



Defense Suicide Prevention Office Podcast Transcript

Real Warriors Campaign

Dr. Andrew Moon:

Thanks for joining the Mental Health is Health: Maximizing Your Well-being podcast hosted by the Defense Suicide Prevention Office, better known as DSPO. I'm Dr Andrew Moon, senior adviser for partnerships and education for DSPO. Today, we're going to talk about the Real Warriors Campaign with Dr. Kate McGraw, clinical psychologist and chief of the Defense Health Agency's Psychological Health Center of Excellence. Her work since 2011 has informed DOD psychological health policy, research, and practices related to a wide variety of topics including mental health needs of military and veteran women, Service members who disclose sexual assault, ostracism, implementation science, suicide, and global behavioral health. Last year, DSPO and the Psychological Health Center of Excellence, better known as PHCoE, revitalized the Real Warriors Campaign which is a public health campaign aimed at decreasing stigma and increasing psychological health literacy.

Welcome, Dr. McGraw.

Dr. McGraw: Thank you.

Dr. Moon: Thank you so much for taking the time out of your busy schedule to join us and talk about your work with the Real Warriors Campaign and Service member mental health. We'd like to start by just learning a little more about you and the Psychological Health Center of Excellence which our listeners may not know about. What is it? What does it do?

Dr. McGraw: Okay. Well, first I want to thank you for this opportunity. I'm really excited to talk about the center and the Real Warriors Campaign. As you mentioned earlier, I'm the chief at the Psychological Health Center of Excellence at the Defense Health Agency. I'm a licensed clinical psychologist, a former Air Force officer, and my first assignment was as a missile officer which was a very interesting role.

Congress initiated the creation of our agency many years ago. We were the Gulf War Center and then we became the Deployment Health Clinical Center. And, that Center served to support Gulf War Service members under the Army and then we had a Congressional mandate for a Department of Defense Centers of Excellence. The Deployment Health Clinical Center then moved under the Navy and eventually the Defense Health Agency as the Psychological Health Center of Excellence.

When the Defense Centers of Excellence were sunset, those missions were sent over to PHCoE. So, over the years our mission has evolved to work to improve the lives of our Nation's Service members, veterans, and their families by advancing excellence in military psychological health care research. So, we're focused more on the research end. We serve as a conduit. We help DOD identify psych health research gaps. We prioritize research funding and monitor progress. We can help conduct health systems and health services research and we translate research into clinical and operational tools for providers, line leaders, Service members, veterans, and their families.

Dr. Moon: Fantastic! You used the word evolved. It definitely sounds like the office has had a vast evolution process. Touching on that really important last piece of the implementation, how we turn research into practice, is particularly helpful. Making sure that all the good work we do to understand



what's happening gets implemented in a way that's beneficial for our Service members. So, we are very grateful for what your center does and to have you here today.

Dr: McGraw: Thank you.

Dr. Moon: So, while we're on the topic of things your office does, can you tell us a little bit about the origins of the Real Warriors Campaign?

Dr. McGraw: Sure can. So, the Real Warriors Campaign began in 2009. It's the Department of Defense's only multimedia public health campaign that originally and still aims to reduce stigma associated with seeking help for mental health concerns. Our primary audience is Service members and their families, but we think the message is important for the community, for veterans, for everybody that comes into contact with Service members anywhere. Our audience has now grown to have over 172,000 followers on our Facebook and Twitter, or X, audience and web page. So, we do have a very large following and we have a lot of interaction with the audience as well.

Dr. Moon: That's fantastic! Quite the impact you could have across the military community with that messaging and the efforts you're putting forth. So, this is something that we have recently revitalized within the last year. What led to the revitalization and where do we see this campaign hoping to go in the future?

Dr. McGraw: Great question. So, well what led to the actual joining of forces so to speak, is the increased collaboration between the Defense Suicide Prevention Office and the Psychological Health Center of Excellence. Given the close relationship that Dr. Clark and I had from different opportunities to work together, and it made the conversations that we were having, it made it apparent that we could amplify the suicide prevention messages through an existing vehicle and potentially find synergies with both efforts. So, in the future, we're really hoping to continue to expand the reach and scope of the campaign materials and to develop flexibility to modify materials to rapidly meet the needs of priorities for both the Defense Health Agency and DSPO as we continue to work to prevent suicide and reduce stigma associated with mental health care and help-seeking.

So, we're really excited about this partnership, and we've really enjoyed the increased collaboration to further this initiative.

Dr. Moon: Absolutely. We are also just as grateful that we have this opportunity to really make an impact upstream from crisis and make sure that people are engaging with mental health care, reducing stigma, reducing the barriers to seeking help so that we can reduce suicides in the long run. So, we're very grateful for this partnership. As we think about the kind of Service members and their engagement with mental health, what do you think are some of the biggest misconceptions about our Service members and their mental health?

Dr. McGraw: So, that's a great question. I put some thought into that. I feel like one of the main messaging of the campaign is really trying to get at a big misconception, the primary misconception, and so it kind of goes like this - Service members are by nature, in order to successfully accomplish the mission, resilient and hearty. We select them. We select people to join the Service that have those capabilities. We select them out if they're unable to perform those capabilities in order to support the mission, and we support them to be strong and resilient, but our main point of the campaign is that seeking help is a sign of strength. So, one big misconception is that Service members must be strong all the time and withstand tremendous stresses without needing help. So, you know, the message to battle



that misconception is that we are all human and piling up stressors if you do that for anybody at some point, we all need help and that asking for help is a sign of strength.

Dr. Moon: One hundred percent. I think we don't say it enough, that our individuals who are Service members, their family, the military community. There's an inherent strength that's what they come equipped with and that's why they're engaged in service and engaged in our military communities so to highlight that and highlight that even the strongest people need help and that's human is absolutely important in terms of our messaging to break down some of those things that keep people from engaging with care. And, while we're on that topic if we dive in a little bit deeper about kind of obstacles to well-being, what are some of the most common obstacles Service members face in maintaining that optimal mental health? How have you seen Service members overcome those obstacles?

Dr. McGraw: Right. So, I thought about that. I think that there's two that came to mind immediately. One is the fear about the impact to duty or career or in order to optimize your well-being. So, I think that that's a really common misperception, that if you have a mental health issue that it's going to immediately kill your career or prevent you from being promoted and the reality is that that happens an extremely small percentage of time. Usually, if you go and seek care when you start to have problems, it can be resolved without any impact to your duty or your assignment.

Obviously, you know, we do have requirements to fly planes and do all those things that we do in the military and so there are some, you know, real situations where you don't want to be necessarily in a submarine if you're extremely anxious or depressed. So, there are certain situations where we do want to provide a safe place for you but also for the mission and so those might have an impact. However, the message here is that reaching out early for help if you're struggling is likely to lead to optimal outcomes.

So, that's the first thing, and then the other thing that I feel like is it probably appears at times to be beyond your control which is the ops tempo and mission demands. Sometimes they exceed your coping bandwidth and so the really key thing to think about here is that we have a lot of studies showing that social support is a really important mitigating protective factor and can really optimize mental health. And so for those of you that are that are struggling, it's important for you to reach out to people that you feel are going to support you so that you can share your challenges and you actually gain support to lighten your stress and also, if you see somebody struggling, you can provide some relief to their struggle if you just simply reach out and say "Hey, how's it going?" I've noticed that maybe I can be of help to you. So, those are a couple of things that I think might be obstacles.

Dr. Moon: Oh, I couldn't agree more. As a clinical psychologist myself, I base a lot of how I engage with people around connection and knowing that connection is a protective factor for so many things in someone's life and so the idea that just making that effort and connecting can have such a positive impact is huge. One of the things I also think about when we think about, kind of as you mentioned the worry about how this might affect your career, is the impact that leaders can have in kind of engaging and sharing their own story with engaging with mental health and the Services and the supports and showing that you can be a leader. You can be someone who is looked up to and makes decisions about the mission and the course of work and still be someone who gets support and has connections through mental health services. So, having our leaderships voice their lived experience has been really great for what we're trying to do.



Dr. McGraw: I totally agree and there's a couple of things to add to that. You can be a leader no matter where you sit in the organization because there are informal leaders, there are people that play an important role. They may not have the rank, they may not be in the position, but they may be the glue that holds the organization together. Then related to that, is that, you know, our entire DOD structure is based on groups and teams. So you have an important role to look around and make sure that everybody's getting the support they need.

So, to that point, there are some really interesting studies going on related to what happens to a group when someone is excluded, either deliberately or not deliberately. It's called ostracism and we have policies in place that tell us that we're not supposed to engage in that behavior, but we've noticed that there might be a gap between what everybody knows about that and doesn't. So, we're going to actually leverage the Real Warriors Campaign to increase awareness. So that's a good example of how we can use the Real Warriors Campaign to increase awareness to bolster some protective factors that could actually help save lives.

Dr. Moon: That is amazing. Very much looking forward to the outcomes of that research and the progress with Real Warriors Campaign around ostracism. It is something that I don't think we address enough in our protective factors and what we can do as groups, especially as you said in the military which is group oriented really has that impact on people. I know we could talk through these things backwards and forwards for hours, but we have a limited time here today. So, I want to move us towards a wrap-up. Are there any final words or a call to action for our listeners today? Anything you'd like to say to kind of wrap us up?

Dr. McGraw: Sure, but again thank you so much for the opportunity to speak today. The main message is, and I think this is a cry that's out there in the world, it's not just DOD, mental health is health. It's not something different. We're not separated into body parts. We are one continuous living, breathing creature and so taking care of your health, take care of it in the same way you take care of your weight training program or your run times. Right? It's just as an important factor in your overall health. Make sure that you get enough sleep and good quality sleep, that you eat properly, get good nutrition and that you manage your stress to prevent your mental health from degrading.

Most importantly, reach out to others if you notice they're struggling and if you yourself are struggling, you're not alone. Reaching out is a sign of strength.

Dr. Moon: Wonderful. Thank you. Again, I couldn't agree more. I often tell people protective factors aren't things we do once we get into a crisis, they are things we need to do every day to prevent a crisis. They're like our vitamins. So, reach out, connect, take care of ourselves. All of those things are going to help us in the long run. So, thank you again for being with us today and sharing more about the Real Warriors Campaign.

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