



Living Your Life Well

WVNG Coffey Break

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This month's topic is *Living Your Life Well* since May is Mental Health Awareness Month. Every day, we are affected by numerous challenges, stresses and demands. And every day, we seek help in responding to them. Sometimes stressors cause us to become depressed, overwhelmed, or anxious. The good news is that there are tested and effective tools that are readily available and that anyone can use to help them cope better and improve their well-being. This month's article is designed to increase awareness about mental health concerns and combat the social stigma that prevents so many people from seeking help. So please, take a few minutes to read the following article before hitting "Delete" on your computer.

"Health is a state of complete mental, physical, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."

- World Health Organization, 1948



The mission of the National Guard Psychological Health Program is to advocate, promote and guide National Guard members and their families by supporting psychological fitness for operational readiness. For contact information regarding the Director of Psychological Health in your state or territory or other resources, go to:

www.jointservicessupport.org/

Coffey Break



Break (brāk) definition
verb: To interrupt or stop
break a habit; noun: A respite
 or brief pause *taking a break.*



How Happy Are You With Your Life?

The following questions can be used as a simple self assessment to determine if you are currently *living your life well*. I urge you not to rush through the questions but instead, give some thought before responding.

1. Do you generally feel as if you are handling life well?
2. In which area(s) are you most satisfied? Home, Work/School, Military, or Social? Are there any areas that you would like to improve?
3. What do you do to stay on top of things?
4. When it comes to anxiety or depression, do you consider yourself knowledgeable or clueless regarding common symptoms?
5. Have you ever felt intense worry or sadness for weeks at a time?
6. When you are anxious or down, what do you do to try to improve your mood? Is this successful?
7. Which of these, if any, do you use as coping mechanisms?
 - Do nothing
 - Talk to a friend
 - Drink alcohol
 - Talk to a doctor or behavioral health professional
 - Engage in self-help activities

Have you sought help in the past for assistance and if so, was this beneficial? If not, were you able to identify the obstacles and would you consider seeking help again if there was a possibility for improvement?

Whatever your situation, life can be incredibly stressful. And too much stress can damage your health, your mood, your relationships, and your focus. It can also impact your ability to be operationally ready for the next mission. But you CAN tackle the stress by using the following 10 tools.

Ten Tools to Living Your Life Well

1. **Connect With Others** - We are social animals. We tend to do much better when we feel supported, valued and understood. Some ways to build connections:
 - Join a common interest group
 - Enroll in a class
 - Boost existing connections. Commit to a certain amount of time with your loved ones or buddies each week – *without* cell phones, iPods, or other technical gadgets.

*“The greatest
 wealth is health”*

– Virgil

2. Stay Positive – In a society filled with negativity, it's often difficult to build the healthy habit of positive thinking. Thinking negatively can drag down our moods, our actions, and even our health. Researchers have found the following benefits of staying positive:

- People who were pessimistic had a nearly 20 percent higher risk of dying earlier over a 30 year period than those who were optimistic.
- People who kept track of their *Gratitude* once a week were more upbeat and had fewer physical complaints than others.

Staying positive doesn't mean ignoring the uglier sides of life. It simply means challenging yourself to focus on the positive as much as possible – and it gets easier with practice. In a difficult situation, ask yourself “How have I grown from this situation” or “What am I proud of about the way I handled the situation” instead of focusing on what you may not have done or what you *should have* done.

3. Get Physically Active – I know, I know. Here we go again. The dusty tennis shoes. The gym membership that mostly exercises your wallet. The exercise bike that is used mostly to hang clothes on. Lots of us have proof that it can be tough to stick with exercising. Pump up your resolve by considering that exercise can:

- Prevent heart disease and high blood pressure
- Lower your risk for stroke, osteoporosis, colon cancer and diabetes
- Decrease some kinds of pain
- Increase your energy
- Help with weight management
- Decrease stress, anger, and tension
- Reduce anxiety and depression and.....
- Offer a greater sense of well being

Sure, lots of us would rather serve cookies than tennis balls, but some tips can make exercising easier. Rather than join an expensive gym, take a look at the local YMCA/community center or sign up for a salsa class. Grab a friend and go for a walk. *Just get moving!*

4. Help Others – If you carry your elderly neighbor's groceries up the steps, obviously it is good for her. But did you know, it's likely good for you, too? Research indicates that those who consistently help other people experience less depression, greater calm, fewer pains, and better health. They may even live longer. Doing good may:

- Help you feel needed and effected
- Make you feel connected to others (Tool # 1)

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Don't feel like you have to make grand gestures or huge time commitments. Sure, helping may mean volunteering your time for a worthy cause on a weekly basis. But it may also mean:

- Calling a friend to see how he's doing
- Serving your spouse breakfast in bed
- Letting a car in front of you on the highway
- Helping your child with their homework

Vary your *random acts of kindness* to prevent the experience from coming ho-hum. In addition, be careful of taking on too much. When asked for a favor, give some thought before saying yes.

5. Get Enough Sleep – Of course, it's not easy to sleep when you are feeling overwhelmed. In fact, nearly two-thirds of Americans say they lose sleep because of stress. That's especially unfortunate because sleep combats some of the fallouts of stress including: impaired memory, weight gain, greater risk of anxiety and depression, and increased risk of heart disease and cancer.



Experts suggest that adults get seven to nine hours of sleep a night. Everyone is different, though, and you may need a little more. To assess your sleep deficit, ask yourself:

- Am I often tired?
- Am I using caffeine to get through the day?
- Do I wake up feeling refreshed?
- Do I get drowsy while driving or watching TV?

To sleep longer and better consider these suggestions:

- Set a regular bedtime – your body craves consistency
- De-caffeinate yourself – avoid coffee or coke 6-8 hours before bed
- Exercise
- Make your bed a sleep haven – don't pay bills or write reports in bed. Also, if you can't fall asleep after 15 minutes, get up until you feel more tired

Also, if you take sleep medication, never combine it with alcohol or other potentially sedating medicines. If you have trouble sleeping more than three nights a week for a month, see your doctor to determine if your sleep problems caused by some underlying health problem.

6. Create Joy and Satisfaction – Studies show that laughing decreases pain, promotes muscle relaxation, and can reduce anxiety. Leisure activities offer a distraction from problems. Positive emotions can decrease stress hormones and build emotional strength. Whether it's playing golf or goofing around, having fun isn't just fun. It also promotes overall well-being.

Leisure activities can boost our effectiveness, broaden our perspective, increase creativity, and restock our energy supply.

"In order to change, we must be sick and tired of being sick and tired."

– Author Unknown

7. Eat Well – Mom was right. You’ve got to eat right to feel right. Good food can boost your energy, provide fuel for your brain, and counteract the impact of stress on your body. Ironically, in times of stress, lots of us tend to eat less well. According to a recent survey, nearly half of all Americans overeat or eat unhealthy food to cope with stress. In fact, it’s not just that we’re seeking comfort – our stress hormones actually give us the munchies. By following some basic suggestions, you can boost your energy, mood, and overall wellness.

- Emphasize fruit, vegetables, whole grains, and fat-free or low-fat dairy products
- Eat lean meats, poultry, beans, fish, and nuts
- For additional information, visit mypyramid.gov for a food tracker, menu planner, and other tools.

Don’t skip meals and if you snack, snack well. Resist the vending machine and carry healthy snacks such as dried fruit in your backpack. Don’t over-diet. Eat to be healthy and fit – not to fit into a certain pair of jeans. Excessive dieting can be dangerous. If you or someone you know seems at risk of an eating disorder, seek professional help.

8. Take Care of your Spirit – Eat your vegetables. Get enough rest. Exercise. Those are clear suggestions. But what does it mean to *take care of your spirit*? For many, being spiritual means observing rituals and attending religious services. For others, it’s not about traditional structures or a belief in God. *Spirituality* is connecting with whatever you consider meaningful or holy. You can find it in God, yourself, in nature, art, or kindness. Whatever you focus on, spirituality offers benefits of better mood, less anxiety and depression, and even fewer aches and pains. Spirituality can provide a reassuring belief in a greater force or being, sense of purpose or meaning, a way to understand suffering, and a reminder of good in the world.

Spiritual paths include:

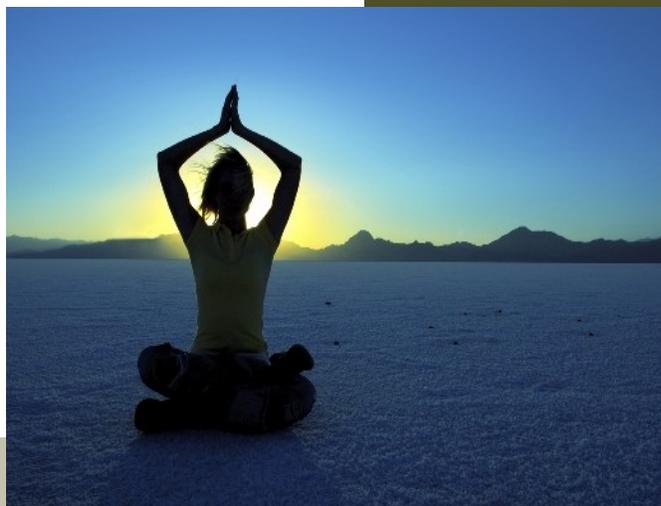
- Organized Religion
- Meditation
- Connecting with your deepest self

What brings you hope, joy, and comfort? How can you make a difference in the world? Asking these types of questions may help you connect with your spiritual side.

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Research indicates that people with strong religious beliefs recovered faster from heart surgery than those who didn’t and people who meditate have increased activity in the “feel good” area of the brain.



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9. **Deal Better with Hard Times** – At some time in our lives, most of us will face a time that brings us to our knees, shakes us at our very core. At those times, having strong coping strategies to draw on can make a significant difference.

Ways to deal better:



- Write it out* – If you've suffered an upsetting event, writing about it can actually help you feel better. Writing organizes your thoughts, which makes the experience seem less chaotic. Writing can also offer an emotional release. Set aside 15 minutes a day for a few days to write about the event. Don't worry about grammar. This is just for you. Keep in mind, though, that if your event is especially traumatic, you may want to do this with a professional.
- Problem-solve* – Self pity or blame makes you feel less powerful. Instead, list as many solutions as possible. Assess your list, choose a reasonable good solution, and develop a plan.
- Shift your Thinking* – How you think about a problem affects how much it affects you and how well you tackle it. Try to shift your mind from negative thoughts and look at the tough times as opportunities to grow.
- Get Support* – Don't be afraid to ask for help. No one knows everything.

10. **Get Professional Help If You Need It** – If the problems in your life are preventing you from Living Your Life Well, professional help can make a big difference. A mental health professional can help you:

- Come up with plans for solving problems
- Change behaviors that hold you back
- Heal pains from your past
- Figure out your goals
- Build self-confidence

To get the most out of treatment, tell your provider your goals. Recognize that talking about personal issues can be uncomfortable at first, but in time, treatment should help you develop better coping skills, stronger relationships, and a better sense of self. Be honest with the provider. Don't say everything is fine if it isn't. And, if you aren't making progress, tell the provider. A good provider will want to work with you so you can get the most out of your sessions.

“Diseases of the soul are more dangerous and more numerous than those of the body.”

– Cicero



If you or someone you know is feeling especially bad or suicidal, get help immediately. You can call 1-800-273-TALK (8255) to reach a 24-hour crisis center or Dial 9-1-1 for immediate help.

Of course, the proactive approach would be to seek help before a situation becomes a crisis. A service member with a mental health issue is not a problem service member but a service member with a problem. Why wait until you feel overwhelmed and unable to cope? Even if you're not sure that you'd benefit from help, it can't hurt to explore the possibility. There are numerous resources available to you such as:

Director of Psychological Health – Elizabeth Coffey (contact information below)

Chaplains - LTC Bruce Reed 304-561-6328 (for unit specific chaplain contact information)

Military Family Life Consultants – Donna Cooke 304-545-5714
Tina Nibert 304-989-0058

Military One Source (24 hour/7 days a week) — 1-800-342-9647 or militaryone-source.com

Local VA – www.va.gov

Local Vet Centers – www.vetcenter.va.gov

The Defense Department offers free online and telephone mental health and alcohol self-assessments for a range of common emotional situations that often go undiagnosed and are misunderstood. Voluntary and completely anonymous, the Mental Health Self-Assessment Program is a mental health and alcohol self-assessment for service members and their families affected by deployment. It's offered online at www.militarymentalhealth.org/ and via the telephone 24 hours per day, seven days per week at 1-877-877-3647.

We are a Guard family and being such, it's up to us to look after one another and offer assistance when needed. Has your wingman not been himself lately? Has your battle buddy stopped laughing and enjoying life? You are the first line of defense and can make a huge difference by encouraging them to seek help. It takes all of us to Live our Lives Well. As always, I am proud to work and serve among you. Thanks for reading.

Next Month's Topic: Summer Safety

Feedback on this article is welcomed. As always, if you have a concern about yourself or a family member, feel free to contact me. Services are free and confidential. I look forward to hearing from you. So.....Step back, take a Coffey Break, and Drink to Your Health!

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Resources:

www.healthcentral.com

www.mentalhealthamerica.net

www.tricare.mil/news

www.suicide.org