

# Spiritual Fitness Contributes To Total Wellness

By LCDR Justin Top, USN

**It is important that we continue to nourish our psychological, social and spiritual growth—otherwise our life ... can tip out of balance.**

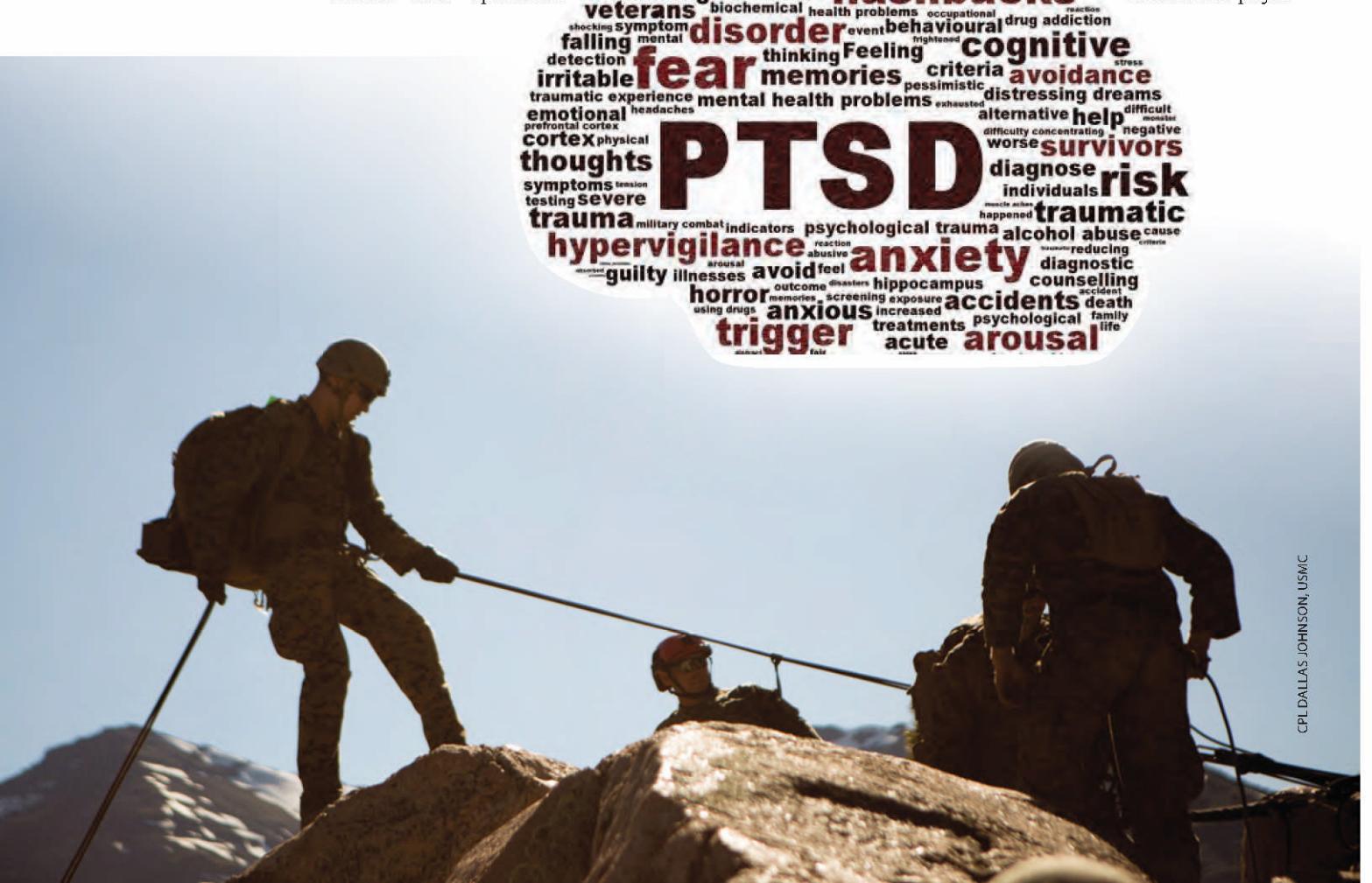
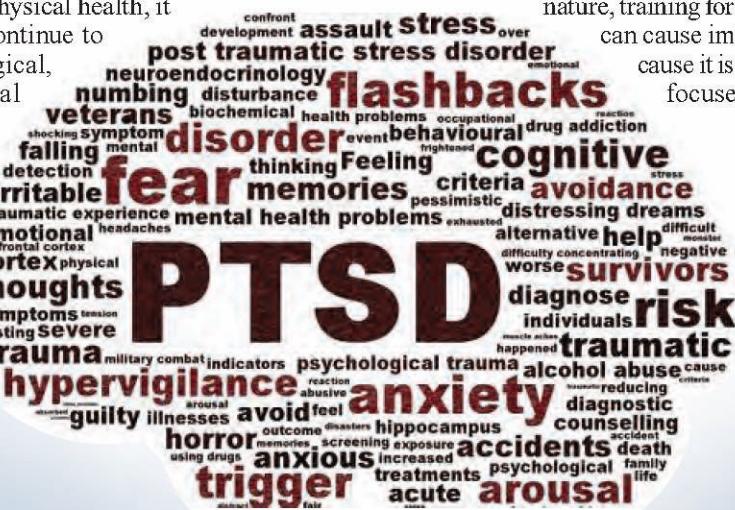
Several years ago, a popular meme circulated the Internet, especially among body builders and gym rats. It was a picture of a big, muscle-bound guy lifting weights. At first glance, he seemed pretty impressive; however, upon closer inspection, his skinny "chicken legs" were visible. The caption read, "Friends don't let friends skip leg day." Here was a man who was dedicated to improving his physique and who clearly invested a lot of time in the gym to shape his body, but apparently neglected his legs. It seems ridiculous, but this type of thing happens all the time. People develop "favorite" muscle groups to direct focus. They spend a lot of time and energy to perfect that part of their body, but ignore other important muscle groups. The result is a body that is awkwardly out of balance.

This principle of imbalance has application beyond bodybuilding and can be applied to total wellness. Wellness is about more than just physical fitness. In addition to physical health, it is important that we continue to nourish our psychological, social and spiritual development. **post traum** **neuroendocrinol** **numbing** **disturba**

growth—otherwise our life, like the body builder mentioned previously, can tip out of balance. Happiness and success in life are most likely achieved when all four elements are in balance.

The reverse is also true. Take clinical depression, for example. While it is considered a psychological disorder, depression exists in all four areas of health—causing poor sleep habits, lack of desire for healthy physical activity, isolation and loss of meaning and hope. Effective treatment for depression includes strengthening all four wellness areas and incorporates exercise, improved nutrition and possibly medication (physical), counseling to help recognize and change irrational and unhelpful thought patterns (mental), identifying faith, values and meaning to motivate and strengthen (spiritual) and reconnecting with others to develop meaningful relationships (social).

Maintaining balance in all four areas of health is especially important to those in the military. By nature, training for warfighting can cause imbalance because it is so intensely focused on physi-



cal and mental hardening. If, however, the emotional, social and spiritual fitness of the individual do not keep pace, it can cause problems, including relationship and family problems and poor moral decisions. Reintegration issues after deployments are often the result of this imbalance.

### Warrior Ethos

To combat this tendency for warriors to experience moral hardening and imbalance, many historical warrior cultures created a strong warrior code to encourage constant attention to all areas of fitness. The Samurai in Japan are known for their commitment to a warrior code known as Bushido, which emphasized eight virtues: righteousness, heroic courage, compassion, respect, integrity, honor, duty, and self-control. Notice that few of these virtues relate to physical strength or mental toughness, but rather provide balance to a combat mindset by emphasizing spiritual and social values that enhance mental and emotional functioning. Chivalry among medieval knights served a similar purpose, providing a spiritual and sociological framework within which warriors could operate.

For the modern warrior, the need to maintain balance is perhaps even greater than ever because modern technology now tends to decrease separation between a warrior's "combat life" and regular life. A Marine may be engaging with the enemy in a fight for life in the morning, and then trying to emotionally engage with family members that same afternoon. Managing two different worlds that are at odds with each other can be extremely challenging. Marines need to develop the mental skills, spiritual strength and social and relational understanding that will enable success.

### Spiritual Fitness

Marine Corps leaders understand the need for a strong spiritual foundation and have highlighted the importance of making it part of warrior preparation. In ALMAR 033/16, Commandant of the Marine Corps General Robert B. Neller explained, "Research indicates that spiritual fitness plays a key role in resiliency, in our ability to grow, develop, recover, heal, and adapt. Regardless of individual philosophy or beliefs, spiritual well-being makes us better warriors and people of character capable of making good choices on and off duty ... By attending to spiritual fitness with the same rigor given to physical, social and mental fitness, Marines and Sailors can become and remain the honorable warriors and model citizens our Nation expects."

It is important to identify the difference between spirituality and religion. Many confuse religion and spirituality as being the same thing. They are actually two different concepts that may overlap for many people. Religion is an organized set of beliefs and practices adhered to by a group of people. It is practiced externally with the intent to foster spirituality. Spirituality is an internal experience. It is characterized by one's personal experience of



SSGT CHRISTAL CRAWFORD, USMC

meaning, connection, and transcendence. It may include a personal relationship with a higher power or a purpose that gives meaning to life. Research shows that religion can be an effective way to foster the benefits of spirituality because it provides teachings, scripture, rituals and practices that can enhance personal meaning, direction, connection and fulfillment.

Simply being part of a religion does not make a person "spiritual." It is also possible to be a spiritual person without being religious or even believing in God as defined by religion. For many people who are not religious, spirituality is about living in harmony with nature or with society. Others use a powerful principle as their guiding source of inspiration, such as love, patriotism, truth or the human spirit. Many seek to understand and develop their own "higher self." Whether one chooses to use religion or chooses to follow a different path, the key to developing spirituality is to make regular, sincere efforts to find deeper connection and meaning in life. The Marine Corps

**As part of the Religious Affairs staff integration week during Eager Lion 2018, U.S. military chaplains and members of the Jordanian armed forces conducted mass casualty training at the Joint Training Center in Amman, Jordan, April 12.**



LCPL AMY PHAN, USMC

**LtCol Daniel Micklis, CO, BLT, 1st Bn, 1st Marines, 31st MEU, receives communion during a Protestant church service aboard USS *Wasp* (LHD-1) off the coast of Okinawa, Japan, April 15.**



is not interested in telling Marines which religion to practice, but it is interested in training Marines to be fit and resilient warriors who are ready in every way for war. Spirituality has been linked by many different studies to numerous physical, psychological and social health factors. In addition, the benefits of spirituality are especially helpful in making warriors more resilient in the face of combat. More and more, research seems to support the sentiments of General George C. Marshall—who also served as Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense—when he said, “It is in the national interest that personnel serving in the Armed Forces be protected in the realization and development of moral, spiritual, and religious values consistent with the religious beliefs of the individuals concerned. To this end, it is the duty of commanding officers in every echelon to develop to the highest degree

the conditions and influences calculated to promote health, morals, and spiritual values of the personnel under their command.”

Though spirituality may look a little bit different for each individual, there are several key elements that seem to be important active ingredients for spirituality across all faith backgrounds and to those of no religious affiliation. Each Marine, whether religious or not, would benefit from becoming familiar with these core elements of spiritual fitness, and from exploring how they can be applied to improve personal resilience. Further, Marine Corps leaders should understand these concepts and find ways to integrate them into training plans.

### Personal Faith

Marines learn about personal faith from the moment they step off the bus in boot camp. It is drilled into them to trust their leaders, trust each other, and eventually to trust their own training and abilities. For example, when Marines first learn to rappel, trusting in the rope can be difficult and disorienting. However, with training and practice, Marines quickly discover that faith in the equipment provides a solid connection that increases safety and stability and instills hope and confidence in accomplishing any task.

Like rappelling, personal faith requires trust in something greater than self. The majority of Americans place faith in a higher power or God and in a religious community and report that religious faith is a source of significant support. However, religion is not the only type of faith that can be beneficial. Other objects of faith may include self, in the form of skills, abilities or personal worth, friends, family, unit, the Marine Corps or the nation. That faith relationship can provide connection that improves personal and moral stability and increases confidence and hope for the future.

**Marines and Sailors of USS *Wasp* Amphibious Ready Group sing during a Protestant church service aboard USS *Wasp* off the coast of Okinawa, Japan, April 15. Marines and Sailors are able to participate in services of various religions and denominations while deployed and in garrison.**



LCPL AMY PHAN, USMC

## Foundational Values

Imagine being completely lost in a wilderness area. How would you determine which way you would go? An effective strategy would be to try to get a view of the land to enable a mental map of the terrain. That way, direction decisions would not be purely based on the limited view each moment. By seeking a bird's eye view, it would be possible to identify important terrain features to follow, such as rivers and valleys, as well as terrain to avoid, such as dangerous cliffs, impassable vegetation or disorienting forests. It would be important to view the surroundings, decide where to go, and then make a plan to get there while properly utilizing the terrain. Marines understand the importance of these land navigation skills and are trained to use maps and plan detailed routes through difficult terrain in order to arrive at objectives efficiently.

The same navigational principles apply to life. Many people wander through life without any particular destination. They make daily choices based on what lies ahead at that moment. The result in life is often much like it would be if they were lost in the wilderness—they end up going in circles, running into dead ends or taking much longer to get anywhere than they need to. In order to avoid this, identifying life's meaning and values is important. Meaning addresses questions such as, "What is the purpose of life?" and "How do I live a good life, even in the face of hardship?" Meaning provides a bird's eye view of life—a "life map" that identifies terrain (values) and objectives (goals). Having personal meaning and values mapped out provides motivation to pursue goals and strength to endure hardship.

Determining a detailed life map is especially important for Marines in combat, as the conditions of war can distort perceptions of right and wrong and can challenge a person's worldview. It is important that Marines regularly reaffirm commitment to and personal understanding of Marine Corps values of honor, courage and commitment, as well as other personal foundational values.

## Moral Living

Just as a map is of little value if it is not used, personal meaning and values are of little use if they are only given lip service. Saying that something is crucial or that it is important to live life a certain way is good because it helps to identify objectives and guide a path to follow, but it can be easy to stray from an intended path without regularly comparing progress to the map and generating reminders of core values.

For many people, this is where spirituality breaks down. Most people want to be "good" people and have at least a vague idea of what that kind of life should look like. Despite this, prisons are full of people who started with good intentions. They didn't say, "I want to be a criminal when I grow up." They probably created some sort of life map at some point. The problem is that many people never follow through on good intentions. In essence, they glanced at their map, said, "I got this," and then



LCPL TAYLER SCHWAMB, USMC

threw away the map and started walking. They never noticed as they gradually drifted more and more off course until they were so far off they could no longer remember what their map looked like. All Marines can recite the Marine Corps values. Those Marines who have made poor decisions that have brought dishonor on themselves and the Corps knew those values in their mind—they just weren't written in their hearts.

Moral living is where the rubber meets the road for spirituality. It is where faith and values are transformed into action and lifestyle. Using the map analogy from above, it is the compass that guides each step we take. Marines learn how to use a map and a compass together by identifying the heading on the map, shooting an azimuth in the same direction with the compass, then advancing in line with that azimuth, paying careful attention to direction and pace. It is a very deliberate, exact process. Likewise, Marines need a moral compass. They need to develop the habit of aligning life choices with foundational values and meanings. When this type of spiritual attention guides every footprint in life, it is more likely that the individual will end up at the destination envisioned.

Spiritual fitness is an important element of warrior total fitness because it provides the underlying framework of meaning and motivation that helps Marines push themselves, overcome challenges, endure hardship and suffering for a greater cause and be able to adapt to life's changing battlefields.

For more information, check out USMC Spiritual Fitness on Facebook and Instagram, or send us an email at [USMCspiritfit@USMC.mil](mailto:USMCspiritfit@USMC.mil).

*Author's bio: LCDR Top, a Navy chaplain, works in the office of the Chaplain of the Marine Corps to create resources to promote spiritual fitness in the Marine Corps. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in counseling psychology and specialized in the relationship between spirituality and mental health.*

**RADM Brent W. Scott gives closing remarks during the Chaplain's Professional Development Workshop at Camp Foster, Okinawa, Japan May 8, 2017.**

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