

Neglecting the Spiritual and Mental Fitness of the Force

What is the damage?

by Maj Shawn F. Carian

The Marine Corps is known for its history, traditions, and camaraderie. Marines are a different breed. We fight hard and play harder, which makes us unique. Marines are known for their physical fitness and legendary performance on battlefields throughout history. There is more to fitness than simply physical fitness. The Marine Corps breaks fitness into the following categories: physical, mental, spiritual, and social fitness. Each element is essential to a Marine's fitness, but we will focus specifically on the spiritual and mental aspects. Spiritual and mental fitness are essential elements to a Marine's overall fitness and are even more critical to our force than physical fitness. The famous collegiate basketball coach Bobby Knight once said, "Mental toughness is to physical as four is to one." Spiritual and mental fitness are imperative to our Marine Corps and readiness for combat. With the onset of COVID, our organizational leadership unevenly applied restrictions to Marines' and other military members' spiritual and mental fitness.

One analogy that has been used to represent the damage we have been inflicting on ourselves is the spiritual and mental cup. We all begin with a cup full of our determination, drive, and desire. The contents of the cup are what we use to conduct day-to-day operations, with different endeavors requiring different amounts of effort and will. To meet the different demands of our daily duties, we pour from our cup into a late-

>Maj Carian is an Artillery Officer and currently serving as a Field Artillery Captains Career Course Instructor at Fort Sill, OK.

night planning meeting, an extended separation from our family because of an Integrated Training Exercise or Unit Deployment Program, or the stress that comes with raising our young Marines into the future leaders they need to be to meet *Force Design 2030* demands. We can only fill our cup through activities that increase the morale of ourselves and our units. A small gathering will help

to fill the cup, but it will not fill it as much as mess night or a Marine Corps Ball. When our cup runs dry because we are unable or not allowed to refill it, we are the most susceptible to disparaging thoughts, loss of faith, or unspeakable actions against ourselves or others.

The *Spiritual Fitness Leaders Guide* for Marines defines spiritual fitness as "the ability to adhere to beliefs, principles, and values needed to persevere and prevail." Many new Marines build their beliefs, principles, and values through their entry-level training and education. A large part of our desired outcome of entry-level training is providing the Marine with a "new" Marine



Grieving loss. (Photo by LCpl Ryan B. Busse.)

Corps-centered values system. There are Marines who join that have established beliefs that they retain throughout their career, but we also strive for a common baseline exemplified through our motto of *Honor, Courage, and Commitment*. By instilling these values and neglecting to allow Marines to see the fruits of their work—through socialization and celebration of their achievements—we fail to provide Marines with the necessary tools to persevere and prevail throughout COVID.

The Marine Fitness portal has a “Total Fitness Self Check Tool,” which allows a Marine to grade themselves across physical, mental, spiritual, and social fitness.¹ I have yet to see this tool utilized throughout the force. Now would be an excellent time to use the tool. Mental fitness consists of components regarding the Marine’s emotional state and value to the unit and whether the Marine knows where to get help when needed.² This tool should not be used in isolation nor extremis but should be part of an engaged approach and part of normal mentorship or counseling. The most memorable and notable impact that leaders can have in getting to know their Marines and understanding how they operate is to build sweat equity. We as leaders must seek every opportunity to work alongside our Marines and engage in candid conversations while sharing the burden of whatever task is at hand. You can pretend to care, but you cannot pretend to be there. The Marine Total Fitness Check Tool is an excellent aid but cannot be viewed as the solution, only as part of the larger equation to address our Marine’s overall fitness. One of the most rewarding aspects of becoming a Marine is sharing the accomplishment with your family and friends. New Marines are not getting that opportunity or emotional boost like they did in the past.

COVID created new difficulties and challenges for our Corps and the military. The suicide rates last year were 29.6 per 100,000; thus far, in 2021, we have a staggering number of 31.6 per 100,000.³ The numbers reflect a 25-person increase since pre-COVID. We have lost 75 active-duty service members out of 1.347 million; 2,272 service members have been hospitalized from COVID.⁴

As visible from the numbers, the unfortunate truth is COVID presents a minimal risk to our force (0.17 percent, not even 1 percent hospitalization), whereas suicides presented a significant concern for over a decade and continue to do so. Mental health issues afflict many across the force. Isolation, combined with limiting unit functions, does not promote better mental health but further isolates everyone, specifically impacting those who should not be isolated.

Currently, Marines enter our Marine Corps without the same welcome to our Corps as in the past. Younger Marines go to boot camp, Marine Combat Training/School of Infantry, and Military Occupational Specialty School before ever having the opportunity to take leave. In some cases, these new Marines cannot leave base on liberty through all entry-level training. Taking leave and liberty may sound trivial; however, leave affords the individual Marine the opportunity to show off what they have accomplished and share that accomplishment with family and friends. We argue that this is an integral piece of sustaining the transformation, receiving positive feedback and further solidifying pride in service and the Marine Corps. Entry-level Marines will now have nearly two years in the Marine Corps without the opportunity of experiencing a Marine Corps Birthday celebration. Understanding the mental and emotional strain these Marines endure for six months (or more) before they have an opportunity to celebrate and reflect on their accomplishments which provides crucial insight into the importance of balancing spiritual and mental fitness.

Not only are entry-level Marines suffering during these periods, but the incongruent and sometimes conflicting decisions on what activities are allowed and what activities are not allowed affect life-long Marines as well. Retirees or Marines separating from active duty are leaving our Corps without the customary and well-earned honors and festivities. These Marines lived and sacrificed as Marines, for one enlistment or decades, are now separating and not able to enjoy a Marine Corps Ball in their final years. Some Marines have had to scale down retirement celebrations, which

serve to recognize the Marine and their family. History dictates Gen Lejeune would not have accepted the antics of today.

All these challenges lead to mental and emotional implications that likely will not surface in the near term but will come back to haunt us—through mental conditions or suicides. Future studies and research will determine the emotional and psychological toll COVID has had on the force. Although we do not have the data now, reason indicates the correlation between the military COVID environment and suicides. The data mentioned above, and overall appearances, suggest the military has sacrificed our forces’ mental and spiritual health at the altar of political optics, and our future generations of Marines and service members continue to suffer the consequences. Spiritual and mental fitness directly contribute to the force’s social and physical fitness. The military needs to maintain independence from political issues. We also need to ensure we do not present an optic of fear from a virus that our demographic should not fear.

Notes

1. Staff, “Marine Total Fitness Check Tool,” *Marines*, 2016, <https://www.fitness.marines.mil/Portals/211/Resiliency%20Videos/Total%20Fitness%20Self%20Check%20V1%20Automatic%20Scores.pdf?ver=2Y1rBoN2oz9q0R7nk0iXDw%3D%3D>.

2. Ibid.

3. Caitlin Kenney, “Active-Duty Suicide Rate Hit Record High in 2020,” *Defense One*, October 6, 2021, <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2021/10/active-duty-suicide-rate-hits-record-high/185882>.

4. Department of Defense, “Coronavirus: DOD Response,” *Department of Defense*, n.d., <https://www.defense.gov/Spotlights/Coronavirus-DOD-Response>.



Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction
prohibited without permission.