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How Yoga and Meditation are Helping to Heal Warfighters and Their Families

Executive Summary:

The United States has been at war for almost two decades and the effects of such prolonged and intense operational engagement has taken its toll on our nation's service members, veterans, and their families. One non-profit organization, Warriors at Ease, has stepped up to bring healing and wellness to this population via a network of professionals trained in evidenced-based practices of yoga and meditation.

Introduction

I didn't expect that we would be talking about mindfulness and "Becoming a Professional Human Being" during the Senior Leader's Program (SLP). I have been practicing mindfulness, yoga, and meditation for several years now, but other than trying to retain my own sanity in a stressful, intense, and at times chaotic work environment in the Department of Defense (DoD) over the last 28 years, I hadn't related it to a movement within the Federal Government sector. How delighted I was to see it woven into the course material and see it embodied in our Visiting Program Manager, Joe Wienand, one of our first keynote speakers, Jim Bagnola, Elfego "Go-go" Gomez, and in many of my classmates. As we shared our life stories, it became apparent that I wasn't the only one practicing and looking to mindfulness as a way to not only become a better human being, but a more effective leader.

The connection that has had the most impact on me personally however, is meeting fellow PLA attendee, Commander Hillary Darby, United States Navy. Hillary introduced me to the organization Warriors at Ease. She owns a yoga studio in Kailua, Hawaii and has made her space available for Warriors at Ease to offer free yoga classes to service members, veterans, and their families. Since meeting Hillary, I have been practicing yoga with the group every Wednesday evening and have made contact with one of their certified instructors, who has offered to bring Warriors at Ease to my base, Camp H.M. Smith. I am so excited about the work that they are doing, I plan to obtain my own yoga teacher certification and volunteer with them in the future.

Warriors at Ease

Who started it and why?

Warriors at Ease was co-founded by four women, Robin Carnes, Karen Soltes, Colonel (Ret) Pat Lillis, and Molly Birkholm, and established as an educational non-profit in 2011 (501(c)(3)). They were involved in some of the early clinical studies funded by the Department of Defense (DoD) and Department of Veteran's Affairs (VA) looking at the use of yoga and meditation to assist in the treatment of combat-related injuries and illnesses. The positive findings of these studies, conducted at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, as well as VA Medical Centers, led to an increased need for instructors

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specifically trained to lead service members and their families in a safe manner relevant and helpful to their special needs.¹

Mission

Through their teacher training curriculum, yoga/meditation classes, retreats, and special programs, Warriors at Ease employs an approach which is evidenced based, trauma sensitive, and military culture informed. They strive to raise awareness of the power of yoga and meditation via these programs to support the health and healing of service members, veterans, and their families.²

Addressing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

“Over half a million U.S. troops deployed since 2001 suffer from PTSD. Yet less than 20% will receive adequate care due to lack of effective treatments, fear of stigma, or insufficient government resources. Half of those with PTSD won’t receive any care at all. Left untreated, PTSD cripples functioning and places veterans at great risk for violent and self-destructive behavior, including: alcoholism or drug abuse; severe depression, anxiety or emotional numbness; family and employment problems; and Suicide – today, more than 6,500 vets die by suicide every year.” (Davidlynchfoundation.org, 2018)

In my own experience, my immediate family has been impacted by PTSD directly as returning war veteran family members, without adequate identification or treatment, turned to alcohol to self-medicate, triggering a chain reaction of decades of multi-generational drug and alcohol addiction and dysfunctional family dynamics.

Meditation’s effectiveness on stress disorders has a broad scientific basis. The U.S. military began researching the use of yogic-based meditation protocol in 2006 and the Army Surgeon General and Defense Centers of Excellence endorsed iRest in 2010.³ “iRest”, short for “integrative restoration” was found to help those suffering from PTSD. iRest is different from a posed-based or “asana” yoga practice, but takes inspiration from traditional yogic practices of meditation and breath work. iRest is now used in over 50 VA hospitals and active-duty settings, and may eventually be incorporated into basic training. According to Stephanie Lopez, a therapist and meditation trainer who helped introduce iRest to the DoD, iRest is “mindfulness on steroids”, as it assists war fighters in dealing with their most traumatic experiences. In as few as four weeks, an iRest practice can produce a number of important changes in PTSD sufferers. Typical improvements include better sleep, moderated behavior, and better emotional regulation.⁴

Many studies have suggested a link between the practice of yoga and improved cognitive performance. Specifically in PTSD patients, iRest creates beneficial changes in the volume of the amygdala and hippocampus, the parts of the brain that handle memory and emotion. According to Lopez, “The research shows that through meditation, the amygdala actually shrinks and the hippocampus is actually growing”. “We’re reconnecting new neuronal connections to bring them back online in a healthy way”.⁵ Warriors at Ease partners with the Integrative Restoration Institute to provide iRest workshops and retreats, for both individual practitioners and those seeking to achieve certification in iRest facilitation.

Improved Pain Management

In addition to proven success in treating PTSD, yoga and meditation are being applied effectively for pain management without the side effects and potential for addiction that come with most prescription pain killers.

¹ Warriorsatease.org Staff, “About Us”

² Warriorsatease.org Staff, “About Us”

³ Irest.us Staff, “Overview of iRest in the Military”

⁴ Rosen, Armin, “Can Yoga Help Treat PTSD?”

⁵ Rosen, Armin, “Can Yoga Help Treat PTSD?”

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The United States is facing an opioid crisis of staggering proportions, and the statistics show that war veterans are at an even higher risk than the general population. As of April 2017, 41 Americans were dying every day from prescription opioid overdose and veterans were almost twice as likely to die due to accidental opioid overdose. This isn't surprising when one considers the current western medical approach of primarily treating pain with these medications and the fact that veterans generally suffer from higher rates of debilitating and chronic pain. While 30 percent of the U.S. adult population experiences chronic pain, almost 60 percent of returning Veterans from the Middle East and more than 50 percent of older Veterans in the VA health system report living with some form of chronic pain.⁶

In a 2015 testimony to the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs, Dr. Carolyn Clancy, then interim under-secretary for health with the Veterans Health Administration, said, "Many of our Veterans have survived severe battlefield injuries, some repeated, resulting in life-long moderate to severe pain related to damage to their musculoskeletal system, and permanent nerve damage, which cannot only impact their physical abilities but also impact their emotional health and brain structures."⁷

An article in *Military Behavioral Health*, published in 2016, cited meditation's effectiveness in helping Veterans control their pain. The research, led by Thomas Nassif, Ph.D., of the Washington, DC, VA Medical Center and American University's Department of Health Studies, found that Veterans who practiced meditation reported a 23 – 42 percent reduction in pain intensity, as well as improved sleep, mood and activity level.⁸

Testimonials

"I have proudly served in the United States Marine Corps as an Infantry Unit Leader for the past 13 years. I've had two combat tours, one in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and another in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). The things my unit and I encountered during both tours were unexplainable and shocking to the spirit. In 2015, I started practicing yoga. Later I began attending a free yoga class at Marine Corps Base Hawaii, taught by Robin Cushing, a fellow service member and Warriors at Ease Teacher. For me, yoga has been a great way to release tension and stress on my mind. It has also been a positive supplement to my regular exercise routine. I work out a lot and yoga has definitely helped me stay limber. Yoga is now part of a daily regiment where I take time to focus my mind and stretch my muscles." - Gunnery Sergeant Donald R. Harris, U.S. Marine Corps⁹

"I spent 15 of my 24 years in the military as a Green Beret, a proud member of the United States Army Special Forces. I am a combat veteran, a modern warrior, and a quiet professional. I have a daily yoga and meditation practice that has served me both at home and in a combat environment. Mind-body practices have helped me to fully embrace the warrior I have become through my combat experiences and decades of service to our nation. I believe in the power of these practices because I've experienced it personally, and I have seen the impact that yoga and meditation have had on my fellow warriors." – Lieutenant Colonel James Alden, U.S. Army Retired¹⁰

Yoga/Meditation Classes

Warriors at Ease offers a variety of classes at many on-base and off-base locations. On the island of Oahu alone, there are currently twenty classes offered weekly at several locations, including five military

⁶ Bazarko, Dawn, "Mindfulness meditation: A promising tool to help reduce chronic pain and opioid use"

⁷ Clancy, Carolyn, "Statement of Carolyn Clancy, MD, before the U.S Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs"

⁸ Nassif, T.H., et. al., "Mindfulness meditation and chronic pain management in Iraq and Afghanistan veterans with traumatic brain injury: A pilot study"

⁹ Harris, Donald, "Testimonials", Warriorsatease.org

¹⁰ Alden, James, "Testimonials", Warriorsatease.org

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bases, a VA Medical Center, and two Veterans' Centers. One such location is Bella Kai Yoga Studio in Kailua, Hawaii, owned and operated by Commander Hillary Darby. Hillary is an active duty Naval Officer and United States Naval Academy graduate with over thirty years of military service. As an avid yoga practitioner and instructor, she was inspired several years ago to open up a community yoga space in Kailua, which she named after her daughter, "Bella". Hillary has become involved with Warriors at Ease and feels so strongly about the group's positive impact on the DoD community, veterans, active duty, and family members, that she provides free space in her studio for weekly Warriors at Ease classes.

Other Warriors at Ease events and teaching collaborations occur on a regular basis with the Wounded Warrior Project, Team Red, White, and Blue, and The Mission Continues.

Teacher Training

Warriors at Ease has trained an ever expanding global network of over 800 yoga and meditation instructors who are teaching yoga on military bases, VA facilities, retreat centers, yoga studios, and other community locations. In the past year alone, they have established a Hawaii-based network of over twenty certified teachers. Executive Director, Susan Alden, was the major driver behind that effort. Susan is a U.S. Army Veteran and West Point Graduate, Military Spouse, and mother of two children. She has been teaching yoga and meditation in military settings since 1997 and got involved with Warriors at Ease in 2012 as an instructor. Her husband, LTC (Ret) James (Jamie) Alden, is also a certified meditation teacher, workshop/retreat facilitator, and sits on the Warriors at Ease Advisory Board. Beginning in April of 2017, Susan began developing a cadre of teachers in Hawaii, trained to teach yoga in a way that is evidence-based, trauma sensitive, and military culture informed.

Warriors at Ease offers Level 1 and Level 2 Teacher Certification programs and has just released a world-class new Level 1 teacher training available through Yoga International. This Level 1 course is a 30-hour online curriculum that took over a decade to develop and incorporates the many years of experience of the co-founders. In the Level 1 training, participants learn the fundamentals of teaching in Military Communities; teaching trauma-sensitive meditation; teaching yoga to survivors of Military Sexual Trauma (MST); and, teaching adaptive yoga for trauma-related health conditions. The care, compassion, and expertise that I have personally witnessed given to wounded veterans by the teachers in the Warriors at Ease sponsored class in Kailua, Hawaii that I attend is inspiring to watch. In addition to completing the Level 1 training, in order to join the Warriors at Ease teacher network, a person must have at least 200 hours of yoga teacher training or formal meditation training with teaching experience. In order to achieve Level 2 Certification, they also must complete the Warriors at Ease Level 2 training and have at least two years of teaching experience (or at least 30 hours with a recommendation from a teacher or mentor).¹¹

Retreats

Warriors at Ease offers several retreats throughout the year at locations world-wide for various audiences, including individual practitioners and those seeking teacher certification. Topics include *iRest and Yoga Nidra Immersion*; *Veterans Retreat for Men*; *Veterans Retreat for Women*; and *Relax & Renew Retreat for Women in the Military Community* (including family members). Scholarships are available for some of the retreats, and there are also retreats tailored specifically for wounded veterans, some free of charge and sponsored by affiliate organizations such as Higher Ground and the Walter Reed Society.

Special Programs

Train, Teach, and Transform (T3) is a special program funded via grants from partners such as the Disabled Veterans National Foundation, the Bob Woodruff Foundation, and local businesses. The program has two areas of focus: a fellowship program for veterans and military spouses who seek to become Warriors at Ease Teachers, and community outreach via yoga classes, wellness workshops, and retreats. The goals of *T3* are to provide education and leadership development opportunities for veterans

¹¹ Warriorsatease.org Staff, "Training"

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and military spouses, as well as provide integrative therapies that support rehabilitation, recovery and resiliency in order to improve quality of life in veteran and military communities.

Another special program, called *Veterans at Ease*, in which Warriors at Ease partners with Manhattan College in New York, helps veteran college students to transition from Military to civilian and academic life. The program was designed to help address unique challenges faced by veterans, such as insomnia, anxiety, depression, chronic pain, difficulty focusing, and mood swings. Some vets also experience a reduced sense of purpose or “emotional let-down” after leaving the intense and often urgent operational military environment and miss the camaraderie of the military unit. Veterans at Ease yoga and meditation classes help improve sleep, reduce anxiety, and support mental clarity and focus. Participants also benefit from the opportunity to connect with other veteran-students on and off campus.¹²

Benefits to the DoD Mission

Although Warriors at Ease is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, whose primary mission is to support the health and healing of service members, veterans, and their families, the impact that the program has towards positive outcomes for the DoD mission are very apparent. When service members are well, rested, calm, and focused, they are more prepared to deal with routine daily duties, and even more importantly, crisis situations. Lieutenant Colonel James Alden reflected, while leading a Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) class, that there were many times in his career, especially in high stress, intense, combat situations, that he benefitted greatly from his mindfulness practice to stay calm and focused, in order to make the next decision and to act quickly, even immediately after extremely harrowing events.

Along with reduced anxiety and improved sleep and pain management, come savings in medical costs associated with medication normally used to treat these problems. The side effects of these medications can further hinder the service member’s ability to continue their military career. Especially in the case of opioid addiction, the costs to DoD and the VA are significant.

The human cost however, is the highest, when the pain and the trauma become too great a burden to bear and the choice of suicide is made. In 2017, there were 285 suicides of DoD Active Duty, 219 Reservists, and 126 National Guards.¹³ Sadly, my family experienced such a loss when a young Marine relative made this irreversible choice, using his service issued weapon while in theater, leaving behind a young widow, also a fellow service member. One can only wonder what may have been different in his experience and ability to cope if a Warriors at Ease class had been available to him.

True Leaders

Being dedicated to developing and caring for people is the sign of good leader, but helping others to care for and develop themselves is the sign of a true leader. I didn’t know that I would have the honor of meeting such true leaders while attending PLA, while trying to become one myself. By meeting Hillary Darby, and through her, meeting Susan and Jamie Alden, I am now linked to an organization, and a community, that is making a real impact. As an organization committed to making yoga and meditation relevant, accessible and effective for members of the DoD community, Warriors at Ease is improving the lives of those who serve, and have served our nation in the greatest way.

Research Methodology:

This paper is written in the spirit of a descriptive *case study* approach on the activities and impact of the Warriors at Ease organization, bringing yoga and meditation practices to the U.S. Military community. Resources and content come from program materials, personal interviews, online articles, and my own personal experience.

¹² Warriorsatease.org Staff, “Our Impact”

¹³ Parisi, G., “Department of Defense Quarterly Suicide Report 4th Quarter, Calendar Year 2017”

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