



# MINDLINES

Edition 14 | Summer 2012

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## *A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Challenge*

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**E**ven as our country draws down from the longest sustained combat in its history, there's every indication that the intense operational demands for the military will continue for some time. This is especially

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true for the Navy, given a new national defense strategy that centers on the sea services.

The need to preserve the total health and readiness of our Sailors and Marines and their families remains in the forefront of how we meet the challenges ahead. Indeed, readiness is the first tenet outlined in the "21st Century Sailor and Marine Initiative," which was announced earlier this year by Navy Secretary Ray Mabus.

The program is a set of new and existing objectives and policies to maximize the personal preparedness of service members, build resilience and hone the most combat-effective force in the history of the Navy. Its goal is to provide Sailors and Marines with the support network, healthcare and skills needed so they can overcome any adversity and thrive.

In discussing readiness, the initiative acknowledges the importance of leaders recognizing when Sailors need psychological help. The Stress Continuum, with its color-coded zones, is one of the best tools available for

determining if a service member is impaired by stress, and leaders are increasingly putting it to use.

The way we approach the causes of stress injuries, I believe, is going to require some change in thinking. In the last few years, there has been a growing awareness of the detrimental psychological effects that combat can cause, and often that involved a life threat – leading to a trauma injury from events that provoke terror, helplessness or horror.

Now our focus needs to shift to what we know are the three other sources of stress injury. As outlined in the Navy's Combat and Operational Stress Control Doctrine, these are:

- Wear and tear, an accumulation of stress over time that can lead to acute fatigue
- Loss that can lead to profound grief due to the death of a loved one or the loss of an important relationship
- Inner conflict that represents an injury to our beliefs and values.

At our recent Combat and Operational Stress Control Conference, we were honored to have among our speakers Vice Adm. Richard H. Hunt, then commander of Naval Surface Forces. He acknowledged in his remarks that it is sometimes "harder to grasp the import of operational stress versus combat stress," adding "op stress can be a challenge for some to comprehend."

Are we up for that challenge? I agree with the admiral that we most certainly are. We have to be if we are to meet the demands of the 21st century Navy. 

*At Naval Hospital Camp Pendleton, on the West Coast of the Western world, Eastern medicine is making its mark through the Holistic Health Program.*

*The program, which began in July 2011, is the first of its kind in the Navy and a key component of the Wounded Warrior Psychological Health Recovery Plan, which is funded by the Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery.*

*Providers for the program include Justin Heesakker, a full-time acupuncturist, and Madelyn Kozub, a part-time Healing Touch practitioner. Mindlines staff recently visited Camp Pendleton to learn how the program is working.*

# Needling Away at Stress

Since he began “sticking it” to patients at Naval Hospital Camp Pendleton, former Navy SEAL Justin Heesakker has become one of the busiest providers on base.

“There’s been a tremendous amount of demand and the response has been super positive,” says Heesakker, who sees about 15 patients a day, many of whom come from the Wounded Warrior Battalion West. He usually is booked five weeks in advance from referrals.

Acupuncture is the ancient Chinese technique of inserting and gently manipulating tiny, thin needles into specific

points on the body to relieve pain or for other therapeutic purposes. While the treatment has not been studied in depth for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), limited research has shown impressive results.

Heesakker sees many patients who are diagnosed with PTSD, mild traumatic brain injury and other psychological health problems. Common symptoms he treats include anxiety, insomnia and depression.

Following acupuncture, he says, “the stress relief is almost instantaneous and better sleep is often reported right away.”

He likes to cite the example of a 37-year-

old Marine who had suffered a debilitating nerve injury to his hip and leg.

“This guy had gone from being a high-performance Marine to barely walking,” Heesakker says. “He always felt anxiety, he had suicidal ideation, depression and he was very angry – all PTSD symptoms.”

After a series of acupuncture treatments, Heesakker says the Marine is now able to go hiking, is much less anxious and feels optimistic about his future. “He says the acupuncture is the most effective treatment he’s had.”

For Camp Pendleton patients, acupuncture often is used in conjunction with



Photo by Joe Griffin

*Acupuncturist Justin Heesakker (left) sometimes uses low-level – and comfortable – electric stimulation to boost the effects of treatments.*

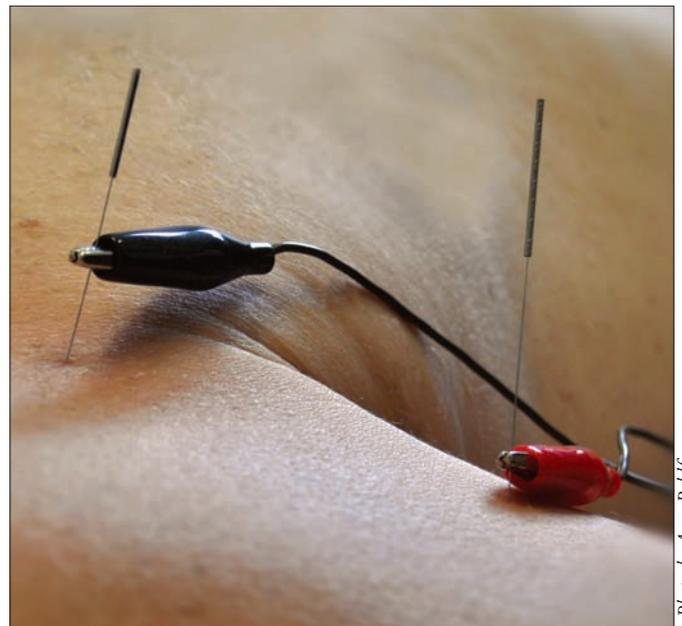


Photo by Amy Roblifs

such evidence-based psychological health practices as cognitive behavioral therapy and cognitive processing therapy.

“A great bonus of acupuncture and the quick relief it provides is that it encourages patients to stay in regular treatment,” Heesakker says. “It gives them tools that help facilitate their regular treatments.”

He’s also finding that patients who receive acupuncture often are able to reduce their medications – nother bonus that also translates to cost savings. “Most of these Marines don’t want meds because sometimes there are side effects,” Heesakker says. “There are

no side effects with acupuncture.”

To validate what patients tell him about medications, Heesakker is working with NCCOSC on a study to measure if, in fact, acupuncture reduces the need for their use.

The former SEAL first experienced acupuncture when he was treated for a shoulder injury. He was so impressed with the results that when he left the Navy, he immediately began the four-year curriculum to become licensed.

While it’s not known precisely how acupuncture works to relieve PTSD and

other psychological health problems, stimulation of certain acupuncture points has been shown to reduce activity in areas of the brain where anxiety, fear and stress responses are experienced. It also releases endorphins – those great brain chemicals that trigger positive feelings.

Heesakker usually books patients for six treatments. “I need to get a feel for their response and then reassess the best approach,” he says. “Every patient is different and one of the strengths of Eastern medicine is that it addresses this. It’s not a one-size-fits-all approach.” 📞

# Better Balance Through Touch

## Energy therapy? What is that?

The human body is an energy field, and light touch can help evenly distribute the energy throughout the body. When we are stressed, or in pain or suffering from anxiety or other symptoms associated with PTSD, depression or anxiety, our energy tends to gather in the upper part of our body. This overloading can cause overheating and lead to complications.

Healing Touch helps redistribute this energy, better balancing our body and ultimately resulting in alleviated symptoms from a variety of ailments and illnesses.

## Who is a good candidate for Healing Touch?

Most of my patients suffer from PTSD, TBI, depression and anxiety. Healing Touch can be effective in relieving both pain and stress. More and more people are seeking out alternative treatments. Sometimes because they want to avoid taking too many medications, and sometimes their current treatment is just not having the desired effect.

I’m getting great responses from patients. At the very least, just about all experience increased relaxation, which, for many of them – particularly those suffering from PTSD – is a great relief.

## Is Healing Touch a popular treatment?

Healing Touch is rapidly increasing in popularity, not just in the U.S., but all over the world. Providers are becoming more and more interested because it is both inexpensive (all you need is a room, a bed and some soothing music) and effective where illness proves immune to traditional treatments. Right now, I’m working three days

a week and seeing about six patients per day. I’m hoping to expand the program as word gets out.

## How do you become a Healing Touch practitioner?

I’ve been practicing Healing Touch since my Navy days, and all of the skills I’ve learned in 40 years of nursing play a part in administering Healing Touch. Healing Touch courses are part of a continuing education program, eventually leading to certification. I was fully certified in 2000 and have been practicing since. 📞

*Practitioner Madelyn Kozub treats a Marine for anxiety relief in the Healing Touch room at Camp Pendleton’s Holistic Health Center.*



Photo by Joe Griffin

# A New Approach for Treating Stress

What began as a loose collection of ideas on how to treat the increasing number of Marines and Sailors returning from deployment with stress injuries has grown into a successful, curriculum-in-a-box program that's getting high marks from participants.

"Back on Track" was launched in 2006 at Naval Hospital Camp Lejeune when caregivers recognized that service members could benefit from a broad variety

compiled the best ideas from the original program and combined them into a full curriculum, laying out the rationale, organization and individual modules to create the new course. The real game-changer for Back on Track was the creation of a workbook that detailed the two-week course into a blueprint, allowing the program to be led by a corpsman or other provider.

The workbook was put to the test almost immediately. Simmons deployed one month after finishing it, leaving the program's first run to a corpsman to execute. He was able to do so with amazing success.

Back on Track – which is open to all Sailors and Marines experiencing issues with combat-related stress, regardless of whether they are currently receiving mental health treatment– teaches skills that help manage stress and stress injuries. Over the course of 70 hours, students take a variety of courses, including emotion management and sleep hygiene. There also are courses on spirituality, relapse reduction and even anti-bullying techniques. At the end of each day, patients engage in some type of meditation, including yoga.

Another key feature of Back on Track: The program's curriculum is taught in a group format, where patients interact with each other.

Simmons believes that the mixture of officers and enlisted, senior and junior Sailors and Marines has created an environment where people are more willing to open up.

"The officers know they're being looked at to set an example so they're willing to open up, and the junior people can see that the people they look up to are also suffering from these types of things," she says.

The results of this new approach to treating stress have been eye-opening,

says Simmons. "We have seen a decrease in symptoms almost universally after two weeks, but not always under the threshold for PTSD." Long-term tracking of the program is in the works, she adds.

Simmons returned from deployment to Naval Health Clinic Cherry Point and brought Back on Track along. Five hundred "students" have now completed the course, and Simmons says the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive.

Back on Track is now operating at three locations: Camp LeJeune, Cherry Point and Naval Medical Center Portsmouth. Simmons will soon transfer to Naval Hospital Camp Pendleton so expect to see Back on Track in action in California, too. 🇺🇸

Back on Track participants give enthusiastic reviews to the program.

*"I enjoyed every day and every part I learned was something new and useful."*

*"I enjoyed listening to issues others are/were having that are similar to mine."*

*"I appreciated the vets coming in to share their stories."*

*"All instructors were very good with knowledge and actually portrayed that they cared. I feel this course is awesome and is helping me already."*

*"This class helped me talk about my issues instead of being quiet."*

of approaches, both conventional and non-traditional, to treat combat and operational stress injuries. It was difficult for the program to gain traction, though, primarily due to frequent staff changes necessitated by deployments.

When Lt. Cmdr. Erin Simmons, a Navy psychologist, arrived at LeJeune in 2007, Back on Track was resuscitated. Simmons

**NCCOSC MINDLINES**  
EDITION 14 • SUMMER 2012



**Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery**

**Naval Center for Combat & Operational Stress Control (NCCOSC)**

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*Views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Department of Defense.*

**Mindlines** is written and produced by the NCCOSC Strategic Communications Department.

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