

Veteran Voices SITREP - Episode #29 - Mental Health and Wellness Strategies - Part 2-4

[Chris Faust]

You know, unless you're already really big into working out and, you know, doing all sorts of physical exercise, you start small. So you begin with manageable goals to avoid feeling overwhelmed.

[Tom Faust]

And you want to schedule your workouts and keep them on a regular basis. It's easiest to have it at a specific time of day. Welcome to Veteran Voices, SITREP, with your hosts, Tom and Chris Faust.

Welcome to Veteran Voices. I am your co-host, Tom Faust, and I'm here with my son, Chris. And today we are in part two of our four-part series on mental and physical wellness strategies.

And so on the first episode, we explored mindfulness and meditation. Today we're going to focus on the significant role of physical fitness and how that plays into your enhancing your mental health. And we'll talk about the benefits of the physical activity and practical steps to help you incorporate it into your life.

So first, I want to talk about the mind and body connection, just to help us understand how physical activity impacts your mental well-being. Because having regular exercise has numerous psychological benefits, such as improved mood and reduced stress levels, mostly due to a release of endorphins and things that kind of give you that runner's high. These are chemicals that your brain puts out when you are exercising, and these contribute to your overall outlook on life.

And so physical activity can also enhance your self-esteem, cognitive function, and overall quality of life by promoting neural growth and reduces inflammation and helps build new patterns in your brain that foster calmness and well-being.

[Chris Faust]

Yeah, exercise also plays a big thing in the reducing of stress and improving your mood. Exercise, it's a powerful tool for doing these, especially reducing stress. It helps relax muscles, relieve tension.

It can alleviate the physical symptoms of stress, like headaches and muscle cramps. And when you focus on the physical sensations during the exercise, individuals can distract themselves from negative thoughts and break that cycle of it. Regular physical activity will also improve the functioning part of the brain that helps regulate stress hormones

like cortisol.

This leads to better stress management, resilience against any challenges you might face. And by incorporating moderate exercise into your daily routines, such as like, you know, walking, swimming, you know, even yoga, that could all significantly enhance your mental health by, you know, just improving mood, reducing anxiety, and helping build your resilience.

[Tom Faust]

Yeah. And so now I want to talk about starting a fitness routine and kind of give you some tips on how to create a sustainable exercise program. And part of it, one of the biggest things is to find activities that you enjoy, things that you actually like doing.

And so, you know, for me, I like, I don't like running, but I like walking. So I will, if it's indoors on, you know, especially in the winter, because it gets cold and snows up here, rather than going out running, I'll use an elliptical machine and I'll do some walking and I'll listen to music at the same time with that. But you want a program that's sustainable for you for long-term physical and mental health.

And so here are some tips. First of all, like I said, choose activities that you enjoy, things you really like doing. And it doesn't have to be like running, like you'd think, you know, I think normal exercise or going, working out even in a gym necessarily.

You can do things like going out dancing on a regular basis, riding your bike, swimming. I really enjoy hiking, but yeah, engage in activities that just bring joy to your life and will have a more or a higher likelihood of that, you know, that you'll stick with it.

[Chris Faust]

Yeah. And on top of doing what you enjoy, you also want to start small and then build from there, you know, unless you're already really big into working out and, you know, doing all sorts of physical exercise, which, you know, most people might not be. You start small.

So you begin with manageable goals to avoid feeling overwhelmed. Like, start with short sessions of 10 to 15 minutes and then gradually increase the duration and frequency and intensity as your fitness levels improve. It helps prevent burnout and reduces the risk of injury.

And then variety is the spice of life. So you want to incorporate this variety into your routine to try and keep things interesting, prevent boredom. And, you know, it could be cardio one day, you know, strength training, another day, flexibility, another day, sports, even on a different day, just, you know, keep different parts of your brain engaged.

So it doesn't kind of get into a monotonous feeling of, okay, yeah. So this, you know, four o'clock in the afternoon, I'm going to go ahead and run for 30 minutes and do this. No, spice it up a little bit and that'll help you stay on track as well.

[Tom Faust]

And you want to schedule your workouts and keep them on a regular basis. It's easiest to have it at a specific time of day and certain days of the week. So for instance, what I like to do is I will do more aerobic things.

Like I talked about on the elliptical, I will do that like Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and on Tuesday, Thursday, and then often on one of the weekend days, I will do more strength things, do a little bit of lightweights or some pushups. I've been playing with trying to do planks lately because it's a full body strengthening thing. Surprisingly difficult is when you start out.

People have a record of, you know, record on those of doing like four and five hours or more of holding the plank position. And, you know, I can make it to a minute or so at this point because I haven't started that long ago, but it's amazing how much a workout that can be. So yeah, you just want to be consistent in the time of day and then make, you know, alternate.

This is part of the variety thing. And also it works different muscles to do aerobic versus strength. So you want to keep into those kind of routines that you'll get used to and becomes a habit.

[Chris Faust]

Yeah. And then going a little further on that too, you want to track your progress and especially celebrate milestones. So you want to keep a record of your workouts to monitor the progress, stay motivated.

And then once you receive that initial goal that you would set, you know, celebrate the achievement, whether it's, you know, you reach your personal best, maintain the consistency, rewarding yourself for meeting the goals helps boost your motivation and reinforces the positive habits. As you know, it's always having, you know, gratification for something is definitely going to hit that part of your brain that says, you know, oh, hey, I did a good job. Yay.

You know, it's just, you know, like when, you know, parents or, you know, parents congratulate you on learning to ride a bike. You know, your boss at work says, you know, hey, great job on this project. You know, things like that just help put a little extra pep in your steps.

So you want to make sure that you do celebrate because working out and getting into

shape and trying to improve your health is, you know, it's a good thing and you don't want to burn out from it.

[Tom Faust]

And it's good, part of that starting small and building your way up, it's good to set some goals. So, you know, think about like a long-term goal of where you want to be, but set shorter term goals in between of, you know, this five or 10 minute thing like Chris talked about, and then extend that on to, you know, to more 15 or 20 minutes, but you can have goals of when you want to do this. And along with this podcast, I'll include some resources on how to set, you know, how to set goals for this and some other tips to make things easier.

And so there's different kinds of exercises that will help affect your mental health. And these can have different advantages. So for instance, the aerobic exercise that I mentioned earlier, like the running, swimming, cycling, things like that, that gets your heart going, right?

This is the part that really gets your insides going, your lungs and your heart and your breathing, and you're working up a good sweat as opposed to strength, which can also, you know, work up a sweat, but it's different muscles in use, right? So these just release different things like the endorphins and chemicals in your brain that are mood lifters and give you that like runner's high sensation that runners often get. And these can help reduce symptoms of like depression and anxiety and help improve your mood.

They can enhance your emotional wellbeing and just kind of boost your overall cognitive functions and help you sleep better as well. And then like strength training, this is like resistance exercise, lifting weights, pulling on elastic straps and doing things like that, that work the muscles of your, like your arms and your legs and your abs and things like that. And these can also help reduce stress and releases cortisol.

And studies will show that the strength training can alleviate the symptoms of depression and anxiety by promoting like a sense of accomplishment and just improving your body image, just feeling like you look better will help you feel better. Right. So these are, these are all good things to, to help your mental, mental health.

[Chris Faust]

Yeah. And then another one, one or two things that you can look at is like, you know, yoga or even like, you know, Tai Chi. So these are kind of like, you know, mindfulness based exercises that combine physical movement with deep breathing techniques.

And, you know, they're, they're, they're particularly effective when it comes to reducing stress and anxiety, you know, initially depression, cause it promotes the relaxation and, you know, enhances your mindfulness. You know, yoga is a lot of, you know, stretching

and movement, you know, different types of positions that you can get to. Tai Chi is kind of like a martial art, which is also beneficial because the, like, you know, when you go through stances and forms and things like that, it's a lot of, you know, a lot of mental focus to make sure that you're in the right position, your body is doing exactly what it needs to do.

So by doing these, you're regulating, you know, nervous system stuff, helps keep you calm, you know, kind of like when you get into like a fight or flight mode, you know, your, your, your heart rates up and everything, you focus it in, breathe and helps, helps calm you down and just helps improve mental health by focusing on these different things here.

[Tom Faust]

And particular veterans have some unique challenges when starting a fitness routine after the military service, you know, with the transition from the structured environment to civilian life, you know, you run into different obstacles like the lack of discipline in the civilian world versus in the military. And, you know, the structure was something that you had on a regular basis while you were in the military. And now you get out and PTSD and depression and things will, will kind of mess with your ability to stay on track with this stuff.

But if you keep, try and keep the routine, because while you're in the military, they give you regular physical exercise, at least most of the time. And so when you get out, it's best to keep that going instead of letting it go and then having to try and come back and build it up again later, which is something I did. I was running five miles a day and then didn't have to anymore.

Oh, well, great. Now I can just take it easy for a while. And suddenly I find myself out of shape.

[Chris Faust]

Yeah, that was the same thing for me.

[Tom Faust]

Yeah.

[Chris Faust]

It's, it's kind of like I was forced to do this for four years. So I'm like, you know what? Nah, I don't, I don't want to.

[Tom Faust]

Yeah, exactly. And so it's best to keep the routine going, but if you don't, then use some of these practices we're talking about to, to set the goals, to build the habits, to get yourself back into the routine. Cause it really is, is good.

Like for me, first thing in the morning, I get up and just get kind of get my mindset for the day and then have my exercise time. And I do all that before, you know, before I get ready for work. And then, then my day is kind of set on a, on a track that is in a better direction than if I just get up and go straight to work and don't have a time to get centered.

So it's best to have these as habits and keep things going.

[Chris Faust]

Yeah. Most of the strategies that, you know, veterans can follow too. We touched about earlier where, you know, start small, build gradually, vary it up, focus on the enjoyable activities, set those goals that are achievable.

But one thing that's going to be really key for at least some people, some people can get self-motivated and do things on their own with no problems. A lot of people might need a support system, somebody that can help keep you honest, keep you on track because you might get sick of it. You might not see results right away.

So you might start to lose motivation saying, well, I'm doing all this. I've been doing it for a month, but I'm not seeing any noticeable changes and having somebody there to, you know, you know, cheer you on and say, hey, you know, you're doing a good job. You know, it's making a difference, you know, keep at it.

That can go for anything, not just, you know, physical and mental exercises. A support system helps through lots of things. So you just want to make sure you got somebody that you can turn to that can, you know, provide some camaraderie.

They can, you know, keep, you know, hold you accountable and other veterans that might be going through the same thing is a good, good solution as well.

[Tom Faust]

Indeed. And yeah. And so by addressing these challenges, you know, with the, you know, thoughtfulness and intent and establishing a routine that you can live with, you can, you can be fit for life.

You really can just keep it up long. You keep on doing it, you'll stay fit. And these are all good for your physical and mental wellbeing.

So along with this podcast, I'm going to include a list of like, like an FAQ, some questions and answers, and we'll, that you can read through and print out if you want to, to kind of

keep on hand. So we're going to answer things like what types of exercise can improve mental health and what, you know, what's the optimal routines that you can use for frequency and duration and other considerations you might want to think about. We'll also have some information on how to stay motivated with a regular routine and give you some ideas and examples for that.

And then we'll also talk about some specific exercises we've talked, you know, touched on some already. We'll include those and some more in a list that you can refer to, to, to be able to get better, a better understanding of what's involved and what you might want to do. So with that, I think there's something else you want to talk about, Chris, or we can wrap things up as a short one today, but hopefully with good information.

[Chris Faust]

Yeah, no, I think we can wrap up. I don't have much there. The, the FAQ that we're going to put to it for people to access will help a lot with that.

So yeah, I think we're, I think we've covered this pretty much for today.

[Tom Faust]

Great. So with that, be sure to, you know, like share all that. This is good information to share with your other veteran buddies that out there or anyone else, you know, your family, anyone else, you know, it's good for everyone.

So keep these in mind. And with that, we will see you next time in part three. Yep.

See it. All right.