

PREVENTION IN ACTION

CONNECTING WITH OTHERS

BUILDING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS STRENGTHENS TOTAL FITNESS

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When Capt Jergen “Cam” Campbell wants to fire up a group of Marines, he coaxes them to repeat after him.

“Like it or not,” he calls and then waits for the group to say it back.

“WE ARE ALL WE GOT!!” Campbell booms.

He doesn’t mean it literally. Instead, he wants to reinforce the idea that Marines are a team who need to support each other, look out for each other, and work together to manage challenges, both on and off the battlefield.

This type of team approach is at the heart of the integrated prevention system the Marine Corps is building to promote positive behaviors and prevent harmful ones. Efforts focus on explaining what to do to increase positive behaviors and not relying on what to know or what not to do.

As the Suicide Prevention Program officer for Marine Aircraft Group 12 at Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni in Japan until the summer of 2023, Campbell led efforts to build connections among prevention stakeholders by holding the Team Iwakuni Resiliency Huddle every two weeks over lunch.

The huddles started as a way to connect members of the Operational and Stress Control and Readiness Team (OSCAR) with other prevention stakeholders, including civilians from Marine Corps Community Services (MCCS) programs, chaplains, and Navy medical personnel.

They talk about what is working, what needs improvement, and how they can work to prevent a range of harmful behaviors.



COURTESY OF CAPT CAMPBELL

Capt Cam Campbell (right) poses with Dr. T. J. Owens, Suicide Prevention Capability section head at Headquarters Marine Corps, at the Suicide Prevention Stakeholders Wellness Symposium in June at MCB Camp Hansen in Okinawa, Japan.

At Iwakuni, one initiative is to offer positive outlets for Marines to decompress and spend time with one another.

They have organized open mic nights at local restaurants and at the base chapel to give Marines, Sailors, families, and civilians a chance to express themselves through comedy, poetry, and music.

Campbell recently transferred to the Marine and Family Programs Division at Headquarters Marine Corps where he focuses his efforts on suicide prevention.

The Human Dimension

Integrated prevention efforts directly support mission readiness and build Marines’ resilience.

“As a warfighting organization and in our warfighting doctrine, we say the central dimension of war is the human dimension,” said SgtMaj Donald Swanner Jr., command senior enlisted leader for 2d Low Altitude Air Defense Battalion, Marine Air Control



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SgtMaj Donald Swanner Jr., command senior enlisted leader for 2d Low Altitude Air Defense Battalion, Marine Air Control Group 28 at MCAS Cherry Point, says it is important for leaders to understand what drives their Marines.

Group 28 at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point in North Carolina. “If it is the human will that we are trying to understand, influence, motivate, inspire . . . as leaders, we have to understand human beings.”

Swanner joined the Marine Corps in November 2003 as an infantryman and has a bachelor’s

degree in psychology with a focus in military resilience.

He is working on a master’s degree to become a clinical counselor in the future. “I want to help warfighters.”

He is a strong advocate of the Combat and Operational Stress Control Program and its OSCAR Team training.

OSCAR training equips a team of selected Marines, medical professionals, and religious ministry teams with tools and resources to help Marines prevent, identify, and manage stress issues early—before medical problems arise.

OSCAR Teams can help improve readiness and build a prevention culture by promoting skill-building and encouraging help-seeking behaviors in Marines. They function as sensors for commanders, alerting them when stress issues arise in the unit.

When Swanner was a first sergeant, he met regularly with the OSCAR Team, a practice he has implemented in the billet he assumed in May 2023.

Every quarter he meets with Marines serving on the OSCAR Team and OSCAR extenders—chaplains, other religious ministry team members, and mental health professionals—to discuss trends and training needs.

OSCAR and other integrated prevention programs also assist Marines in strengthening their Total Fitness.

“For a long, long time, we figured fitness was only the physical capacity,” Swanner said. “But now we look at physical, mental, social, and spiritual fitness.”

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

The Marine Corps Total Fitness (MCTF) philosophy aims to not only improve the lethality of Marines, but also the readiness and resilience of Marines, family members, and communities.

Units can build Total Fitness with activities that are already part of routine training.

Swanner used battalion and company hikes as an example.

"At the end of the hikes, we'd talk about how what we just did was to build that physical toughness," he said.

If that hike was 3 miles, the next hike might be 6 miles, and the weight in the pack would be heavier.

"With each new step and new accomplishment, it's building your mental resilience and toughness," Swanner would explain.

The unit talked about why they were doing the training and how it would prepare them for situations where they might be on their own on the battlefield. They would have to remain spiritually tough by connecting the training to a sense of purpose.

The hikes have another benefit.

"We're doing it together, so we're creating a social bond and unit cohesiveness," Swanner said. "A unit hike is not just building physical fitness."

Leaders set the tone for their Marines by sharing how they are working on their MCTF.

Swanner shares his calendar with his first

sergeants and his Command Team. "I have physical fitness blocked off in green. Then I have 1130-1300, spiritual and mental fitness, blocked off each day."

That mid-day block is "a do-not-disturb time for me unless it's an emergency—to read and refill my spirit," Swanner said. He encourages his Marines to also prioritize improving their Total Fitness.

Making Connections

Prevention experts often discuss the importance of protective factors: characteristics that directly decrease the likelihood of, or buffer a person from experiencing, harmful behaviors and can promote resilience, health, and overall well-being.

One factor that helps prevent harmful behaviors is connectedness—feeling connected to others, to a unit, to something bigger than oneself.

Leaders are expected to ensure their Marines are connected and that units are cohesive.

Swanner said he first became aware of connecting people and understanding what drives them when he was a recruiter. He would ask a series of questions.

"What drives you? What inspires you? What do you want to change?" Swanner said. "I've seen that to be a valuable perspective to take into leadership."

"You need to know who they are and what drives them to remind them of those things when things get hard" and to support them in their future goals.

"When I'm building a relationship, I recognize it has little to do with my rank, my grade, or position," he said. "Those just grant me access, but if I really want to connect, then I have to be willing to remove any barriers that exist to earn an invitation into the life of another human being."

Anywhere, Anytime

Activities that build skills and strengthen Total Fitness do not have to be marketed explicitly as prevention programs.

The Pendleton Surf Club is one example.

Before first light, the diehard surfers gather on the beach at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton in California. They sip their coffee and wait on the sun.

The nonprofit club, started by Marines and run by active duty Marines and veterans, takes advantage of the base's location to allow Service Members, veterans, and families to experience the joy and health benefits of riding the waves.

Carlos Burela is one of the Marine veterans on the Surf Club board. The Southern California native, a surfer since he was 7, works on base as an Embedded Preventive Behavioral Health specialist for 1st Marine Division.

He surfs before work most days, usually with a group of active duty Marines. "I need to cleanse my soul."

Because of his work in integrated prevention, he recognizes the benefits the club activities provide.



PROVIDED PHOTO

Carlos Burela, an Embedded Preventive Behavioral Health Capability specialist at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton and Pendleton Surf Club member, rides a wave. The club's mission is to serve Service Members, veterans, and civilians.

Apart from the physical activity, Burela said studies have shown that the cold-water immersion "clears your mind and hits a switch in your central nervous system that relaxes you."

Some find a spiritual connection to nature while on a board.

The surf club helps build a positive, healthy culture or climate—another protective factor. Making one positive choice can lead to others.

"If you're getting up at 0400 to get your gear ready, you're going to bed early the night before," Burela said.

The social connections formed in the club might be the biggest benefit. Marines of all ranks and backgrounds are drawn to the club. A few years ago, a general kept his board in his truck and surfed for PT.

More experienced surfers mentor the novices, and club members volunteer to assist children with disabilities and wounded warriors who want to surf.

They hold gatherings on and off the beach to strengthen connections. They compete in events against other surf clubs.

Lasting friendships form on the beach and out on the water during the down time while the surfers wait for a wave.

"We talk about life," Burela said. "We talk about challenges."

"The Surf Club not only fosters an environment of connectedness and belonging ... surfing reinforces all the concepts of Total Fitness by allowing us to strengthen our minds and bodies and giving us a deep spiritual connection with nature."

FIND JOY IN CONNECTING DURING THE HOLIDAYS

The holidays can be a wonderful time of year. The decorations, festive music, and images of families sharing happy memories inspire holiday cheer and togetherness.

But the holidays may be stressful for those unable to connect with family because of a deployment or geographical separation. For singles, the idea of spending the holidays alone can create isolation, loneliness, or disconnectedness.

However, it is still possible to celebrate the season with the spirit of joy, even if spending this time away from family.

Here are some creative tips for holiday connectedness despite the distance:

Keep family traditions; create new ones. Continuing traditions while apart can make the tradition more meaningful. Allow yourself to accept new experiences by sharing in others' traditions, finding something new to experience on your own, or celebrating with new friends.

Spend time together in unique ways. Use social media or video chatting to stay connected. Recorded video messages can be shared with others throughout the holiday season.

Celebrate with friends, neighbors, or fellow Marines. Plan a volunteer activity by yourself, or with a group of other single warfighters or coworkers. A "Friendsgiving" style gathering promotes social bonding and shows gratitude for the people you rely on throughout the year.

Recharge and reflect on upcoming year. Take this moment of holiday downtime for quiet, personal reflection. Review successes, challenges, and set new goals for the upcoming year. Visit the fitness or recreation centers, or reconnect with hobbies you are normally too busy to pursue.

Practice gratitude for loved ones. Spend time writing letters or calling friends and family, thanking them for their love and



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support. Gratitude helps refocus on what an individual has, instead of what one does not have.

Contact the Family Advocacy Program, Semper Fit, or the Single Marine Program for more information and support.

Set Boundaries and Communicate Honestly to Build Healthy Relationships

A relationship is a way two or more people are connected or the way they behave toward each other. You might have romantic, friend, professional, and family relationships.

Healthy relationships include boundaries, self-control, communication, and respect. In healthy relationships, people feel supported, connected, and independent.

Those in healthy relationships experience less stress, report lower levels of depression, and live longer.

Healthy relationships often bring out the best in people, which positively impacts readiness.

Five key elements to healthy relationships:

- **Trust:** Having trust in your partner creates healthy boundaries. Privacy is respected and commitment is not questioned.
- **Equality:** Partners have equal say in the relationship. Decisions are made together and both parties have a voice.
- **Loyalty:** Partners advocate on each other's behalf and look out for each other's best interests.
- **Communication:** All parties can talk about the good and the bad. Communication is open, honest, and judgment free.
- **Respect.** Each person in the relationship respects each other, feels valued, and is mutually supported.



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Every relationship can be improved. The Real Relationships course hosted by Marine Corps Family Team Building offers a variety of skills to make both personal and professional relationships stronger and healthier.

Contact your local Family Advocacy Program or Marine Corps Family Team Building for additional information.

No relationship is perfect, but all relationships should be safe. If you or someone you know is not safe in their relationship, help is available. Reach out to law enforcement, the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 800-799-7233, or view resources at www.usmc-mccs.org/domestic and www.usmc-mccs.org/sapr.

ABOUT THE NEWSLETTER

The United States Marine Corps' Marine & Family Programs Division publishes Prevention in Action.

The contents of this quarterly newsletter are for informational purposes only and not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment.

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To suggest topics or questions, email hqmcprevention@usmc.mil.

To access hot links, right-click on link, copy link, and paste it into a browser window.



Connect Through Volunteering

Volunteering can improve the health and well-being of the volunteers and the people they are helping.

A quick web search reveals almost 20 million articles on how volunteering, or doing good, can benefit someone mentally, physically, and emotionally. Research shows six main areas of life that volunteering can positively impact: physical health, life satisfaction, sense of control, happiness, level of depression, and self-esteem.

Volunteering can strengthen all four domains of Marine Corps Total Force Fitness: physical, mental, social, and spiritual. Volunteers have the amazing benefit of helping others while building and practicing skills and gaining valuable experience that can fuel their personal and career growth.

For example, volunteering with programs that serve children could spark an interest in teaching or working for a nonprofit.

The more time you spend volunteering, the more you will reap the benefits.

Setting aside one day or one weekend of service is great but does not provide the same long term health benefits that people receive who have made volunteering a habit.

Committing 40 hours or more a year to regularly scheduled volunteer events (less than an hour per week) can pay even

bigger dividends.

Volunteering can be the first step to an amazing connection within the community and with fellow volunteers.

Building social connections is an important part of overall wellness. Connect with an installation Volunteer Coordinator today.

MAINTAINING FAMILY PEACE DURING THE HOLIDAYS



It is very common to feel both stress and excitement while celebrating with family and friends during the holidays. Sometimes our expectations and striving for holiday perfection result in disappointment.

HERE ARE FIVE TIPS FOR LOWERING STRESS AND FINDING PEACE THIS HOLIDAY SEASON:



SET REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Consider priorities for the upcoming holidays and plan accordingly. Stick to your budgets, practice gratitude, and be flexible if your plans have to change.



KNOW WHAT MIGHT CAUSE FRUSTRATIONS

Are there topics to avoid at gatherings? Feeling pressured to attend multiple family events? Short on money? Pay attention to your mood, practice self-care for balance, and try creative gift giving ideas like offering to babysit.



KNOW HOW TO COPE WITH HOLIDAY STRESS

Talk to a friend, take a walk, or practice deep breathing. Have a plan to deal with stress before it happens.



MAINTAIN HEALTHY HABITS

Make sure to get plenty of rest, exercise, and eat well. When stressed, people lose sleep, eat too much, or do not eat enough.



SET HELPFUL BOUNDARIES

Discuss boundaries with loved ones. Try to set aside personal differences and accept people as they are. Contact a counselor for additional support or information if needed.

FOR MORE INFORMATION AND SUPPORT, CONNECT WITH YOUR INSTALLATION'S **FAMILY ADVOCACY PROGRAM**

Check Out the Interactive Mental Fitness Resource

The Marine Corps Interactive Suicide Prevention and Mental Fitness Resource provides suicide prevention and mental fitness skill-building information for all Marines and their families.

This is a resource users can come back to as often as they need it.

Scan the QR code, or go to www.usmc-mccs.org/marine-family-support/prevention-and-counseling/suicide-

prevention to access the resource. Once on the page, click on the Prevention Skills You Can Use button.



PREVENTION SKILLS YOU CAN USE