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Myth Busters

IT'S TIME TO GET OVER STIGMA

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With our country at war for nearly a dozen years, the public has become increasingly aware of PTSD and other stress disorders that can arise from sustained conflict and its effects on military personnel. This, I think, often presents a good news/bad news situation.

It's good because education about psychological health issues is vital to breaking down stigma that prevents people who need help from getting it. But too little information – or, more likely, misconstrued information – can lead to misconceptions, which can lead to more stigma.

Many of our efforts at NCCOSC are directed toward educating Sailors, Marines and their leaders about identifying and mitigating stress reactions. We also provide information that helps them separate the myths from the medical realities of psychological health to erase any stigma.

With that in mind, here are a few of the most common misconceptions you hear about PTSD:

Only weak people develop PTSD. PTSD has nothing to do with weakness of character or moral failing. In a PTSD sufferer, the brain's metabolism has been altered by a rush of stress hormones and measureable changes in the brain and body are produced. PTSD may be caused by a trauma that provokes terror or helplessness; overwhelming grief from the loss of people who are cared about; inner conflict due to moral beliefs versus current experiences; or the wear and tear of stress accumulation.

People with PTSD are violent. No research study to date directly links PTSD with violent behavior. Irritability and agitation can be symptoms of PTSD but these feel-


ings tend to be turned inward, not aggressively toward another. If a person with PTSD is violent, most likely the person had prior emotional disorders, including anger issues or substance abuse.

PTSD cannot be cured, so treatment doesn't work.

The majority of PTSD symptoms resolve with time. But it's so important to note: A PTSD sufferer gets better much more quickly with appropriate treatment. Research has shown that there are a number of effective treatments for PTSD, including cognitive behavioral therapy, cognitive processing therapy and what's known as prolonged exposure. These and other therapies help a person learn new and more adaptive responses to trauma reminders.

Holistic approaches also are showing promise for treatment when used in conjunction with more traditional modes of therapy. We spotlight one of them – yoga – in this edition, so see inside to learn how some Marines are benefitting from this ancient practice.

Sailors and Marines who need psychological treatment may forego it because they believe their careers will be damaged. But seeking care can actually strengthen and protect a military career by minimizing the impact of symptoms on a service member's performance. For a more in-depth look at this important topic, see our story on page 4, "I Fear for My Career."

The bottom line on mental healthcare: Know the facts and don't let stigma prevent you from care that can help. 

Warrior Pose

How the practice of yoga (yes, yoga) is strengthening Marines at Camp Pendleton

The dimly lighted room was mostly silent as a dozen Marines rolled up their mats and rubbed their eyes, as if awakening from a nap. Some, in fact, were.

Sleep – something that can be very difficult for combat veteran Marines – is a common byproduct of the new yoga program at Camp Pendleton. A part of Navy Medicine’s expanding Holistic Health Program, the yoga course is quickly gaining in popularity among Marines, particularly those with stress, anxiety and PTSD. Today’s class was specifically designed for those suffering from anxiety and stress and focused on relaxation and breathing.

“It helps take away the chaos in my day.”

Pvt. Donald Faulkner, who stands well over six feet, doesn’t look like the stereotypical yoga devotee. But after six weeks in the program, he’s sold. “I had heard the stereotypes, but I came into the program with an open mind and took what I could from it. Never hurts to try anything once,” says Faulkner.

“It makes me more relaxed, concentrated and focused. Gets my anxiety down and makes my day go more smoothly. It helps

you concentrate on the here and now. Especially for people with PTSD - you’re not focused on the past, not worried about the future. You’re concerned with the here and now.”

Yoga’s benefits are quickly realized. Sgt. Justin Noel, who found the class through his therapist at Naval Hospital Camp Pendleton, felt the results immediately. “This is my first day,” he says. “I got a little of both spiritual and physical out of it. It helps you find yourself spiritually and stabilize yourself physically.”

Cpl. William Attwood has experienced relief in more ways than one. He’s sleeping better, his energy has improved and he feels less pain borne from a car accident in 2004. Most importantly, he says, his “anger is much better.” Attwood thought enough of the class to invite Lance Cpl. Tyler Weatherford, who after only two classes was ready to also recommend it to other Marines. “It’s relaxing and therapeutic and helps the overall well-being of anyone who comes,” he says.

Staff Sgt. Adam Vickery, a Marine with the Wounded Warrior Battalion, is perhaps the group’s most ardent believer. “I love it. It’s the most relaxing portion of my day. I started doing it once a week, and now I do it every morning at home,” says Vickery. “I





recommend it to anyone, especially my junior Marines. It's easy to start and benefits both mind and body. It helps endurance, strength building. I've been injured several times, I have two new elbows and a new knee and through yoga I've been able to get 100 percent motion.

"It helps take away some of the chaos in my day. I can focus harder on the mission."

"Sometimes the best excuses not to try it are the best reasons to start."

J. Haunani Chong Drake, having recently arrived at Camp Pendleton with her Marine infantry officer husband, jumped at the chance to teach the new yoga program. An experienced yoga instructor and licensed acupuncturist, Drake beams when talking about the benefits of holistic practices, and she envisions the day when "all military medical installations will have integrated programs like the one at Camp Pendleton."

Since November, Drake has been teaching seven classes per week. All are based on Hatha yoga, which incorporates movements and stretches to pair the physical aspects of yoga with the spiritual ones. "We always incorporate breath," says Drake. "That's the key to yoga and what differentiates it from other activities."

Though the yoga program at Camp Pendleton is still in its infancy, Drake has witnessed many skeptics quickly become believers. "I always ask first-timers about their preconceived notions about yoga. And I always get similar answers: 'It's hippie. It's for girls. It's gonna hurt. I'm not flexible. I can't calm my mind.'

"I always tell them: If you're not flexible or can't calm your mind, those are great reasons to start yoga!" The majority of participants in today's class, she says, were original skeptics who have realized results and keep returning.

"They have an unconscious awareness of not feeling safe."

Much of Drake's class is focused on the breath. "A lot of these guys have experienced combat stress and have an unconscious awareness of not feeling safe," she says. "The mind brings them back to memories and traumas and experiences. When we have

them focus on their breath, it prevents the mind from constantly going back to those memories."

Drake designs the course to focus on the relation of mind and body, even encouraging the Marines to fall asleep. The last 20 minutes of the hour-long class are dedicated to "guided relaxation" techniques. The quietness of the room is interrupted only by the occasional snore during this period. Drake teaches another class focused on increasing physical readiness, and one designed to alleviate chronic pain.

"Comprehensive, complementary alternative medicine has a lot to offer."

Though the Holistic Health Program has produced successful and worthy outcomes, therapies like yoga and acupuncture will not supplant the more traditional, evidence-based mental health treatments available to Sailors and Marines. U.S. Public Health Service Cmdr. Emily Streeter, treatment programs division officer at Naval Hospital Camp Pendleton, says yoga and other alternative treatments are part of a comprehensive approach to mental health.

"Yoga serves as adjunctive therapy to mental health therapy that Marines and Sailors receive through the clinic," says Streeter. "The purpose is to help them in those areas where regular mental health is not as useful. Relaxation and meditation are things that we've been teaching our patients in psychology for many, many years. Practices like yoga give Marines an additional tool to these things on their own."

Streeter and others are impressed with the results they have seen so far. Marines participating in the Holistic Health Program are reporting lower stress, anxiety and a reduced reliance on pain medications.

"I'd like to see these programs rolled out Navy-wide," says Streeter. "We can find a way to reach everyone and get our Sailors and Marines to be whole again." 🇺🇸

Marines start their day stretching through a variety of yoga poses. The Holistic Health Program at Naval Hospital Camp Pendleton offers yoga courses that focus on stress and anxiety, physical readiness and pain management.

Photography by Amy Rohlf.

"I Fear for My Career"

The stigma of receiving psychological healthcare manifests itself in many forms within the military, needlessly keeping service members from getting help when they most need it.

A big roadblock can be an underlying fear that seeking professional help will negatively affect one's career progression. It's a fear that is decidedly overblown.

Consider the facts:

- All branches of the military have undergone a huge cultural shift in dealing with the mental health problems that have arisen from more than 11 years of combat and an exceptionally high operational tempo.
- In 2008, the Department of Defense issued revisions to question 21 on the Questionnaire for National Security Positions, Standard Form (SF) 86, regarding mental and emotional health counseling. The revised questions states:

"Mental health counseling in and of itself is not a reason to revoke or deny a clearance. In the last seven years, have you consulted with a health care professional regarding an emotional or mental health condition or were you hospitalized for such a condition? Answer "No" if the counseling was for any of the following reasons and was not court-ordered: strictly marital, family, grief not related to violence by you or strictly related to adjustments from service in a military combat environment."

- While naval policy dictates that patients taking selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors – SSRIs, which are commonly known as antidepressants – shall not be issued firearms, waivers are routinely granted. "In considering waivers," the policy states, "the psychiatric diagnosis, medication, other medical history and their effect on judgment and motor behavior shall be the primary considerations."

It's true that there still exist some dated attitudes that paint mental health issues with a broad brush, and there are still some leaders who view psychological disorders as a "weakness." This viewpoint, though, is on the fast track toward extinction. All branches of the military now place as big a premium on mental health as physical health.

Psychological health issues are like any health issue – the longer the issue is left untreated, the more serious it becomes.

More and more resources are allocated to mental health as warfighters return home from deployment to – and in support of – combat zones. The Navy and Marine Corps also are now embedding mental health professionals into combat units, hoping to address issues in real time to prevent or lessen complications down the road.

Could mental health issues negatively affect your career? It's possible. But failure to seek help for these issues is much more likely to damage your career. Psychological health issues are like any health issue – the longer the issue is left untreated, the more serious it becomes.

Acute stress, depression and PTSD often lead to alcohol and drug abuse, angry and reckless behavior, apathy and other career-damaging, and career-killing, issues.

So ask yourself, which is worse — suffering while your mental health deteriorates, or getting help now so you can be a complete, ready and effective warfighter? 📱



Photography by Joe Griffin

Electronic data capture is a key feature of Psychological Health Pathways, a program designed by NCCOSC to improve consistency and continuity of patient care. NCCOSC staff member Eddie Mariani demonstrates the program at Naval Medical Center San Diego to show providers how PHP will allow them to easily access information about a patient's care and progress in treatment. 📱

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