

# Insights into Teaching to the Military

*by Major Michelle Thornell*

Teaching to the Military provides a unique and rewarding way to give back to those who are willing to sacrifice their lives for the freedoms we all enjoy. Only one percent of the U.S. population has served or is currently serving in the military. Therefore, it is unlikely that you will be familiar with this specialty group, unless you have a family member, friend, neighbor, or co-worker serving.

Since September 11th, 2001, the public has become more aware of the military because of the efforts of organizations such as the Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP), which serves veterans and service members who incurred a physical or mental injury, illness, or wound, co-incident to their military service, regardless of location, on or after September 11, 2001, and their families. The National Football League's (NFL), "Salute to Service" is another program which promotes public support for our troops.

I began my journey with the Chopra Center for Wellbeing in 2008, while looking for a holistic way to reduce chronic pain, resulting from injuries sustained in a car accident. While attending "Journey into Healing," taught by the late, great, Dr. David Simon, and the incredible Davidji, I was immediately drawn to the teachings and the positive effects that meditation and yoga had on my mind, body, and soul.

At that time, I was stationed in Salt Lake City, Utah, working with Army Soldiers, many of whom were dealing with Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Unfortunately, I found that a number of Soldiers were self-medicating with alcohol and drugs in order to cope with their injuries and memories of war. As a proud American Soldier of 29 years, I was inspired and compelled to teach my fellow Soldiers meditation as a healthy alternative, so I enrolled in the Primordial Sound Meditation Teachers Course.

Approximately, one year later, one month shy of my 45th birthday, I found myself facing a major life changing event, when I experienced a right hemisphere, ischemic stroke. Talk about Dharma slapping me in the face! This experience has given me firsthand knowledge of having to deal with a brain injury and the numerous cognitive and physical deficits I now face as a result. In spite of this challenge, I continued my meditation practice, and truly believe it has helped in my healing process, and to better cope with the many challenges facing me as I continue to recover. I now feel more centered, grounded, and peaceful about my "New life." I felt so compelled to share meditation with other stroke survivors and brain injury patients, that in May of 2012, I became a Volunteer and began teaching free weekly meditation classes at Intermountain Neuro-Rehabilitation, where I am a patient. I also teach my fellow Soldiers and Staff at the Community Based Warrior Transition Unit, where I am currently assigned, and at the Salt Lake City, VA Medical Center, Holistic Medicine Department, teaching our brave and most deserving Veterans.

Teaching to the military is uniquely different from teaching the general population as the military has its own culture, language, and hierarchy, which are necessary to ensure that the defense institution as a whole, functions smoothly, and is prepared to face any eventuality. The following information will provide you with a basic understanding of the military and insights necessary to aid you in preparing to teach this specialty group.

## **Know Your Audience**

Knowing your audience is extremely important when working with this specialty group. The following are important considerations when teaching to the military.

1. Understanding the differences between your country's military services. For example, there are five branches in the U.S. military, which include; the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corp, and Coast Guard. Although the military branches work together each branch has its own unique culture. It is important to know the individual roles of each branch so that you can speak their respective language and exhibit a basic understanding. For example, you would never want to call a "Marine," a "Soldier," as the Marine would most likely be offended. The term "Soldier," refers specifically to the Army.
2. Understanding the differences between Commissioned Officers, Warrant Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers, (NCO's) and Enlisted Soldiers. The rank structure in the military provides a necessary hierarchy to successfully perform military operations. Due to this hierarchy, it is important to separate the Officers from the Enlisted Soldiers to minimize possible feelings of vulnerability and intimidation.
3. Understanding the medical conditions that are commonly found in the military:
  - **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)** is a psychiatric condition that can occur following the experience or witnessing of a life-threatening event, such as military combat, natural disasters, terrorist incidents, serious accidents, or physical or sexual assault in adult or childhood.
  - **Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)** is an injury to the brain that can result in cognitive and psychological impairments. Areas that may be affected include, memory, attention, reasoning, judgment, communication, and psychosocial behavior.
  - **Amputees:** There are currently 1,715 individuals with battle-injury amputations from military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.
4. Understanding the different Military Operations: This includes the Korean War, Vietnam War, Conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo, Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Homeland Defense Operations. September 11th, 2001, served as a stimulus for Operations Iraqi Freedom, Enduring Freedom, and New Dawn. Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) refers to military operations in Iraq that began March 19, 2003, and officially ended August 31, 2010. Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) refers to combat operations in Afghanistan and other regions in support of the Global War on Terror. Operation New Dawn (OND) refers to the conclusion of operations in Iraq beginning September 1, 2010, and ending December 15, 2011. Operation Noble Eagle (ONE) is the name given to the United States and Canadian military operations related to homeland security and support to federal, state, and

local agencies. The operation began September 14, 2001, in response to the September 11, attacks.

### **Utilize Meditation as a Therapeutic Tool**

Teachers must be sensitive and flexible when working with this specialty group, especially when working with service members dealing with PTSD and TBI. In many cases, you may find yourself playing a dual role of a teacher and therapist.



The average age of a returning service member from Iraq and Afghanistan is 20. During this time period, the Frontal Lobes of the brain are still developing. This is critical to higher level learning, executive functioning, reasoning, abstract thinking, and inhibition. My Cognitive/Speech Therapist, Mark Fox, believes that “TBI’s occurring in people ages 13-22 is detrimental to their brain development.” As a result, it is critical that the following issues be taken into account when working with injured service members.

1. Military identity is important to these young service members, as they feel they are invincible, unstoppable, and powerful, combined with being in a hyper-testosterone environment which only fuels these beliefs.
2. Young service members often struggle with acceptance of their “New Life.” In order to heal, they must learn to accept their cognitive and physical changes and limitations. Meditation can help Bridge the Gap of “What can I do now?”

3. When a service member's identity is taken away, they can often become suicidal because they feel they have no purpose. Having the service member ask the "Soul questions," before each meditation is very important. Since most service members and the public in general, identify themselves by the labels of "what they do," versus "who they are," it is critical to help them adjust this limited and constrictive mode of thinking.

4. As teachers, you must adapt the curriculum, you have learned at CCU, when dealing with injured service members. Specifically, limiting the amount of information you share at any given time; adjusting your rate of speech; providing specific verbal directions; and ensuring repetition of information. For instance, have service members begin meditating for 5-10 minutes once a day, versus 2 times daily for 30 minutes. The goal would be to extend time by 1-2 minutes per week.

### **The Benefits of Teaching Mindfulness**

Mindfulness is a non-judgmental awareness of one's feelings and sensations in the body, objects of consciousness (thoughts and perceptions), and consciousness itself. Mindfulness is also an attentive awareness of the reality of things (especially of the present moment), and it is an antidote to delusion. I often begin by asking participants to physically feel to chair under them and remind them that they are sitting safely in an office in the VA Medical Center in Salt Lake City, not in the streets of Iraq or Afghanistan.

Studies show that the emotional processing part of the brain in people who suffer from PTSD is overactive, whereas, the frontal lobe which is responsible for regulating emotional response is underactive. Mindfulness meditation actually reorients the brain, so the frontal areas of the brain are better able to process over-reactive emotional responses that hinder people from leading normal lives.

### **The Format I Use when Teaching to Military Includes:**

#### *1. Breathing Techniques:*

- Diaphragmatic Breathing: The Army refers to this as "Tactical Breathing," and is a tool that our current military members are familiar with.
- Nadi Shodhana (Alternate Sinus Breathing): I have found this most effective, as it works both hemispheres of the brain.

2. *Music:* I have found that the primordial sound of waves crashing on the beach is highly relaxing for this specialty group.

3. *Aromatherapy:* Use caution here as some TBI patients can not tolerate odors.

4. *Positive Affirmation:* The military in general can elicit a somewhat negative environment. I ask individuals to close their eyes while I recite an affirmation from Dr. Deepak Chopra's, "The Soul of Healing Affirmations" CD, to help provide participants with a reprogramming mechanism to expand their limited and conditioned way of thinking.

5. *PSM Meditation*: This depends on your specific audience, usually 10-30 minutes.

6. *Attitude of Gratitude*: I end each session by having each participant share one thing they are grateful for. This reinforces that no matter what our current situation is, we always have something to be thankful for.

Providing a safe, quiet environment is crucial. You must ensure that there are no interruptions, noises, etc., especially for those with PTSD, as this could trigger a “Flashback.”

I also teach a monthly Introduction to Meditation Class, for new students, using a PowerPoint slide presentation, which helps reduce the amount of time I have to review and repeat the basics. I place special emphasis on “Seeds of Illness,” “Software of the Soul,” and include slides containing information specific to research about PTSD and the benefits of meditation, and changes in the brain. From personal experience and teaching to Brain Injured students, I have found that visual props, slides, and pictures are the most effective tools for learning and comprehension.

### **Other Military Agencies that You May Want to Consider Contacting**

- Active Duty Installations
- Family Support Coordinators
- Army Reserve Units
- National Guard Units
- VA Hospitals- (151 nationally)
- VA Community-Based Outpatient Clinics- (827 nationally)
- VA Vet Centers- (300 nationally)
- American Legion
- Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW)

### **Some Closing Thoughts**

The total military population including Department of Defense (DOD) civilians is 3.6 million. There are currently over 3.1 million family members, which includes spouses, children and adult dependents of service members. For those of you who are interested in teaching to children, this might be another great option. Children of military members face a unique type of stress due to their parent(s) being deployed to combat zones. There are currently 8.7 million Veterans enrolled in the VA Health Care System. Veterans are another segment of the military population that is often forgotten. I have found that they are extremely grateful for the positive effects that meditation provides.

Teaching to the military can be very rewarding. I highly recommend volunteering at one of the agencies I listed above. Our brave service men and women sacrifice so much for the freedoms of the majority. I can’t think of a group more deserving to receive the gift of meditation. Remember, they are the one percent who is willing to give their lives for your freedom.

---

## About the Author

### **Major Michelle Thornell**

*Certified Primordial Sound Meditation Instructor*



**Major Michelle Thornell** is a Certified Primordial Sound Meditation Instructor, has a degree in Sociology, and has been a proud American Soldier for the past 29 years. She began her journey with the Chopra Center for Wellbeing in 2008, while looking for a holistic way to reduce chronic pain from injuries she sustained in a car accident. Michelle loves helping and serving others and plans to continue to focus on teaching Meditation to Service Members and Veterans at the Salt Lake City, VA Medical Center, and at Intermountain Neuro-Rehab, where she is currently a patient. Michelle currently resides in Salt Lake City, Utah and will begin yoga certification in December. You can contact her at [ZenSoldier@choprateachers.com](mailto:ZenSoldier@choprateachers.com) or friend her on Facebook.

---