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I TOOK AN OATH TO THIS COUNTRY. IT GAVE ME PTSD

I have Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This is hard to write, but I finally feel like something fits. After more than a year, about 5 different screening tools and a full blood panel, which included cortisol levels, I was diagnosed. I knew something was wrong beyond just being depressed, beyond just clinical depression. My blood levels show that my diagnosis is not just clinical, but there is empirical evidence of the damage to my body.

How did I get here? I was one of 4,500 Americans that was terminated illegally when DOGE took a chainsaw to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

FEBRUARY 2025

I was in West Africa when we were placed on leave mid-February 2025. Before then, we were busy trying to find out the new administration's priorities and what we would need to do to meet them (just as we would after any election). We thought the 90-day foreign assistance "pause" was to give us time to make these adjustments to our ongoing work. Then we were told we were on leave, and to not report to the office. For 4.5 months, I was stuck, not knowing when or how my family and I would return home. If we were sent home immediately, would our pets, all our things, be abandoned, or would the government honor their contractual requirements to return us home "in full"? How would we be sent home - would they send us to DC and leave us there, much like they left the Afghan refugees after dropping them off in Dulles, VA? Or would they send all of us to our homes of record?

The first few weeks, especially, were harrowing. We were told we would be militarily evacuated within the first 36-72 hours and have a "go bag" ready. Then... silence.

Our leadership from that day on tried to keep us updated, but updates from DC were few, far between, and vague enough not to tell us anything. We heard from our USAID colleagues at other embassies that Ambassadors were trying to limit access to critical services, including medical care. We didn't know if we would be kicked out of our homes, and the silence was as much a threat as a threat itself - especially when questions were ignored, answers were not given, and more and more colleagues in DC were silenced and let go.

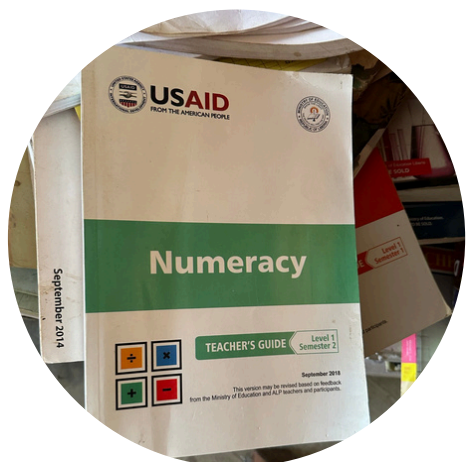
I am beyond thankful our non-political Ambassador did not take these extremes.

Almost immediately after DOGE was allowed into our agency, we started hearing lies about us in the news and on social media. "We were liars. We were frauds. We were thieves. We were balls of worms. We were unpatriotic."

"I am an American who did not deserve to feel abandoned overseas by the same country they were serving for."

Each lie felt like an attack - an attack against my values, my integrity, my life's mission to improve other people's lives everywhere through education. As American citizens living overseas on federal orders, my colleagues and I could not respond to these lies because we were bound by the Hatch Act; my colleagues in DC could not respond out of fear of retaliation. Every lie felt like another gut punch; another betrayal from my country I was serving. My husband and I talked about not knowing the situation we would find when we did return home (whenever that would be), not knowing if we would be safe, not knowing the amount of vile hatred we would encounter in real life compared to what we were reading and seeing online.

I swore an oath to the Constitution. I worked to ensure that children could access quality education, youth could access workforce development, and teachers could access the most recent, globally researched evidence in teacher training and professional development. The more education could be supported overseas, the more opportunities could be created in their home countries, and people would be less likely to immigrate (legally or illegally). How could this be something my fellow countrymen hate about me, without knowing anything about me?



SURVIVOR'S GUILT

The politicians arbitrarily determined who would be fired on July 1 and who on September 2. I was lucky. I would be terminated on September 2. I had a condo to return to once our tenant moved out; I had a "place to land". However, as I said goodbye to my friends and colleagues, leaving my post sooner than me and being terminated in July, I found I was having severe "survivor's guilt". I felt myself pulling back and withdrawing from them, because what was happening wasn't fair to any of us.

Why did I get the extra months of pay and support, and they did not?

I believe it was one way to divide and conquer us and create division. I hated that I was "privileged" while my friends and colleagues faced greater hardship.

COMING HOME

At first, our arrival home was uneventful. We did not encounter the bile and vitriol in person as we expected, based on what we encountered online. However, I soon realized that the lies continued and spread. Every time I saw someone in a Trump shirt or MAGA hat, I didn't know if they believed the lies spread about me and the work I did, or if they were one of the faceless posts and comments that hated me without knowing me. I soon questioned my ability to trust, and I hate my ongoing sense of betrayal, because I love my country and felt I was just as patriotic as anyone else; in fact more than many, as I took (and still do) take my oath seriously and without reservation compared to those who hide behind their screens and have never taken the oath and swore on the Constitution (and YES, that includes the Bill of Rights and Amendments as determined by Congress and the Supreme Court). Every single government official and federal worker who stood by and did nothing while USAID was destroyed demeaned that same oath I took.

Colleagues and partners gathered under the USAID flag – the community I said goodbye to.

After 6 months, we finally got health insurance, and I went to see every doctor I was overdue for. I started seeing a social worker/ therapist when I could, but realized that while it was great to talk with someone, there were still major gaps. I knew something was wrong, and I needed to find out why I wasn't sleeping or feeling rested, why I was so angry yet scared, why I felt so unlike me. In the past 3 months, I have seen a General Practitioner, a Gynecologist, and an Endocrinologist. Was this a physical issue, a medical issue, or an issue related to menopause? Everyone came back and said no. I requested a referral to a more formal therapist, with someone who had the qualifications to diagnose and prescribe - I needed help. I knew it, and I asked for it.

This year, I have participated in classes on pivoting careers, webinars on how the development world is evolving, and courses on mid-life transitions. One thought underpinned it all - what will happen to my career, which I have spent decades building, and joined USAID mid-career as my overall professional goal? I watched as the entire education development sector imploded, as my university, where I earned my Master's Degree, graduated its last class and closed the program. I was fortunate to secure a year-long part-time consultancy in my field, but I've been struggling with feelings of incompetence each time I freeze in front of my laptop, not knowing why my mind and fingers get stuck.

I did not know why I was reacting the way I did during my condo's July 4th BBQ. I did not know why I was feeling this sense of electricity up and down my limbs, this shortness of breath, this poor sleep, and increase in heart rate with every sight of an American flag; every thought and memory of USAID, what I did, what we lost, what was done to us, and every step I took to heal or try and re-establish my life.

WHAT I KNOW NOW

Two weeks ago, after 1 session with this specialist and a range of screening tools, I was told YES - I HAVE PTSD. Last week, when I received my bloodwork results, I saw YES - I have clinically proven higher levels of cortisol running through my body, keeping me in this perpetual state of fight-or-flight at every trigger over the past year and more. All I know is, I have such empathy for my fellow Americans that did serve in uniform and returned home with PTSD, regardless of when they served; I have such empathy for those who suffered PTSD over ANY sense of betrayal, loss, violence, etc. I try my best to smile and laugh, but when I do, I feel like it's not reaching my eyes.

I know I don't feel "normal". I know I question whether I can trust every person I see. I have not yet jumped off the elevator at my condo when someone in a MAGA hat gets on, but I do struggle with the electricity and shortness of breath and fight-or-flight response that it sets off in me, and I don't know how long until this stops; I wonder if they bought the lies about me and still see me as a ball of worms, or if they could look past what that hat has come to represent to actually see ME - an American just as them, an American that swore an oath to this country, and American that would have died overseas for serving my Mission just as any military person would - and just as many USAID staff have in the past. I am an American who did not deserve to feel abandoned overseas by the same country they were serving for.

And yes, I feel weak and vulnerable while writing this. I am crying as I sit at a table in public at a fucking coffee shop because I didn't want to write this in my home, my sanctuary. I write this not knowing if the people around me in this coffee shop were one of the millions who outright lied about USAID, who spread lies about me and my fellow colleagues; or if they were the uninformed, who never thought about the consequences of what the destruction of USAID did - not only to those USAID's destruction killed and continues to kill, but their fellow Americans who felt the best way they could contribute to the country they loved was to invest in humanity and development.

We need the truth. We need to know what happened, how, when, and by who. Who made the decisions, how, and why? Who communicated what? We need the truth to come out - not only what USAID did, but what was done to us and how. I write this to share my story. I write this in case other USAIDers find this helpful for their own mental health, and to know they are not alone. I write this to ask for your help. This is not a Democratic-Republican, us-them fight. This is a fight to "learn what actually happened". Even if you proudly wear a MAGA hat, I ask that you help me regain my belief in my country and my fellow citizens and show me you were not, or apologize to us if you were, complicit in the lies and hate spread about us. We deserve the truth to come out, our patriotism unquestioned, our integrity proven, and our lived work justified.



This piece is part of our ongoing testimonial series, where we share first-person accounts from USAID employees and families about what happened to us – in our own words.

These stories are not policy briefs or legal filings. They are what survival actually looked like: the silence, the fear, the diagnoses that came months later, the slow work of naming what was done to us. We publish them because the truth of this dismantling lives in individual experience as much as in any court record.

If this story resonates with you, or reflects something you've lived through, we want to hear it. Reach out at info@usaidemployeefund.org.

They wrote the obituary too early. USAID lives.

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