
TRANSITIONS

FROM WAR
FROM COMBAT TO ACTIVE LIVING



Reconnecting with Mind, Body, and Spirit



By **MIKE ERGO,**
LCSW
Marine Corps Vet



TABLE OF CONTENTS

3

My Journey Home

10

Mind

17

Body

22

Spirit

27

Next Steps

CHAPTER ONE



MY JOURNEY
HOME



I'M HOME. NOW WHAT?

In the spring of 2001 I enlisted in the United States Marine Corps. I planned to be in the band (it's okay, I laugh too), but the attacks on September 11th sent me on a different path- to the infantry. I deployed to Iraq twice, most notably to Fallujah in 2004. I fought in [Operation Phantom Fury](#), the largest urban battle Americans have fought in since Hue City, Vietnam.

I was honorably discharged in 2005 and returned to my hometown Walnut Creek, California. All ready to be a happy-go-lucky civilian again, I grew frustrated that it was not so easy. Anger, panic attacks, intrusive thoughts, nightmares, avoidance, isolation: all the symptoms of PTSD.

But even more than PTSD, I was **struggling to find a purpose in life**. What could I possibly do after combat that would matter? Feeling stuck led me straight into the trap of self-pity. That turned into full-blown alcoholism. I blamed others for my circumstances and became someone I despised: a dishonest, flaky, mean-spirited drunk. The "Semper Fidelis" tattoo on my chest mocked me each morning in the mirror. I was anything but faithful.

After a few years of heavy drinking, I was 40 pounds overweight and felt terrible. My marriage was on life-support and I was barely making it through school. I lived to get drunk and high.



Fallujah, November 2004: If this wasn't hell, it was probably a couple miles down the road.

“ *If you're going through hell, keep going.*

- Winston Churchill

”



In July of 2012 my wife let me know that I had a choice to make. Change my life or the marriage was over. Message received. I quit using alcohol and drugs that day. A good friend brought me to the twelve-step recovery community and I spent time soul-searching and uncovering the inconsistencies and character defects in my life. The truth was painful, but the change was worth every second of discomfort. I was liberated from the slavery of alcoholism and self-sabotage.

With no chemical aids, I faced the hurricane of feelings I had avoided for years. Grief from friends lost in combat. Resentment towards myself. Resentment towards other people. And FEAR. Fear that I was not good enough. Fear that if people really knew me, they would leave. A spiritual teacher helped me to face these fears head-on and learn they were an illusion. In fact, I started to see fear as something to move towards. Fear became a helpful guide to my next steps in life.

Little by little, I reacquainted myself with how good it felt to work out and put more wholesome foods into my body. I accepted a challenge to do an [open water swim from Alcatraz](#) to San Francisco. I started blending fruits and vegetables into shakes that tasted better and better. And then one day on vacation in Hawaii I watched elite athletes compete in the Ironman World Championships. The shiver down my spine contrasted the oppressive heat among Kona's lava fields. I didn't know how I would get there, but the sport of triathlon was my next step.

I signed up for my first triathlon soon after that vacation. I chose a [local Half Ironman](#), a 70.3 mile race. Twice a week, I found community with my local swim team. I surrounded myself with people who had similar values and goals. Most days I was running, biking, and swimming.

The grief of losing my friends in Iraq still ate at me.

But this time I used that grief as fuel. I would honor my friends in each race by wearing their names on my triathlon jersey. It wasn't just a race anymore. Now there was a purpose behind it. A chance to let the pain be there, but be proud of the men I served with. A chance to tell others about the Marines who made the ultimate sacrifice.

No more hiding. No more numbing out. This was my path to healing.





Calming my nerves before Ironman 70.3 Santa Cruz

“ *But the attitude of faith is to let go, and become open to truth, whatever it might turn out to be*

”

- Alan Watts



Today my life revolves around family, healthy eating, and exercise. If I had read this 5 years ago, that would have been terrible news. I didn't think I could find satisfaction and fulfillment in sobriety. I could not imagine getting a break from the fear, panic, sadness, and anger that came along with PTSD.

Fortunately I found my way out. And life is truly better than I could have imagined. This is not to prop myself up and brag about how great I have done. Firstly, I could never have done this without the courage of my wife to demand the real me. I could not have done this without the support of family, friends, therapists, spiritual teachers, and the community.

I write my blog, [Transitions From War](#), to inspire those who are stuck in that same rut I once was. I am living proof that change is not only possible, but that becoming our best selves is a birthright. Included in this eBook are a few ways to get you started.

If you are reading this with doubt, that's okay. Bring that doubt along with you. Your results will be the only proof you need.



CHAPTER TWO



MIND



THE MENTAL GAME

With major transitions in life, anxiety and depression are common companions. Coming home from deployment and transitioning out of the military are two of the biggest changes people experience in life. Many of us expect to come home and return to civilian life without any hiccups. As if we had not changed in major, fundamental ways. But like it or not, we return different people. Military life is a very specific culture with its own customs, dialect, and values. We spend anywhere from six to thirteen weeks learning them in basic training, let alone the rest of our military careers. Getting out is a culture shock! It may seem like the pace of life changes from speeding on the freeway to slowly meandering on city streets.

The mind is our most powerful weapon. It is our strongest ally. But like any powerful weapon, it can be unwieldy without the proper training. By noticing the mind and how it operates, we can have more choice in how we react to circumstances.

Many veterans I talk to explain their frustration with how “civilians just don’t get it” or how “x” is not as efficient as it should be. We may have expectations of the civilian world to function like the military, which is unrealistic in many cases. This can lead to frustration, anger, resentment, and depression. If we hold onto the expectations that are constantly disappointed, those feelings fester inside and keep us stuck.

Returning from combat, veterans can also experience a heightened sense of awareness, or “**hypervigilance.**” Scanning the environment for threats wherever we go. This skill is a great ally in combat, but it does not serve us as well back home. It is exhausting. It keeps us from truly tasting the food we eat. We miss out on the subtle nuances of conversations with others. In short, we see everything around us but little right in front of us.

So how do we stop doing this?





Silver Strand Beach, Coronado, California

“ *But you have power over your mind -
not outside events. Realize this, and
you will find strength.*

”

- Marcus Aurelius



1. The first step is awareness. Noticing that our mind is giving us thoughts. Noticing that our bodies are reacting in certain ways. This is always the first step to changing a pattern or behavior that does not serve us well. What does your mind say to you?

“This shouldn't be so hard” or “Why is this taking so long?”

How does your body feel? What sensations are occurring? When I am angry, I notice a pulsing in my temples, tightness in my chest, and a lot of tension in my neck and shoulders. When I am nervous or feel dread, there is a twisting sensation in my guts and an icy, fluttery feeling in my chest. And when I am happy, there is a lightness in my body and warm feeling in my heart. What sensations do you notice? Everyone has different sensations unique to them. With practice, you will be able to notice these more readily.

2. The second step is acceptance. Most people would rather not feel unpleasant feelings. This is natural. But what happens when we avoid these feelings and thoughts? What things do we do that are harmful to us in the long term? For me, it was drinking and binge eating. This kept the feelings at bay for a time, but they returned to a fatter me.

Many times it is not the feeling that is the problem, it is our solution that gets us in trouble.



What if we could make friends with these feelings?

So now you may be thinking,

“This is some weird, hippy stuff, Mike. Who does this!?”

I agree. The thought of making friends with feelings is bizarre. But just like the bully that doesn't get the reaction they want from us, accepting and welcoming unpleasant feelings and thoughts takes away their power over us. Maybe we don't need that pint of whiskey or tub of Ben & Jerry's this time. I've learned to simply say hello to these feelings and keep in my mind that they are only temporary and will pass eventually.

3. Figure out what we can change. There is a lot of wisdom in the serenity prayer used in recovery groups.

“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”



What is in your power to change? Can you go on a walk, call a friend, do some deep breathing? **Of course you can.** Conversely, what can you do to change traffic or bad weather? Nothing. Once you realize this, it becomes easier to let go. Anyone who has made it through boot camp has done this successfully. Drill instructor smoking us again for no reason? Just do those pushups and mountain climbers. Let go of how it “shouldn’t be this way.” It is.

Resources for the Mind

- [V.A. Vet Centers](#) - Readjustment counseling for combat veterans and vets who have suffered military sexual trauma
- [Give an Hour](#) - Free mental health care to active duty, National Guard and Reserve service members, veterans, and their families
- [Veteran’s PATH](#)- A non-profit offering retreats to teach mindfulness, wellness and meditation tools

CHAPTER THREE



BODY



GETTING PHYSICAL

Our bodies give us great feedback. When we treat our bodies well, it just feels good. When we overwork ourselves, we pay for it. Eating poorly can lead to health complications. A sedentary life leaves the body weak. In my experience, there are three main ways to treat our body well: Sleep, Nutrition, and Movement.

1. Sleep

- Contrary to popular belief, we don't get stronger during a workout. That happens during recovery- the time between workouts. Without enough sleep our bodies cannot handle the physical and mental stress we experience each day. Lack of sleep can lead to weight gain, sickness, injury, and overall irritability.
- Good sleep habits can set the odds in our favor. A few easy ways of doing this are to:
 - A. Turn off the TV, phone, and computer at least 1 hour before bed time. The blue light emitted by these devices tells your brain to wake up. It's the same signal we get with morning sunlight.
 - B. Make your room as dark as possible for sleeping. Get black-out curtains, turn off the lights, or use a sleeping mask.
 - C. Have a consistent bedtime. This makes it easier for your body to start winding down at the same time.
 - D. Have a sleep ritual. It could be as simple as one relaxing back stretch or a few deep breaths. Just like a consistent bed time, a sleep ritual helps your body to know when to start winding down.



2. Nutrition

Every internet “guru” has an opinion on nutrition: Paleo, Gluten-Free, Vegetarian, Vegan, High-Carb, Low-Carb...the list goes on.

How does anyone cut through all the b.s. and contradictions the health experts are giving us? I take a simple approach inspired by Michael Pollan, author of “[In Defense of Food](#).” He states that we can avoid the hassle of counting the grams of protein, carbs, or fat we should have.

Instead, focus on foods that are closest to their original form when they were alive. Would your great-grandmother recognize it as food? Then eat it. Check in with yourself 30 minutes later. How do you feel? There are plenty of foods that taste great at first, but leave me feeling awful 30 minutes later (BBQ, pizza, ice cream).

Once again, your body will let you know what is working if you can check in with yourself and listen.

Pollan helps us keep it simple with his timeless phrase:

“Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.”



3. Movement

Our bodies were created to move. We feel good when we are moving more and sitting less. Anyone who has had a baseline of fitness knows this.

One thing that I struggled with the first few years after the Marine Corps was overdoing it. What is overdoing it? For me it was a cycle. First I would look in the mirror and see how pudgy I looked. Then I proceeded to haze myself with some weights, a death run, and calisthenics until I was gassed. I didn't listen to the signs my body was giving me. I jumped right into the type of workout I "should" have been able to do -the workout I could do at the peak of my physical fitness. Then I would get sore, strained, or injured and have to limit physical activity for a few weeks.

Ease back into exercise. You will reach your goal sooner, and without injury.



Swimming in the San Francisco Bay, the best natural high out there.

“ Keeping your body healthy is an expression of gratitude to the whole cosmos - the trees, the clouds, everything. ”

- Thich Nhat Hanh



Find something that is fun and do it. Pay attention to your body and stop or slow down when you need to. Be honest with yourself about where you are, and not where you “should” be, physically. Slow and consistent movement beats inconsistent bursts of intensity. Walking, hiking, biking, calisthenics, and doing yoga at a moderate level are among the best activities to start with.

Each week I enjoy my practice with [The Veterans Yoga Project](#). Movement should be enjoyable. If we exercise in the spirit of enjoyment, it will be sustainable. If we thrash ourselves as punishment, it will eventually be avoided and abandoned. My favorite aspect of intentional movement is truly being in the moment. It is here that the bombardment of thoughts cease and we get a break from the noise of the mind.

Resources for the Body:

- [National Sleep Foundation](#) - Tips on getting better sleep
- [MichaelPollan.com](#) - Nutrition information
- [Veteran’s Yoga Project](#) - Yoga for military veterans

CHAPTER FOUR



SPIRIT



THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

Outside of any religious context, humans have a spiritual craving for connection and meaning. These are core values of almost everyone. Many veterans value service, integrity, selflessness, and teamwork. These intangible qualities and desires make up our “spirit.” When we take inventory of our values, it becomes clear if we are not living in accordance with them. This creates turmoil in the mind, body, and spirit. What keeps many of us from living in accordance with our values? Fear, sadness, anger, and trying to be someone we think others will like. This is inauthentic. At our core, we know this.

Connection

One of the core things we crave as humans is connection with others. Sebastian Junger, creator of the documentaries *Restrepo* and *Korengal*, wrote the book [“Tribe.”](#) In it, he postulates many problems veterans face are from the loss of tight bonds forged in combat. Humans have lived in tight-knit bands and tribes since before recorded history. A complex and intimate level of social interaction is woven into our DNA. We are hard-wired to have many close relationships.

But how do we connect when we feel so different than our civilian classmates and coworkers? We face our fears knowing that some short-term discomfort pays dividends. One of the “tribes” I belong to is [Team RWB](#). A group of active duty military, vets, and civilians that get together for physical fitness and social events. Within minutes of my first event, the joking and commonality amongst us was reminiscent of the camaraderie I had in the Corps.



Meaning

What brings your life meaning? How do you find joy? Like many veterans, I am fulfilled in the service of others. I take care of my needs in order to serve, but I end up suffering when focusing too hard on myself. Fulfillment and happiness are different. Happiness is a great feeling, but it is fleeting. Fulfillment and joy do not depend on feelings that can change as quickly as the weather.

In his book, “Man’s Search For Meaning,” Viktor Frankl, wrote of his experiences in Auschwitz, sharing his belief that our main drive in life is neither pleasure nor pain, [but meaning](#). We find meaning by:

1. Interacting authentically with the environment and others.
2. Giving something back to the world through creativity and self-expression.
3. Changing our attitude when faced with a situation or circumstance we cannot change.



Sunset in the Al Anbar Province of Iraq, 2004

“ “ When we are no longer able to change a situation - we are challenged to change ourselves. ” ”

- Viktor Frankl



Outside of direct service to others, many find meaning in creating. Music, art, poetry, or writing are all powerful ways to give back to others. We don't need a reason to create art other than for the sake of creating. Like author Neil Gaiman says, simply "[Make good art.](#)"

Resources for the Spirit:

- [Team RWB](#) -a group to “enrich the lives of America's veterans by connecting them to their community through physical and social activity.”
- [The Mission Continues](#) -community service platoons for veterans to work in the community.
- [Team Rubicon](#) - a group that “unites the skills and experiences of military veterans with first responders to rapidly deploy emergency response teams.”

FORGE YOUR PATH

The mind, body, and spirit, are like a three-legged stool. Without one of them, it is unbalanced and falls. By competing in triathlons, I have found a way to combine the three elements.

My training helps me to accept discomfort and make friends with my difficult feelings. It builds my body and requires me to eat right and sleep well to maintain the training load. And I find meaning in the races. I compete to honor the friends I have lost in war and honor Gold Star Families. I help raise money for organizations I believe in, like the [Challenged Athletes Foundation](#), [Sentinels of Freedom](#), and [Semper Fi Fund](#). The races are a great deal of fun, but the meaning behind them feeds my spirit.

This is my path. Yours may be similar or quite different.
But it will be unique.

Take the first step down your path in reconnecting to your Mind, Body, and Spirit.



JOIN THE TFW COMMUNITY

Subscribe to Transitions From War Blog and Podcast for the latest news on active lifestyle, wellness, and inspiring veterans in the community who are showing the country what it means to be in service even after the military. No fees or gimmicks, just a community of people striving to self-actualize.

[READ THE BLOG](#)

[HEAR THE PODCAST](#)