



DIRECTORATE OF PREVENTION, RESILIENCE AND READINESS

Holistic Workouts Better for Mind and Body

By Kim Ferraro, *Directorate of Prevention, Resilience and Readiness*

No matter how good your mood or life circumstances, it's challenging to exercise consistently—period. That's why Cher famously said in a 1980s Jack LaLanne health spa commercial, "If it came in a bottle, everyone would have a good body." But for those suffering from deep depression or trauma, the challenge of staying motivated to work out regularly can be insurmountable. Thankfully, pioneers in the fitness world have significantly lowered the hurdles with an innovative approach to exercise, one that focuses on the whole person and that goes by names such as trauma-focused fitness training and life-transformation coaching. And with these techniques, many people are conquering mental health problems while getting physically stronger and more resilient.

Laura Khoudari, author of *Lifting Heavy Things: Healing Trauma One Rep at a Time*, is a renowned expert in trauma-informed personal training, an area she got into after going through a dark period. She was training in Olympic weight lifting and powerlifting when she experienced a severe traumatic incident that led to post-traumatic stress disorder. "The way I was training, which was with experienced and well-meaning coaches, was exacerbating my PTSD symptoms—intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, irritability and insomnia—and primed me for a debilitating injury that took years to recover from," she says. "Unfortunately, the way we approach mainstream fitness and the way we train for sport can have some debilitating effects on a traumatized nervous system." This was the impetus she needed to create a holistic wellness program that includes talk therapy and mindfulness along with strength training and weight lifting.

"I realized that by offering a trauma-informed approach, I could do more than create a safe place within fitness for trauma survivors—I could offer something that had the potential to be an adjunctive treatment for talk therapy," Khoudari says. The result is a program based on exercise science, neuroscience and trauma research. "A truly trauma-informed personal trainer," she explains, "will do what they can to support clients in not just getting stronger but in cultivating a deeper relationship with their own body and fostering an environment where clients feel safe, strong and empowered."

Khoudari firmly believes that a holistic approach is ideal for military members because "by regularly approaching strength training through a trauma-informed lens, regardless of whether or not they have a trauma or stress disorder, Soldiers will be engaging in a practice that can help them process excess stress, increase their capacity for future stressors and regularly reconnect with their body in a way that will help them in the present and for the long haul."

By taking into account her clients' life experiences, goals and boundaries, Khoudari says, she helps people "see gains and reach their physical goals oftentimes in a quicker and more sustainable way" than by using a no-pain-no-gain approach.

Holistic Workouts Better for Mind and Body

Indeed, personal trainers who view working out through a lens of the mind-body connection are revolutionizing the fitness industry. One prominent player is Mark Schneider, creator of LIVIT, a personalized coaching program of fitness, nutrition and lifestyle. He often works with clients who suffer from anxiety and depression and stresses the importance of giving ourselves do-overs after setbacks. As a coach, “I get to help someone use their physical body and the narratives around it to give themselves second chances,” he says.

A good sweat session isn’t just a physical exercise, Schneider stresses, but an opportunity to get in tune with and harness our emotions. “Much of the turmoil that comes from being in combat or being regularly displaced is losing the sense of self or place. It’s the stress of not being able to calm down enough to ask yourself, *Wait, who am I in this moment?* or *Where am I in this moment?* I believe you can use exercise to help stay anchored in yourself. Not in a selfish way but in a strong and focused way—less likely to be distracted, overwhelmed or surprised.”

The Army, too, recognizes that exercise is a critical component of emotional resilience. At Fort Stewart-Hunter Army Airfield, in Georgia, the Army Substance Abuse Program endorses physical activity as a means to “release tension, help with recovery from trauma and reduce depression symptoms,” ASAP program manager Christina Lopez-Kimble says. To highlight the importance of exercise for good mental health, the program hosts several national prevention campaigns each year, such as April’s Alcohol Awareness Month fitness event. And Soldiers and Civilians who enroll in ASAP’s Prime for Life motivational course—which teaches participants to substitute healthy alternatives like working out for high-risk behaviors like misuse of alcohol and narcotics—are questioned about their exercise habits, Lopez-Kimble says. “Some research has shown that physical fitness is a protective factor against alcohol and drug abuse. Research has also shown that formal exercise programs, as well as regular walking, can help improve mood significantly.”

Charles D’Angelo, a best-selling author, motivational speaker and life-transformation coach with clients around the world, says it is critical to care for and invest in your emotions and feelings as you do parts of your body.

“I think that we all have to realize that we have an emotional economy and when experiencing stress or trauma, it can be injured,” he explains. “Setting up a routine that keeps your life force in check, so that you know you will consistently have the energy and focus to perform not only professionally at your peak but personally as a husband, wife, father, mother or any other number of roles, is critical to fulfillment.”

When done right, training can bolster Soldiers’ resilience by getting them beyond their physical and emotional comfort zones. “This doesn’t always mean to push harder,” Schneider points out. “Often, our discomfort comes from putting in less effort or just enough. Having the choice of being calm or escalating, and the awareness of when we are losing that choice because of coming up to our edges, is what training can provide.”

The key, he says, is for people to figure out what movements and intensity levels are right for them in different situations and to recognize when they have reached the boundary of their mental, emotional or physical capacity—and to have coping strategies. “Maybe things feel smoother when they are squatting with intensity, or in a machine, or some ground-based squat motion. Maybe the narrative they need is one of

Holistic Workouts Better for Mind and Body

creating space and distance between them and what they are focused on. Maybe it's closing that distance. Maybe they need to feel the tension of an isometric."

Whether someone is struggling to make healthy changes due to excessive drinking or being in a downward spiral of depression, a life coach, D'Angelo notes, can help them set truly meaningful goals and be more introspective so that they "begin to learn more about the mindset that will not only allow them to reach their goals but to avoid falling back into the patterns that took them off course in the first place."

People who are overcome with grief—be it from the loss of a loved one or a painful divorce or a traumatic incident—should find the right person to speak to honestly and in an uninhibited manner, an excellent listener who is also able to challenge them to summon their inner strength and change their negative outlook. "It isn't what happens that determines how your life goes but your response," D'Angelo says.

And learning to train not just your body but your mind is something all Army members can reap rewards from in their demanding duties. As Schneider notes, "If you can operate with external intensity but internal peace, you become significantly formidable."