

Mental Health & Resiliency

Mental health affects people of all ages, races, ethnicities, and social economic status.

As a Veteran who has had personal struggles with mental health I know the latter to be true. Before I was a veteran I was a regular working class kid from the San Francisco Bay Area who struggled with addiction and substance abuse for as long as I can remember. Through the love and support of many great people I was able to find a new way of living and I'm still learning how to live my authentic life. As a wellness professional, working in Human Resources for a school district, one of my focuses is how to best support and improve the mental health of my community. This is no small task and requires partnership, collaboration, and a comprehensive approach including: promotion, prevention, intervention, and maintenance. To the benefit of my school district and the surrounding community I have an outstanding partnership with the Peninsula Health Care District. Since May was Mental Health Awareness Month I would like to highlight the PHCD and their enduring commitment of addressing mental health issues in a large portion of San Mateo County. My partnership with this organization has informed my professional efforts as well as my personal development in the health and wellness sector. Their outreach and efforts to improve people's lives within their community are noble and continue to grow in scope. PHCD understands that mental health is not only important, but a key component in maintaining and improving overall health.

- If you live in San Mateo County and would like more information about mental health services available to you and you and your family click on the following link: [San Mateo Mental Health Community Resources](#).

Now there are two sides to every story, so let's discuss the other side of mental health; resiliency and what exactly that means. Resiliency is typically defined as the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness. It is also a term we use to describe one's overall wellbeing. First we need to set the record straight. Mental health or any struggle associated with it is not a detriment to one's character or capabilities in life. This attitude is an affliction in and of itself in the military community and with older generations in Western society. There are some seriously negative biases held against mental health issues in our country today. Most people will not even entertain the idea that they have any such issues in the first place, which is why mental health carries with it the stigma it has. Mental health is and should always be viewed as a continuum. This is explained exceptionally well in a blog post titled, *Breaking the stigma: one image that will make you think differently about mental health*. It can be found on the Are You Mental website; [AYM](#). It's a blog dedicated to supporting the Mental Health Foundation through unconventional marathon training. If we take a long view of our life, we can begin to understand it as an endurance event where we will have periods of high performance, low performance and any combination of the two; both emotionally and cognitively. Just as our physical health fluctuates, so too will our mental health. In the same way we work to strengthen our bodies to become stronger, more resilient to fatigue and infection, we can work to improve and stabilize our mental health as well. Outdated and conventional wisdom used to suggest that we are all operating with a genetic predisposition to a certain temperament or emotional set-point. This was an inaccurate assumption that we were born to be a certain way and that's just the way it is. However, there is a wealth of current research that supports the notion of personal resiliency as something that is malleable in nature, which can be developed and strengthened with practice over time.

There are many methods one can employ to develop or improve their personal resiliency, but for time and space purposes I will share a few things that have worked well for me on my endless journey of becoming my best self. When I first became interested in improving my own mental health I didn't know where to start, but was lucky enough to be introduced to the practices of Sensory Awareness, Mindfulness & Meditation through my involvement with Veteran's PATH. Through simple exercises of bringing full awareness to the sensations in my body I felt more grounded and present to what was really happening in the present moment. Learning to meditate helped me observe my thoughts in a non-judgmental way, which at some point made me

aware that I had been operating, unconsciously, with a negative self-bias for many years, even before I entered into the military in 2001.

Once I brought awareness to these negative thought patterns I was able to begin the work. Full disclosure, it took a few years and a lot of persistence to make it to that point, but I'm forever grateful for every awkward meditation and difficult conversation I had to get there. Once I woke up to my unconscious and negative mental formations, I immediately felt more at ease and capable of truly transforming who I was. Then I began an intense couple years of training in compassion. Out of habit I quickly developed compassion for everyone else first. It was a regular old love fest when anybody was around me. This was really good for a while and felt like I was really reconnecting with my community of veterans and family, but then I hit wall and was regressing to old, unsupportive habits.

To the credit of my wife and daughter, that was not going to happen and I doubled down on my meditation and mindfulness practices and went to depths I didn't know existed in myself. From that deep exploration I found my ego was getting in my way. By that point I had accumulated some practice and tools to really work on that issue and was able to ask my ego, nicely, to back off and turned that outpouring of compassion inward. It was life changing and mind-blowing to see the returns on my self-compassion investment. Soon after, I graduated college and begun helping people transform their lives via physical fitness intervention and introducing them to mindfulness practices. Beyond that I continue to deepen my personal practice, while developing professionally, including writing this article you are reading today, all of which continue to reaffirm who I am and my commitment to holistic health.

My personal evolution towards total wellbeing is still a work in progress, something that I hope and intend to never stop. Life and the challenges that we encounter can be viewed as continuous opportunity to learn, grow and transform who we are. Through my quest of trying to help as many people as possible I've continued the personal practices I mentioned earlier, but have also expanded my practices to include Qigong, Transcendental Meditation, and adopted a growth mind-set. All of which I am able to share with the employees in my school district as well as my Veteran brothers and sister at Veterans PATH.

Mindfulness Password of the Week: TRUST

When practicing mindfulness we are taking responsibility for how we experience our life and this requires some level of trust. Trust itself is a mindfulness practice, which can be cultivated and deepened over time. We trust our breath, which leads to a deeper connection to our body and a calmer aspect of the mind. As we develop more trust in our self we begin to relax more, perhaps living and experiencing a more authentic life. Mindfulness also allows us to trust our own confidence and honor our feelings in way that truly supports our personal well-being. We trust each experience for what it is and know that it has its own value in our life.

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