

Re-engagement

Ibrah Ali - Episode 003

Addressing some of the challenges around preparing to re-engage (redeploy) after a period of recuperation with your family, with Ibrah (Ibi) Ali.

Michael: Ibi, do you have a good relationship with your daughter now?

Ibi: Oh, Michael, what a question to ask me. If you ask her, maybe she'll give you a different answer. But I think I've got a great relationship with my daughter. She's almost 12, which I think is a difficult age for any sort of child. But I think, over the past 12 years, I've managed to build a great relationship with her and we get on amazingly well.

Michael: When was she born?

Ibi: Zara was born in August 2008.

Michael: And were you in the military then?

Ibi: Yeah, I was very much right in the middle of my career. I was doing reasonably well, I would say. And she was the apple of my eye. August 2008 birth, and everything went incredibly well. But then, six weeks after she was born, I had to disappear on operational deployment to Iraq.

Michael: Was that your first time away?

Ibi: No, that was my second deployment. I deployed in 2006 with my regiment. Unfortunately, I'd come back early from that particular deployment due to injury. So, having been through rehabilitation, and then relearning lots of military skills, I was ready to go out in October 2008.

Michael: Tell us about your injury. What had happened?

Ibi: As part of our work in Iraq in 2006 – 2007, we were often visiting local people in Basrah. And on one of those visits, a roadside bomb was detonated against my vehicles and, sadly, one of the soldiers was killed, and I was quite badly injured. I lost my right arm, and then had damage to my right leg, and left leg as well.

Michael: After rehabilitation, it's fairly uncommon to deploy again as an active soldier, but it does happen. So, you went back to Iraq, you'd had the injury, you'd had your daughter. Did it feel different to go away this time?

Ibi: I think so. I think lots of stuff had happened since being injured. Rehabilitation and reconnecting with my family after such an intense experience, was quite difficult.

I think it took me a lot longer to get to grips with it than I thought it had. And then, all of a sudden in August, when Zara came along, that added an extra dimension of complexity. Having been through what I'd been through in 2007, being injured, and seeing the after-effects of it, it makes you think about whether you want to go back – whether you're risking everything for very little reward.

But, in my case, I had that conversation with Zara's mum, and it was my decision. Obviously, my commanding officer and the team had to make a decision as well, as to whether they wanted an amputee to be deploying or not, so there was lots of health and safety to consider. Not the first thing that you think about when you think about the army, but your health and safety is a big consideration. And, for me, I had to, for the first time, consider whether I was putting people around me at risk: the soldiers that I'd be commanding, because the last thing you want to do is be a liability to anyone. So, there was a huge raft of things to think about.

Michael: Did your confidence get dented?

THE
CONVERSATION
WITH THE NHS

Ibi: Oh, massively, massively. You go from being this fit active 29-year-old, and there is a certain feeling of invincibility, to suddenly not being able to do anything for yourself, and I mean anything. And you're relying on others to help you and do things when you first come back. And you just lay in that bed completely helpless, your brain still working, and you're very much still the same person, but when you look in the mirror, you're totally different. So yeah, there's lots of different things that you have to think about, and be in touch with. And I can't say that I was always the best at it.

Michael: So that second tour – you had a young daughter, you had an injury, but you'd proven yourself to be competent enough to get out there and do the job. Was it dangerous where you were?

Ibi: I think, when we went back out to Iraq in 2008, yes, there was an element of danger. But I think it's like any profession where you balance the danger against your own training and knowledge, and you try and plan to remove as much of that danger as possible. You can't ever remove all danger, but it's a bit like going to the shops, or driving down the motorway. You're constantly alert, you constantly plan ahead. And there's so much training that you do as well. So, the danger was minimised as much as it could be, as far as I was concerned.

Michael: So after your six, seven month operational tour, you returned for some R&R, a bit rest, a bit of relaxation. Your daughter was six months old at that point, how did you find reconnecting with her again?

Ibi: Oh my God, it was horrible. I'd just been out to Iraq, work was tough, it was really high stress. And you just come back and you want to be with your loved ones for that period of time that you do have: two weeks or 10 days. And my daughter didn't recognise me. She didn't want anything to do with me. I was a complete stranger to her. As far as she was concerned, she'd gone from six weeks to six months without me being around. And that was heart-breaking, but you sort of put a brave face on it and you get on with just doing what you can, and rebuilding and reconnecting with your partner and family.

And then, eventually, after a couple of days of bribery, I think mostly with sweets and chocolates that her mother didn't know about, she realised that I was there. I was a person that was in her life. She was a six-month-old, so they're reasonably easy to convince that you're going to be around. It took a little while, and it was difficult, and it wasn't something I was prepared for fully. It took me a day or two to realise that she had feelings as well, it wasn't just all about me.

Michael: Did you feel like a dad?

Ibi: I certainly felt like her dad, but I don't know whether she would've thought I was her father because, obviously, I'm just a complete stranger. She's used to seeing her mum, her grandparents, and other the family members that had supported my partner at the time. And I wasn't. There are new smells, new look, just a different person who suddenly turns up wearing this uniform, and they're unrecognisable. So, I think it's a two-way thinking process. I could understand that she did not recognise me, even though I recognised her.

Michael: Speaking about that reconnect, there's your daughter, and your partner at the time, but your wider family as well. Was reconnecting with them easy? Especially your parents, and especially as you'd been injured on the tour before?

Ibi: Yeah, it was bittersweet when Zara was born because she was born in the August and my father had passed away in the June 2008. That was something that the family were still getting used to. So, me putting myself in danger, as they thought, was completely unnecessary. But it was the career I'd chosen, and the vocation that I absolutely loved. And I would still say to anyone, even to my daughter, the army is the best thing that's ever happened to me in terms of the way I've turned out. And I'd never put anyone off from joining the military at all. So, that was difficult. And there's always those sorts of bittersweet moments going to visit mum, and she would say, "Oh, you've got Dad's nose," or something like that. And she'd be a little bit upset because, obviously, she'd lost her husband, but she had the return of her son, even though I was only back for two weeks.

So, it was an interesting and difficult time. I was slightly selfish with her at the time because I didn't fully consider her feelings as a parent. Now I understand that much more as a parent myself. But yeah, they enjoyed the time. I'm from a big Asian family, so there was always a gathering whenever I came back, and she always laid on a great amount of food, so that normally helps with families.

THE
CONVERSATION
WITH THE NHS

Michael: Yeah. You've decompressed for two weeks, and got into the flow of things, got into the flow of being a dad, changing the nappies, getting up in the night, going out to the park, going for little walks. You've then got to make a switch, and you've got to make sure that risk, and that stress level is balanced out because you're then going and returning back to a hostile environment. How did you do that? And did you see traits in yourself in the run up to that redeployment and reconnecting with work?

Ibi: I think the one thing I was very fortunate to have was some really supportive friends, who were in the military. So, they understood my situation completely. Just before returning back to Iraq, having had that two-week period of R&R, the professionalism just kicks back in. I'd have a chat with some of the guys who had just come back for their R&R. I'd have a conversation with them and say, "How are things going? Is there anything I should be aware of," because there's information that remains confidential within Iraq.

And then, I would just have a think about some of the stuff that I would need to do when I got back. And I would always make time for myself, just away from the family, to have 30 minutes, an hour where I would focus on what I would be going back to. But I would always say I trusted in the training I'd been given, I trusted in the experience that I had. And that, in itself, was amazing to know that I'd been through some really tough times. And then, when I was going back, I'd be facing the same, and it would be hard work. But I'd coped with it okay before, and I would continue to cope with it well in the future.

Michael: You'd been on another tour off the back of this one, three or four years later, we won't go into that too much. But the question I want to ask is: is it hard to leave, especially when your daughter was so young, and then again, when she was four? Is it tough or can you make that switch?

Ibi: It is a wrench. And I think I had to be very open and honest about that fact. She was almost four years old when I left again in 2012. She was more aware that Daddy was away. We'd had two or three years of relative stability of seeing each other constantly, and doing stuff, and building those memories. And then, for a four-year-old to suddenly have half her family taken away overnight, as far as she was concerned, was incredibly difficult.

I did have to think about it. But actually then, when I went out to Afghanistan in 2012, I had to switch back to being the professional army officer that I was, because other people are relying on you in that scenario. And, in my head, what I realised was that my daughter was incredibly well cared for and loved back at home. So, that was one less thing for me to worry about. I could purely focus on my job at hand, and keeping the people safe around me, and keeping myself safe in Afghanistan. And that's the way I sort of looked at it for myself. And so, you have to compartmentalise a little bit.

That didn't stop me ringing once or twice a week when I was in Afghanistan, just to check in with Zara and her mum, and just make sure everything was all right. But I think having set the conditions, so that Zara would be happy, and she would want for nothing whilst I was away, was my way of sort of compartmentalising that part of my life.

Michael: What advice would you give to someone who is, essentially, in a stressful situation now? Especially, when they come out of that, spend time relaxing with friends and family, and then have to make that switch again – just like you've done several times?

Ibi: I think the first bit of advice I'd give (and I'm incredibly bad at this actually) but I can certainly give the advice is: be proud of what you've done and what you've achieved. You don't need to sing from the rooftops what you've done, or where you've been, but just be inwardly proud of what you've achieved, what you've been through, and how you've grown through tough situations, which I think everyone does. If you can get through it, and you know that you can go to a dark place, and then go back to sort of normality.

The other thing I would say is: look after yourself. Don't be afraid to be a little bit selfish at times where you just make time for yourself, whether that's every day, or every other day, and do a bit of exercise, or read, or just build in some thinking time where you can – just completely decompress from everything. And make sure people are aware of what you're doing, and why you're doing it.

And, finally: look around, see if there's anyone that's struggling that has been a friend at work, and often helping others will also help you cope as well. So, it doesn't always work for everyone, but I've certainly found that that's helped me get through some quite tough times.

THE
CONVERSATION
WITH THE NHS

Michael: A while ago, a friend of mine mentioned that he used to make memories, especially in the build-up before.

Ibi: Yeah, definitely.

Michael: Do you ever do anything like that?

Ibi: Yeah, definitely. What I would always do, and I still do, is plan ahead for activities that I want to do with Zara and the family. And not that I fill the diary completely, but I think it's all too easy when you come back, certainly when you're on R&R, that you could just sit at home in the comfort of your own lounge, and just watch television all day, or just be focused on stuff that just doesn't really add value to anyone's life. So, during R&R I'd always say, "Let's book some stuff in, let's organise stuff," and then it's in the diary, and everyone sticks to it.

Ibi: I'm about to go off to Wales and we've pre-booked some surfing lessons, and a bit of kayaking, and things like that. It's just things that can help you connect with others in an environment that's completely safe, and lovely.

Michael: And lastly, before we go, are you aware of your feelings? Do you speak to your friends and family?

Ibi: I'm aware of my feelings. I'm not so sure I speak as much as I should about them, but it's something that I'm getting better at. I speak to my daughter, who's 12 and going to be a teenager soon, and going through lots of different changes. And I try and make sure she's got a safe space to talk about her feelings. I think I probably compartmentalise quite a lot so, depending on the situation, I'll talk to certain people about certain feelings.

With my military friends, I know I've got a shared kinship with them, so I can talk about certain things with them. And then, other people at work, I'll talk about the stresses that we've got at work. So, I think what I do is I try and find commonality with the people I'm sharing particular feelings with.

Michael: Ibi, thanks so much mate, and we will leave it there.