



Finding Balance After the War Zone

**Quick Guide for Veterans
and Service Members**

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Finding Balance After the War Zone

This Quick Guide is part of a series of materials by the Great Lakes Addiction Technology Transfer Center and Human Priorities. It's written for service members, returning veterans, and others who want to understand post-deployment stress effects. This booklet has five short sections:

The Body	1
The Impact.....	3
Survival.....	5
Balance	7
Training.....	9

A beginning list of web-based resources is shown on the inside of the back cover. This booklet is also part of a series that includes a downloadable Clinician's Guide for counselors. Plans include more materials for veterans and families. (More information from pamelwoll@sbcglobal.net)

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But far above all of this is our thanks to the men and women who have been willing to risk and give their lives for the country we love.

—Pam Woll, 2008



The Body

Human beings are “wired” to survive and keep going. The body, brain, and mind do amazing things to make this possible. At many times in our lives, our bodies react automatically to intense life experiences, including stress and threat, by:

- Pumping out chemicals that keep us going
- Speeding up and slowing down body functions
- Tightening muscles to protect vital organs
- Storing powerful memories of these events
- Getting ready to react the same way next time

Our minds react automatically, too, to help us protect ourselves and others. They might:

- Organize our thoughts to keep us functioning
- Keep us from feeling more than we can handle
- Affect the way we relate to other people
- Affect our belief systems, to help make sense of what’s happening to us and around us

We all face experiences intense enough to trigger some of these automatic stress and survival reactions. We don't choose how our bodies react. Our stress systems and other organs respond for us, and our bodies store all our responses—and strong memories of the events that triggered them.

In a war zone like Iraq or Afghanistan, many Service Members have lived through months or years of blistering heat, constant vigilance, surprise attacks, combat, injury, loss of true friends, and the sights and sounds of injury and death.

In these conditions, all of the body's automatic survival systems kick in repeatedly. Many Service Members have stayed on the alert all the time, every day, for months, over several deployments.

The many ways in which your body keeps you going are signs of your incredible strength as a human being. Military training kicks in—and so do the body's powerful stress and survival systems.



The Impact

Your body was built to respond to short-term threats, then “reset” when the threat dies down. But when the threat continues over time:

- The powerful chemicals that kept you going can keep surging long after the threat is gone
- The systems that were supposed to keep these chemicals in balance can stop working
- Your body can hold onto the intense energy of automatic “fight, flight, and freeze” responses
- Your brain can “hide” memories and pull them up later, as if they were happening right now

On the outside, some of these natural reactions can look—and even feel—like emotional problems. They are not. They’re normal, natural, physical responses to intense experiences. With the right help, you can re-train and manage your stress systems, to bring them back into balance.

Kevin's Story

Kevin went to Iraq as a medic, with a history of police and paramedic work. In spite of the grounding his history gave him, Kevin came back feeling let down, shut down, short tempered, and withdrawn. It wasn't the nightmares or sleep problems that troubled him so much as his desire to go back. He feared that people might think he was crazy, or his wife might question his love. They couldn't understand the intense sense of meaning and purpose he'd found in his work there.

Kevin's breakthrough came when he started talking to his National Guard buddies, and found out they all felt the same way. "You come to accept the feelings you have," he said. "It doesn't mean you're a bad person, or a 'warmonger.' You're not crazy. You start giving yourself some peace with the whole idea." When he talked to his wife about it, she understood. He also started teaching medical staff about veterans' needs, and he keeps tabs on buddies who are having a hard time. "Sometimes it just takes time," he said. "You realize some of this stuff's going on, you talk to your friends, and that's how it starts to get better."



Stress Chemicals

In intense experiences, our bodies help us keep functioning by pumping out stress chemicals. But under prolonged stress, the “feedback loops” that keep these chemicals in line can stop working.

- Chemicals like *adrenaline* speed us up so we can take action. But the systems that regulate adrenaline can stop working. We can end up with too much adrenaline, or not enough.
- Chemicals like *serotonin* calm us down, help us make better decisions. But stress can wear down our ability to use serotonin, making it hard to feel hope or happiness; cooperate; or control our urges to drink, fight, etc.
- Chemicals called *endorphins* blur the pain and the memories, so we can keep going. Later, past memories and feelings can invade the present, and we can get powerful cravings to drink or do anything that will numb us out.

Different people's bodies react to war-zone stress with more or less power, and take more or less work and help to get back in balance. But when these stress effects cause other life problems, it's each person's responsibility to get help.

Because you're human, you have feelings—happiness, sadness, guilt, fear, anger, hope, despair—you name it. Your feelings are not problems or symptoms. They're not the reason your body is doing painful or frightening things, though their intensity might point out things you'll want to work on. Feelings are tools to help you find balance on all levels—body, mind, and spirit.

You know better than anyone that everyone who experiences war is changed by it. Sometimes these changes turn out to be positive in powerful ways. Many people who have lived through war end up understanding life more deeply. And the process of getting back in balance can make you stronger, wiser, a powerful force for good in this world.



Balance

The power that helped you keep going in battle is still there, still inside you. You can use that power to help you bring your body, brain, and life back into balance, and back into the present.

Preparing your body, brain, and mind for war included a process of learning and training. Preparing to live in peace back home will also include a process of learning and training, and there are many resources that can help.

Getting back in balance gives you the power to:

- Recognize your body's stress/survival reactions
- Choose whether or not to act on them
- Notice when the past is "invading" the present
- Choose to separate the past from the present
- Do things to regulate your stress systems
- Choose responses that make things better
- Make choices that support your true values

Laura's Story

Laura grew up strong, raised in a family full of boys, and the Army toughened her up even more. It was a year after her return from Iraq, on her first day of simulation at SGT school, that Laura first experienced violent PTSD symptoms. She managed to finish, but the symptoms kept getting worse—flashbacks, nightmares, panic attacks, depression, everything. Even fireworks at a baseball game had her in tears.

Unable to come out of it on her own, Laura went to the VA and started therapy and medication. She also got in touch with Army buddies, to talk to people who had been there. Over the next year, as her symptoms tapered off, she worked with her therapist to decide how long to continue treatment. She even wrote a book about her experiences, and started giving presentations at local schools and community groups. These efforts have helped transform her challenges into something that can promote understanding.

Laura's stress systems are finally getting back in balance. "A year ago at Fourth of July I didn't want anything to do with fireworks," she says. "Now I'm kind of looking forward to it."



Training

The aim of training is to strengthen the skills that will help you regulate and manage the parts of your brain that still operate as if you're in country. There are many approaches, but we'll look at three here: bonding, regulation, and purpose.

Bonding

In the war zone, a strong bond within the Unit is one of the best ways to help the body and brain stay in balance. Back home, a strong bond with other service members/veterans is also essential in getting back in balance. It's important to keep in touch with people in your Unit, wherever they are, but you'll want face-to-face contact with others who have been there, too. If you don't know anyone in your area, a local Vet Center is a good place to start. You can find one by calling 1-800-905-4675 (Eastern) or 1-866-496-8838 (Pacific).

Bonding with other people back home is also important in restoring balance to your brain's survival systems. This can be hard if the combat experience has left you feeling separate and distant from people who haven't been there. But it's important to look for and find people you can trust, and work on letting them in. These can be family members, friends, clergy, counselors, doctors, etc. Our bonds with other people actually affect our ability to regulate our stress systems.

Our stress systems also do better when we're truly connected with a family or community. This is especially important when you've come back from an experience that was worlds away from community life, and seen things you can't begin to describe. You'll want to find a community you can trust—maybe your family, a faith community, a group of friends, a support group, etc. It's important for the new, changed person you are now to be part of a community—important both for you and for the community.

A few things that help balance survival systems:

- Breathing slowly and deeply
- Walking, running, or riding horseback
- Exercises, especially stretching core muscles
- Letting your body release its stored energy
- Getting a good night's sleep (7 hrs. or more)
- Prayer, meditation, yoga, affirmations, etc.
- Any kind of positive ritual or ceremony
- Dancing, music, singing, artistic expression
- Looking into the eyes of someone you trust
- Telling your story to someone you trust
- Being an "outside observer" of your feelings
- Separating the past from the present

A few things that put you more off balance:

- Drinking too much, doing street drugs
- "Stuffing" your thoughts and feelings inside
- Doing things that speed or "pump" you up
- "Ranting," yelling at people, etc.
- Getting into heated arguments or fights

Regulation

The first step is to get a better understanding of how and why your body's stress systems do what they do. For example, you might find out:

- Why you feel bored, numb, or disconnected
- Why you feel edgy and flare up or get upset over things that turn out to be unimportant
- Why it sometimes feels like you've got one foot on the accelerator and one foot on the brake

Once you understand the physical reasons, it's easier to become an "outside observer" of your thoughts and feelings. You can also learn techniques—thoughts, actions, affirmations—that can help you manage your stress systems and make choices that have the effects you want.

A counselor who understands war-zone stress can help train you in questioning your thoughts, managing your body's reactions, and separating the past from your experience of the present.

Another thing you'll learn when you study these stress systems is how the effects of some of your experiences in country have been stored in your brain and in its connections with your muscles.

Under threat, the body tightens and "freezes" the front core (stomach) and thigh muscles, to protect your organs. If you're wearing heavy body armor, it puts even more strain on those muscles. This freeze experience can be stored in your body for years, as energy. Training might include exercises to relax these front muscles, and ways of letting your body discharge the energy stored there.

There are also many kinds of counseling that use physical techniques to help regulate survival systems. One example is EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing), done by a counselor who's trained in it. Counseling can be an important part of training and regulation. (A beginning list of web sites with more information and help is shown on the inside back cover.)

Purpose

No matter how powerful your brain and body are, they're still connected to the rest of you—your mind, your heart, your spirit. The journey back to balance may lead through rocky terrain, but those who make this journey grow stronger and wiser.

In the end, it will be important to find the meaning or purpose your war-time experience had for you. Someone you trust—a true friend, a faith leader, a good counselor—might help you explore this. But it's an individual thing. It's not the meaning they give it, or the meaning the nation gives it. It's the meaning and purpose you find in your experience.

You have discovered in yourself the strength and the willingness to give the highest gift: your life. That life is still with you, to do with as you choose. As you return to balance, you come to live more and more in the present moment. May you find there a sense of purpose, peace of mind, and joy.



A Few National Resources

Military OneSource (lots of materials, services, referrals)

<http://www.militaryonesource.com>

Vet Centers (community based, informal, run by the VA)

<http://www.vetcenter.va.gov/>

VA Veteran Recovery

www.veteranrecovery.med.va.gov

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Admin.

<http://getfit.samhsa.gov/Drugs/>

<http://getfit.samhsa.gov/Alcohol/>

Vets4Vets (support and training for vets, by vets)

<http://www.vets4vets.us/>

The Coming Home Project

<http://www.cominghomeproject.net/cominghome/>

Wounded Warrior Project

<https://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/>

National Center for PTSD (Veterans Administration)

<http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/veterans/>

American Veterans With Brain Injuries

<http://www.avbi.org/>

Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center

<http://www.dvbic.org/> 1-800-870-9244

Military Home Front (Department of Defense)

<http://www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil/>

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Thank you for your service.