

Statement of Paul Downs
before the
U.S. House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States House of Representatives

Hearing: "Overcoming PTSD: Assessing VA's Efforts to Promote Wellness and Healing"

June 7, 2017

Thank you, Chairman Roe, Ranking Member Walz, and other distinguished members of the Veterans' Affairs Committee for this opportunity to speak with you today, to share my story, and to bear witness for a powerful technique for healing and wellness: Transcendental Meditation (or "TM").

My name is Paul Downs. I served 11 years in the United States Marine Corps as an Infantryman and was deployed a number of times.

When I left the Marines, I was happy that I would be closer to my young children. But what I didn't realize was just how much my identity as a Marine meant to me. When I left the Corps, I lost my tribe, my sense of self, and all that I knew to be true. I lost my sense of forward momentum, purpose, and connection.

What caught up with me weren't just the nightmares relating to my deployments . . . it was all the trauma I carried into the Marine Corps. Like many of my brothers and sisters, my first experience with combat wasn't in Karmah, or Fallujah. My first combat zone was my own childhood home, a place that should have been safe but instead was an active war zone.

The Marine Corps, in actuality, saved my life. At least for a time.

When my service was done, I sought help from the VA. I sought guidance, direction, and connection. Instead, I got apathy, diagnoses, and denials. So, I quit trying. Why add that level of stress to the deep-rooted struggle I was already neck deep in? I suffered from post-traumatic stress (PTS), and to many outside observers, might have seemed like an angry, disgruntled veteran.

The fear and sadness were drowning me. A few months after putting away the uniform, I developed a pretty detailed plan for suicide. I was about as close as you could come to becoming a statistic. While sitting in my truck, ready to proceed, a thought hit me: to die by my own hand is not my birthright. This is not it...this is not to be my end. It CAN'T be. It is not the way of the Warrior. Warriors have a deep appreciation for life, and are not victims of circumstance.

I called the Boulder Crest Retreat Facility in Bluemont, Virginia and said I needed something new in order to live. That something was the Warrior PATHH program, an immersive program where veterans rely on the support, company, and experience of our peers. The program was created by combat veterans, for combat veterans. During the program, many modalities allowed me to face my deep struggle and grow to profound strength and I was able to claim a new and positive diagnosis: Post-traumatic Growth. The modality that most made this change possible was Transcendental Meditation, a simple to learn technique taught by a fellow combat veteran.

I took comfort in knowing how evidence-based TM is. I could cite the research that demonstrates its promise and power – the more than 340 peer-reviewed studies, or National Institute of Health research showing substantial reductions in heart disease, the massive decrease in symptoms of PTS, depression and insomnia. But I'm not a public health expert, so instead, I just want to tell you what TM did for me.

After just a few weeks practicing this meditation for twenty minutes, twice a day, I felt less anxious, less angry, more focused, more energized, more directed. I gained a connection to self that I didn't have before. I found peace with my past. I realized who I am...and there's NO PILL for THAT.

Because of that connection to self, I am now a Warrior PATHH Guide at Boulder Crest, where I get to walk with my brothers and sisters on their path from struggle to strength.

There were many activities that we engaged in at the retreat, but many of them don't apply to everyday post-retreat life. TM is different. I can meditate on an airplane. I can meditate in traffic. That's why TM is so pivotal. You can take it anywhere. And it can be done at any time. Perhaps that's why it has so many other applications, such as in classrooms filled with at-risk children, or for women and children dealing with the after effects of intimate partner violence.

What I have come to realize is that I needed this training...training to learn how to regulate to be calm, be cool, and be collected at home, just like on the battlefield. We have to be trained to be present and connected. It is hard to believe that twenty minutes, twice a day, is exactly what we require. But it is. It works for me, and for thousands of my brothers and sisters. It has given me the opportunity not just to survive on earth, but thrive here – and to live a life that is truly full of purpose, meaning, connection, and service.

And for that, I want to thank the David Lynch Foundation, and their outstanding Operation Warrior Wellness division, which makes TM available to veterans overcoming PTS and the families who support them. They gave me a gift that changed my life, and the lives of everyone I come into contact with. I'm grateful that they have also been there for many others. In 2016 alone, veterans and active duty military from 38 states have learned TM from specially trained teachers and experienced its impact.

As you reflect on the changes that are needed at the VA, I would ask that you provide more platforms for the voices of others like me – those who have “been there and done that” on the battlefield and in the depths of despair. The one thing that will never change is that we veterans know what one another need.

Thank you for your time and attention, and for the honor of addressing you today. I look forward to answering any questions that you might have.