

## Transcending Stress

Operation Warrior Wellness is changing the lives of returning warriors.

by Heidi Smith Luedtke, Air Force spouse

**W**hen Army Reservist Luke Jensen came home from Afghanistan, the war came with him. “Luke was very angry,” says his wife, Abi, then a preschool teacher and mom of two. “Everything was an issue.” Due to post-traumatic stress, Luke lost his job in law enforcement. He took a drastic pay cut and a desk job. His confidence and self-respect plummeted. They struggled to pay their mortgage. “It was,” Abi says, “without a doubt, the hardest time in our life together.”

### WHAT HE EXPERIENCED

In the war zone, Luke lived with constant insurgent attacks and explosions, seeing soldiers wounded and killed. One day in September 2009, he went outside the wire at Kandahar airfield after an American vehicle killed an 8-year-old Afghan girl who darted into the road. Angry mobs of locals swarmed the scene trying to get to the body. As he held them off—preserving the scene for investigators—something inside Jensen’s mind unraveled. He was evacuated stateside due to severe post-traumatic stress.

“I felt ashamed that I had a mental breakdown,” Luke says. This former undercover drug cop was in top physical condition and he had worked under pressure for years. At the start of his deployment, “I expected to be that guy that could handle anything over there.”

Coming home didn’t solve the problem. “All of our money and energy were going into

helping Luke,” Abi recalls, but psychotherapy and medications didn’t quell his anxiety. Constantly on high-alert, he couldn’t sleep. He was quick-tempered, depressed and even thought about suicide. There wasn’t much post-deployment follow-up, Abi says: “We felt like we were on our own to figure this out.”

Then another veteran intervened. Last summer, WWII fighter pilot Jerry Yellin saw a story about Luke in the Des Moines Register newspaper. He empathized instantly. “On March 7, 1945, I landed on Iwo Jima—an island of only 8 square miles littered with 28,000 dead bodies,” Yellin says. “You couldn’t escape the sights, the sounds, the smells. Sixteen out of 34 guys in my unit didn’t come back. I came home an empty shell of a person. I was a lost soul.”

Yellin’s wife, Helene, helped him find the path back to himself after 30 lost years. In 1975, intrigued by a talk-show interview with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the developer of Transcendental Meditation (TM), Helene learned the practice herself and encouraged Jerry to join her. “It was life-changing,” he says. He’s been doing TM ever since.

### BEYOND BLISS

TM uses a mantra—a sound-word-vibration—to create an alert, focused mental state. “It’s not a religious practice,” Yellin says, and doesn’t require any specific belief system. “Like an athlete who gets into the zone, TM allows you to get into the mental zone. It’s blissful.”

## Many Meditations

All meditation isn’t transcendental. Meditation experts distinguish three types of techniques, and brain imaging studies show they each have different effects.

### Focused Attention

techniques require you to hold your attention on a specific object (such as a beautiful flower) or a profound emotion (such as love or gratitude).

### Open Monitoring

techniques, including Buddhist mindfulness meditation, require you to observe your own thoughts and feelings without judging or reacting.

### Automatic Self-Transcending

techniques, including TM, are designed to take the meditator beyond the activity into another state of awareness.

## FYI

Learn more about Operation Warrior Wellness and/or make a donation at [operationwarriorwellness.org](http://operationwarriorwellness.org)

Find out about TM, attend a lecture or locate a teacher at [www.tm.org](http://www.tm.org)

See how TM helps school kids, service members, Native Americans and other high-stress populations worldwide at [www.davidlynchfoundation.org](http://www.davidlynchfoundation.org)

## TRANSCENDENTAL MEDITATION DECREASES THE BODY'S RESPONSE TO STRESS, RESULTING IN LOWER BLOOD PRESSURE, INCREASED LEVELS OF THE SOOTHING HORMONE PROLACTIN, AND MORE COHERENT BRAIN WAVE PATTERNS.

The technique is effortless, but can't be learned from a book. It's taught by highly trained instructors in a standardized way, says psychiatrist Norman Rosenthal, M.D., author of "Transcendence: Healing and Transformation through Transcendental Meditation."

"The mantra takes you into another state of consciousness, where details of space and time seem to melt away and you're left feeling very alert and very relaxed," Rosenthal says. TM is usually practiced for 20 minutes twice a day. As with exercise, sleep and healthy eating, consistency is key to lasting effects.

Rosenthal, who approaches any potential therapy with a healthy dose of scientific skepticism, was "blown away by the research" as he investigated TM. Numerous studies show TM decreases the body's response to stress, lowering blood pressure, increasing levels of the soothing hormone prolactin, and causing more coherent brainwave patterns.

### MEDITATION MEETS MILITARY

Two small studies have shown that TM helps people with PTS even when traditional therapies fail. In a study of Vietnam vets, Rosenthal says, "those who received psychotherapy showed little improvement. By contrast, 70 percent of the vets who learned TM said they needed no further treatment." More recently, Rosenthal and his colleagues found a 50-percent reduction in combat stress symptoms in a group of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans.

Yellin is pleased to see hard evidence, but he knows from personal experience that TM relieves PTS.

He describes his own remarkable recovery and that of other veterans in his book, "The Resilient Warrior." In 2010, he co-founded a program called Operation Warrior Wellness with a Vietnam veteran, retired Marine Ed Schloeman. Sponsored by the David Lynch Foundation and by grassroots fundraising, it provides TM training to veterans, military personnel and their families. Luke and Abi Jensen are grateful recipients.

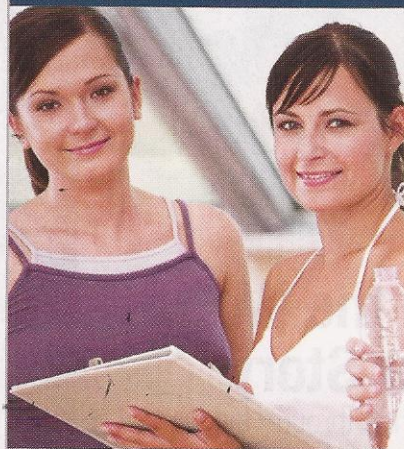
At Yellin's invitation, they traveled to Fairfield, Iowa, home to Maharishi University of Management. Over a four-day weekend, they learned TM from their own individual instructors. Immediately, Luke's instant, angry reactions subsided. He was calm and energized, not frantic and exhausted. He hasn't stopped going to counseling or taking medication, and his therapist completely supports his TM regimen, he says.

Abi's life changed, too: "Within a few weeks, my depression naturally lifted. My mind rested." She now has energy for her new job as a third-grade teacher. "I couldn't have done it before," she says.

The couple's 9-year-old daughter had grown sensitive and emotional as a result of the family's stresses. After learning a brief, kid-friendly form of TM called "word of wisdom," she also regained her positive outlook.

When it seemed like nothing could make any difference, TM restored the Jensen's peace and joy. "It would be so easy to be angry about what we've lost," says Abi, "but despite all of it, my heart is calm." ★

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