
‘Warrior Psychotherapy’ holds promise for veterans

By **Hamid R. Tavakoli, Md**
and **Landon Van Dell, Md, Lt, Mc, Usn**
Guest Columnists

As psychiatrists who treat active-duty military members, we often return to the core values that we, and all members of the armed forces, are taught during military training. Given our unique vantage point, we have observed time and again that the same skills that are successful in the armed forces, resulting in a more resilient military member, can translate to success in life for all individuals.

We coined these values and skills “Warrior Psychotherapy Elements,” which when encouraged can cause a paradigm shift in an individual, and eventually a community and a nation. We agreed on the few we thought were the most significant to impart.

Honor, one of the three values of U.S. Navy, represents the highest form of self-respect. Dishonorable practices are destructive, leading to chaotic life experiences, anxiety, and suffering. A clear conscience is the essence of self-respect, and thus, honor. If we cannot honor and respect ourselves, we cannot appreciate and love our family, friends, fellow humans or the world around us.

Faith is believing in something beyond yourself. For many it means devotion to a system of religious beliefs. However, it can also be private, without any need for formal organizations with rituals and traditions. Contrary to the common notion, faith is not blind. It requires study and effort. It is a form of knowledge, congruent to science, in the pursuit of truth.

For those who have lost their sense of purpose in the workplace, in families, and communities; faith can provide renewed vigor and hope.

Courage does not imply fearlessness, for courage without fear is recklessness. Eleanor Roosevelt said, “People grow through experience if they meet life honestly and courageously. This is how character is built.” The fear can result from failure, pain or any number of unpleasant consequences. However, failure is necessary to learn, and pain is often required to grow and strengthen. Each time, to move forward, takes courage.

Toughness signifies the resistance to hopelessness and the rejection of giving up. Giving up is different than giving in. Imagine an outnumbered team of operatives whose position was discovered. They may have to give in to their dire situation, but they will fight against the odds. That much

they can control. They are trained to never give up. When balance of life is not ideal, it takes toughness to avoid giving up. This is analogous to a patient whose medical treatment cannot resolve terminal cancer. Giving-up behavior leads to demoralization and depression. Giving-in behavior may be necessary to accept facets of life beyond our control.

Excellence: One of the three Air Force core values is “Excellence in All We Do.” The aim here is not perfection, an unattainable concept, but rather for continued improvement. Whether in personal or community endeavors, we must strive for and pursue excellence and improvement in perpetuity.

Situational awareness infers mindfulness of the details, resources available, and how those factors influence a circumstance. The steps required to achieve on a day-to-day basis is the essence of situational awareness in the military or civilian world.

Flexibility and adaptability are essential abilities to better our lives. The opposite, inflexibility and maladaptive behaviors, are hallmarks of mental distress that cause havoc in individuals and societies. President Dwight Eisenhower once said, “Plans are nothing. Planning is everything.” While dealing with an acute stressor,

plans often change. Learning to recognize when to be flexible momentarily or when to adapt altogether is indispensable.

Communication is complex in humans. The importance of human connectivity is highlighted by the fact that perceived loneliness and poor communication have been shown to be risk factors for mortality and suffering. Knowing this, we must learn to foster human connections and exchange thoughts, feelings and ideas. They are vital to our health.

These are just a few elements of Warrior Psychotherapy, which we believe can be encouraged and fostered in the general public just as they are in our military. They build upon certain character traits and behaviors that make us, and our country, stronger. Much like a warrior’s mentality, we must strive for improvement, learn from failures, adapt and ultimately never give up.

Hamid R. Tavakoli, MD, and Landon Van Dell, MD, LT, MC, USN, serve at the Naval Medical Readiness and Training Command in Portsmouth. The views in this letter are the authors’ and not those of the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government, and they, as government employees, are not afforded copyright protection.
