The Care of Veterans

by Veterans Care Association – Promoting Health and Wellbeing, Healing and Growth.

From the experiences of Chaplain Gary Stone and many others.

This resource is produced as a guide for Veterans, their families and other carers, to better understand health, disease, and healing in the veterans' context. Our experience is that if we can choose to be proactive in a holistic health programme, we can counter distress, develop resilience, maintain wellbeing, and look forward in hope.

Background

All who serve their nation in the Defence Force, Police or Emergency services will experience consequences to their health and wellbeing as a result. Their families will also experience consequences and may struggle to comprehend what is going on in the life of their loved ones. Whilst in uniform, a range of support services and mutual support is readily available, and various safety nets can catch people struggling with issues before they become acute.

Once discharged from active service, the Veteran and their family, must take responsibility for their health and wellbeing, and be quite intentional in maintaining a healthy life. This need to self-manage health and wellbeing is not well understood, and we have seen that many veterans do not fully understand the key ingredients of a healthy life. Systemic safeguards involving regular medical checks, enforced exercise, disciplined routines, and monitored behaviour have underpinned their service life. All this disappears on leaving the service.

The issue of Veterans Health is quite complex. Most veterans have experienced wounds, illness or injury to their body, mind, soul and relationships. Added to this is the conundrum of discovering a new identity, life purpose, and community of belonging, once they leave the service. Moreover all of these components impact and interact with each other, which can lead to escalating experiences of distress, and inappropriate coping measures normally involving self-medication with alcohol or drugs. Addictive responses compound the problems and life can become chaotic.

This resource seeks to provide information on:

- The complexity of health issues for Veterans and their families.
- Understanding stress, distress and post-traumatic stress and co-morbid illnesses.
- Healing, growth and developing resilience through a Health and Wellbeing Plan.
- The challenges of relapse and need for commitment.
- Practical measures to nurture body, mind, soul, and relationships.
- Developing a future life purpose, involving care for others.

A personal reflection - The experiences of life are great teachers

Over many years as a Chaplain to the Royal Australian Regiment Association and as a member of the RSL, I received too many notices of the death of veterans, mostly from cancer, and some from suicide, but dying well before the age that they should have the lived to. Like others in the veterans' community, the early passing of these friends saddened me but I did not consider that much could be done about it. Many of these men had struggled for many years with a plethora of other health issues stemming from their military service.

Then in September 2012, at age 60, I received a diagnosis that I had cancer. To say I was shocked is an understatement. I have always maintained a very fit and active life. I have never smoked. I have never even been drunk, though I enjoy couple of glasses of red wine of an evening and an occasional beer. There is no history of cancer in my family. My parents and grandparents lived into their 90s. After biopsies were taken, the doctor indicated to me that my cancer was growing aggressively and indeed would soon be inoperable and that I would be dead soon after without immediate surgery. Indeed from a medical perspective, surgery was the only response offered to me. The powerlessness of waiting for surgery and the fear that cancer could be growing in other places prompted me to get to understand more what is going on inside my body, and see what I could do to help myself.

I am open to complementary therapies and a range of tests conducted by a naturopath, remedial masseur and Reflexologist identified that my body was highly acidic, that my liver and kidneys were clogged with toxins, and that my body was deficient in a number of vitamins and minerals as well as the "feel good" Serotonin hormone. I prayed for God's guidance, and started searching the Internet for articles about cancer and its causes. After reading numerous books, and meeting cancer survivors who had utilised a range of complementary therapies I became aware of a range of healthy living recommendations that I previously had no awareness of. This gave me hope, and lifted my spirits.

I became more aware of how interconnected the body, mind, and soul are in terms of health. Like many other veterans, I had been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) following my service in the Iran Iraq war. Doctors then, prescribed medication and cognitive behaviour therapy. These treatments helped manage the symptoms of anxiety and depression, but these did little to diminish hyper-vigilance, hyper-arousal and hyper-activity. These had become a feature of my life. I also had a range of other physical problems that got worse whenever I was under stress. I came to realise that accumulated stress was killing me!

What I was to learn through my own research was that my PTSD symptoms were releasing Cortisol and causing inflammation in my body, immobilising my immune system and allowing cancer to grow. At the same time a diet with too much sugar, wheat and dairy products was clogging up my digestive system causing me to put on weight and develop a range of other illnesses. The distress of anxiety saw me living with a "battlefield in my mind" that spilled over into my body and soul, and saw me react inappropriately at times with those around me.

As a Chaplain of course I have ministered to many people with a whole range of problems, but I was also aware of how disparate and parochial the various health providers can be, particularly in dismissing alternate or complementary therapies, and how most veterans with multiple health issues were not getting integrated care plans. Moreover, involvement with some health care providers focused on "treatments" for immediate symptoms with less emphasis on preventative health measures – promoting wellness into the future. I became convinced that a coordinated holistic approach to health was needed, starting with myself, and my taking responsibility for my own part in rehabilitation and restoration of wellness.

Following surgery, (and a near death experience with Peritonitis caused by accidental rupture of my bowel in the surgery) I am now clear of cancer for the time being, but I am conscious that I must take "intentional" steps to provide for my future health and avoid cancer appearing somewhere else. I look forward to the future with some hope that I might be able to not only live a little bit longer myself, but also through sharing this information with others I might able to make a contribution to the improvement of veterans health generally. Adopting a self managed holistic programme I have lost 12kg, regaining and sustaining a fighting weight of 80kg that I had as a 30-year-old company commander, and I feel the healthiest I've been in 20 years. I have had to 're-balance" and "re- create" a healthy lifestyle that involves less work, minimises distress, and incorporates more self care for my body, mind and soul.

The complexity of the challenges facing veterans

Many veterans have had years of exposure to an accumulation of stress, distress and trauma, both physical and mental as well as wounds to the soul involving guilt and shame. The turbulence of soldiering on families has often impacted in broken and troubled relationships. This domestic stress adds to operational stress, and compounds people's problems. It causes the release of too much Cortisol into our systems. Pride and ego cause us to want to "soldier on" despite our disease, in the vain illusion that we can tough it out and we'll get through this maze of problems. But our bodies, minds and souls are little different to the vehicles and equipments that we spent countless hours servicing and maintaining in the military. We need maintenance, repair, and sometimes even a rebuild, but we don't seem to realise this until we breakdown completely!

In addition to a plethora of more obvious physical injuries to backs, knees and feet, a growing number of veterans have undiagnosed and untreated psychological illnesses, which manifest in secondary issues of degraded workplace performance, sleep disorders, poor dietary practices, obesity and addictions including alcohol, sex and drug abuse and consequential outcomes involving loss of jobs and criminality.

Unfortunately a stigma associated with mental health sees most people with psychological or moral injury issues attempting to mask these issues. Even family or friends will not generally be aware of the "submerged" issues that some people have. Evidence indicates that many veterans have experienced physical or sexual abuse as a child and the trauma of these experiences resurfaces in traumatic experience in the military. It is difficult to identify a genuinely "wounded soul" or to know how to respond. Traumatised people camouflage their pain with masks of normalcy, whilst being chaotic internally. Withdrawal from society is also common, where a person deteriorates without others knowing. The reality is that veterans wounded in body, mind and soul and can slip into a victim mentality, angry with others and the world, and can unintentionally hurt those that love them and try to help them.

Some veterans don't trust medical systems and will rarely present themselves for treatment. People don't know what they don't know, and don't understand what is going on in them. In this unknowing, they can choose inappropriate responses or miss out on simple therapies and behaviours that would help them. We at Veterans Care seek to provide the education and information that can assist all involved.

Understanding stress, distress and post traumatic stress (PTS) reactions

Most veteran's health issues have their sources in the additional stress that service life entails. An understanding of what happens to veterans can assist in countering distress, developing resilience and maintaining wellbeing.

Stress, and the memories of past trauma, tenses our muscles, deposits toxins in our bodies, and can build up to chronic levels which impacts on the body's immune system and can become life threatening. Stress assists in improving performance initially, but sustained or intense stress leads to *distress* whereupon performance starts to degrade, leading us to anxiety and depression, and tempting us to self medicate with alcohol or drug abuse. Secondary outcomes can be anger, violence, withdrawal, relationship conflicts and suicide.

The physiological impact of *stress* in the body includes adrenalin release to stimulate our muscles, heighten our awareness, accentuating hypervigilance and increased heart rate as the body prepares for fight and flight. This is a natural inbuilt survival mechanism. Cortisol is released to shut down other body functions, so the muscles can fight. This is useful if we really have to fight physically, but otherwise leads to distress when we don't. The physiological outcomes of *distress* include Serotonin depletion (our "feel good" hormone), survival responses, mental overload, confused thinking, performance degradation, and physical exhaustion. We become vulnerable to a range of infections and other health problems from a degraded immune system.

Experience of a life threatening event and/ or sustained exposure to distress can bring about a permanent automatically triggered distress response (also known as PTSD). Normal bodily functioning is reprogrammed to be 'on alert' for further life threatening events indefinitely. The physiological outcomes of *posttraumatic stress* include sustained hyper-vigilance, hyperarousal, and hypersensitivity. In the absence of any actual stressors, sights, sounds, experiences and smells similar to those experienced in earlier life threatening events, trigger hormonal releases in the brain and vital organs. The body subconsciously and autonomically reacts to these triggers, via the amygdala in our brain, that shuts out the frontal cortex's logical thinking and readies the body for perceived life threatening attack, moving it into fight or flight mode. The individual starts re experiencing the fear/anger/guilt etc associated with earlier events. Repeated stress reactions overload the vital organs with Cortisol, immobilising the immune system.

Education/awareness of this process can assist the individual in taking counter strategies to calm the physiological response and limit the wash of Cortisol into the system, before the symptoms become acute. But persistent (and unchecked) PTS reactions, particularly when actual new stressors affect the person, exhaust the body and expose it to the development of the illnesses of anxiety (worrying about the future) and depression (grieving the past), which have a debilitating life of their own. In the absence of hope or spiritual frameworks, the person experiences woundedness of the soul, where life ceases to have meaning, the person loses a sense of identity and purpose, and indeed the will to live.

Years of stress responses manifest in breakdowns in many of the body's systems and premature chronic illnesses and death. Yes stress is a killer, and is wounding many more service people than bombs or bullets on the battlefield.

Post traumatic Healing, Growth and developing Resilience, through a Wellbeing regime

As a result of our research, we believe veterans need:
- to be educated to the nature of the health challenges they face, understand the threat components and the need to develop counter strategies
- to be encouraged to choose to proactively attend to their health through holistic actions.
- to care for their bodies through a good diet, exercise, rest and recreation
- to care for their minds by minimising negative inputs and exposure to stressors, and optimise stress reduction strategies.
- to care for their souls by embracing nourishing worldviews and spiritual practices.
- to nurture their relationships through intentional acts of love and improved communication
- to develop a future life purpose that involves helping others in need
- to maintain an ongoing holistic "Wellbeing" regime in daily life.

The Veterans Care Association promotes the development of a Personal Health and Wellbeing plan. An example template is included at the end of this document.

A suggested and proven "Wellbeing" regime involves a range of components - in summary:

Nurturing for the body
Exercise daily to release endorphins and produce more serotonin hormone.
Whenever distressed, reduce a runaway heart rate with deep slow breathing and meditation.
Eat regular and appropriate foods – particularly fresh fruit and vegetables, drink lots of water, and minimise alcohol and caffeine (which acts as a depressant in large quantities).
Avoid processed and fatty foods, and cut out sugar in all its forms.
See your doctor if you experience anxiety or depressive symptoms
Be open to the complementary therapies of chiropractic, therapeutic massage and reflexology, to release tension and restore energy flow through the systems of the body.
Be open to taking prescribed medication, e.g., Zoloft. It is not addictive and helps in stabilising mood.
Avoid inappropriate self-medication with alcohol or non-prescription drugs.

Nurturing for the mind
Be open to learning cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) – conduct a mental reality check.
Be open to seeing a Clinical Psychologist or social worker
Recognise and avoid all unnecessary negative inputs to your life.
Remove yourself from persistently stressful environments and individuals.
Be a "good finder" – name daily all the good things you see in life (journalling is very useful).
Read uplifting and nourishing stories and teachings.
Learn to relax muscles and breathe deeply, to re-engage your frontal cortex logical thinking.
Become attentive and "mindful" of the present moment and your pleasant and safe surroundings.

Nurturing for the soul
Find and embrace a spirituality or "World view " that is life giving.
Be open to the advice of chaplains / wise teachers / mentors.
Be open to discovering and trusting in God or a "higher power" to assist you in life.
Share your experiences with friends and be open to mutual support.

Practice meditation to get in touch with your soul.
Treat yourself to soothing music that will nurture your soul.
Be open to asking for forgiveness for things you may have done wrong.

Nurturing our relationships
Invest significant time and resources in key relationships.
Be humble and forgiving to those you have fallen out with.
Let go of past grudges and grievances.
Become a better lover by words, acts of service, human touch and gifts.
Become a better listener and communicate cleanly.
Engage in team/group activities e.g., sporting clubs, interest groups.

Developing a future life purpose
Engage a life coach or mentor to assist you.
Identify ways that you can bring care and joy to others.
Join a local ex-service organisation.
Consider training to develop skills to assist as a carer or welfare officer.

Choosing to be healthy and having sustained commitment
Desiring to be healthy, like desiring to lose weight, is easier said than done. Preferably we won't have to have a cancer scare to jerk us into sustained action, but most people reading this far probably already know they have problems to address, and hopefully this information will assist in making appropriate choices. We may need a coach or mentor, perhaps our partner, to help us get onto, and stay on, a healthy pathway.

Research suggests that it takes from at least 28 days to many months, to change behaviours and my experience is that if we can show that amount of commitment and patience – we will in time see measurable results, like loss of excess weight, better sleep and a calmer mind, which will give us the encouragement to keep at it.

It is also realistic to be aware that ***relapse*** into past unhealthy behaviours, is most likely, particularly if we have reached addictive level of response. In cases of addiction, professional assistance and rehabilitation will normally be necessary. Many veterans and family members have benefitted from group support programmes like AA and Al-Anon. Abstinence for at least 28 days is a good target in breaking out of addiction.

Conclusion
We, or our loved ones, get sick and "dis-eased" because we have chosen or let stressful or toxic environments to affect our body, mind and soul. While stress and distress are normal elements of life, when experienced in the extreme they will have debilitating consequences, affecting our whole person. Rather than just react to sickness when it occurs, a better way to live life is through a wellness model where we intentionally promote healthy living practices to avoid disease.

To develop resilience for future stressful situations, we must examine the way we nurture or abuse our body mind and soul, and make choices and commitments to engage in wellbeing practices as a matter of daily living. Upon experiencing distressing situations, we must recognise the potential for illness, and initiate wellbeing strategies immediately.

May peace be with you – Your Chaplain, Gary Stone

Gary served continuously in the Army from 1970, with 26 years as an infantryman and 22 years as a chaplain. He deployed on operations to Malaysia, the Fiji Coup, Iran-Iraq, East Timor, Bougainville, Asian Tsunami, Solomon Islands and Timor Leste. He lives in the Gold Coast hinterland near Mt Tambourine with his wife Lynne. Their two sons Michael and Paul are also Army officers with extensive operational experience in Timor Leste.

Veterans Care Association is committed to raising the health and wellbeing of veterans and their families.
The range of support we offer can be found on our website: www.veteranscare.com.au
Contact us on 0403270515 or at support@veteranscare.com.au or visit us at our office and Drop-in Centre at 2 Victoria Park Rd, Kelvin Grove 4509 QLD.

Some detailed advice is offered now in these Appendices:
Nurturing for the Body
Nurturing for the Mind
Nurturing for the Soul
Nurturing our Relationships
Developing Future Life Purpose
Personal Health and Wellbeing Plan

Nurturing for the Body

- Water. We need to drink 2 to 3 litres of water every day. Water aids in the transmission of nutrients and the disposal of toxins. We need to drink before meals and not during or after, as this will interfere with digestion.
- Sleep and the rest. During sleep, growth hormones are active, our immune system fights unhealthy cells, and Cortisol levels reduce. Most of us will need 7 to 9 hours of unbroken sleep, to assist our body to recharge. We must avoid the stimulation of caffeine and sugar prior to sleep as well as any noisy intrusions during sleep time. A dark room is best. Where we miss sleep time we must catch it up later to give the body the repair time that it needs.
- Recreation. As the word implies, we need to take time to re-create our body mind and soul, in this necessary part of our life cycle. We need to program recreation in our diaries for at least one full day per week, one full weekend per month and one full month per year. This needs to involve "re-creation" activities like sightseeing, sports or undertaking hobbies, and not catching up with housework. Just 10 minutes outside in the sun releases Vitamin D in to our bodies.
- Detoxing the body. Possibly your body is toxic, as mine was. A naturopath can easily identify this from urine tests. I undertook a seven-day detox, where I progressively rested my organs especially my liver from complex foods and alcohol consuming only "green smoothy" blended vegetable drinks for the central 3-day period. It wasn't difficult and I felt good all the way through this. It's worth it to consult a naturopath to help you get back on the track that nature designed your body to be on.
- Relaxing your muscular-skeletal system. I knew my body was stressed. It regularly locked up in certain muscle groups. Some of these were from sports injuries, but my neck in particular locked up from stress alone. Certain people and issues were literally "a pain in the neck "for me. I have taken assistance from a chiropractor for joint displacement and a masseur and Reflexologist for removal of the tautness and inflammation of my muscles and organs. There is a wonderfully human 'touch for health" that such

therapies provide. The result is a phenomenal improvement in my range of movement, my energy levels and my comfort from nagging pain.

- Exercise. Rest and you will rust. Exercise is vital in prevention of many illnesses, and in strengthening our bodies to avoid injury. If possible exercise for up to one hour each day. The most fundamental exercise is to go for a vigorous walk where our heart rate is elevated and our blood gets to circulate all parts of the body. Cycling provides a similar outcome. This aerobic activity should be supplemented by a range of whole of body movements and exercises. Stretching before and after exercise will help in improving flexibility. Utilising some moderate weights will assist in prevention of arthritis in our joints and will improve in building muscle tone. DVA recipients can get free access to an exercise physiologist who will tailor a program to suit your particular circumstances. Once the body is in moderately good shape, suitable sporting activities like tennis or golf will be even much more enjoyable, and have the added health benefit of providing scope to build friendships through mutual experience.
- Food. Our bodies need "living" food. Fresh and uncooked and unprocessed is best. Fruit and vegetables provide us our basic needs. The avoidance of "bad food"- also known as "fast food", and the right balance of good food can make a massive difference to our health. By changing your food you can also change the reactions in your mind. Most fundamental eliminations that can help us are in deleting sugar, which leads to inflammation of organs, and avoiding caffeine and nicotine, which stimulates overly active minds. By contrast the protein in eggs and nuts encourages the production of dopamine and noradrenalin, which increases our energy levels. Salmon and chicken produce more serotonin to provide for calming and relaxation. Herbal teas calm the nervous system.
- We get sick because of toxicity and deficiency. We must consume a diet that gives us an appropriate balance of vitamins minerals and other nutrients, and avoid those things that are toxic. The best meals will include a wide range of brightly coloured foods.
- *A list of healthy inclusions in diet is as follows:*
  Lemon is our number one body cleanser-start each day with a lemon's juice in water
  Broccoli is a calming of antioxidant
  Tomatoes contain lycopene- an anti-cancer enzyme
  Spinach gives us magnesium
  Sweet potato produces serotonin
  Apricots aid relaxation
  Avocados reduce cholesterol
  Blueberries reduce inflammation
  Almonds and Brazil nuts boost immunity
  Walnuts aid in brain development
  Raisins lift our spirits
  Apple's contribute to mental alertness
  Rice produces selenium, which lowers depression
  Pawpaw aids our digestive system
  Prunes are antioxidants that improve bowel movements
  Watermelon reduces fluid retention
  Vitamin C, especially as found in dark chocolate, is a powerful antibiotic
  Red wine contains chromium, which regulates cholesterol levels
  Bananas and Onions protect our heart
  Pineapples are anti-inflammatory
  Beetroot nurtures our bowel
  Celery reduces lactic acids
  Ginger is antibiotic
  Black grapes reduce acidity in our system
  Lettuce assists digestion
  Mushrooms and olives strengthen immunity
  Parsley is good for our kidneys
  Peppermint aids in digestion
  Olive oil fights carcinogens
  Oily fish or fish oil should be consumed at least twice per week to promote immunity
  Lean meat in chicken or beef provides protein but one small serve per day is sufficient
  Eggs are an excellent form of protein for daily consumption.

Foods to avoid include:
Anything containing additional sugar; especially soft drinks and sweets
Saturated fat that is contained in hamburgers, sausages, butter, cheese, and ice cream
All processed foods containing preservatives
Nicotine in cigarettes, and other carcinogens like burned toast or skins.

Nurturing for the Mind

As with the body we need to embrace those things that nurture us and avoid those things, which are toxic. The most toxic impact on the mind is stress. Stress is a more significant danger to our health than being 15kg overweight. Stress hormones increase our blood flow to the muscles for "fight or flight" and in doing so, shut down our processes for healing and growth. Stress down regulates our immune system. What happens in our mind affects our body in profound ways. Chronic stress raises Cortisol levels, which turns off our immune system, keeps us awake, raises our blood pressure, and increases our abdominal fat by leading us to overeat. Chronic stress depletes Serotonin levels, moving us into depression.

We need to manage stress of identifying what we can avoid, and possibly changing our situation so that we are not exposed to the stressors. Clearly everyone will have a better life if we live in a healthier harmonious environment. This may mean that we need to change our work circumstances, or make choices to not expose ourselves to situations or people that are clearly distressing and toxic to us.

For those things or people that we can't avoid, we need to find ways to manage them differently. A fundamental treatment for anxiety and distress his cognitive behavioural therapy. This is a psychological intervention that helps us to think clearly and avoid catastrophic thinking in situations that seem threatening to us. Essentially this technique encourages us, when stimulated by a potential stressor, to consciously think about the situation before we allow our body to go into "fight or flight" mode.

People with PTSD are hypersensitive to stimuli that are associated with the trauma situations that they have faced in the past. For example, a bang type noise could automatically see the person's body want to take cover, fearing it was a gunshot or explosion that was threatening, but a cognitive intervention would see the person reminding himself or herself that they should wait to see if there is any evidence of a threat. Over a number of sessions of therapy, a person with PTSD can be trained to use this technique to avoid overreaction to situations.

Another therapy that a Psychologist could assist with is called exposure therapy. In this technique the therapist invites you explore a range of low stress situations with the "eyes and attitude" of a forensic investigator. Over a number of sessions, the therapist gradually increases the potential stressfulness of future imagined situations and tries to help you get accustomed to a calmer bodily response. The aim here is to train the body to minimise its reaction to future surprise stimuli, by exposure to such a situation in a non-threatening environment. Hopefully the body them develops some muscle memory of associating a lower level of physical reaction response to such stimuli.

For cases of anxiety and depression, a doctor may well wish to prescribe antidepressant medications. In simplest terms these medications are designed to assist in the production of serotonin, dopamine and other brain chemicals that are needed for us to remain balanced and calmer. We should be prepared to take medication when it is prescribed. Generally it is not addictive but that may cause us side effects like a dry mouth as we get used to it. The medication may take a couple of weeks to have a demonstrable effect in our body but it is well worth the wait. Of course it is much better if we can have natural chemical production of the hormones that are needed for relaxation and calmness, by eating the foods that assist in this area. Taking medication indefinitely does not address the situation that is causing stress in the first place. The medication provides some temporary relief but it is clearly much better if we can change our circumstances so that we are not exposed to stressors as much as possible. Other simple techniques can be employed to decrease stress levels. Slow deep rhythmic breathing will also slow down our heart rate, and give greater oxygenation to our body that will allow it to calm.

A hot bath relaxes us and stimulates circulation of blood to the brain. A gentle walk in the sunshine (creating some Vitamin D), taking in the sights and sounds of nature, or playing with a pet or even simply saying thank you and being thankful for the things that are going well in your life can all contribute to minimising and diminishing stress.

A problem shared is a problem halved, and thus calling a friend to share your situation, or seeing a counsellor to help you get a different perspective on the situation you are facing, can do wonders to minimise your stress levels. When you're in a situation where there is no one to talk to, even just writing the situation down on a piece of paper, or into a diary to be dealt with later, or by writing a draft response to the person that is causing you distress, can relocate the problem out of your mind and into another place, until you are composed to deal with the situation.

The mind can get overloaded, because we are doing too much, and are allowing ourselves to be overwhelmed by too many activities or demanding people pressing against us. Simply using a diary or a planner to apportion your time and to put off into the future, issues or tasks that we experience as pressure can be a great help. At the same time a systematic approach to living can help us to block out time for rest, recreation and time with friends and family well in advance of the inevitable requests that others may place on our time. Of course we must learn to be able to say "no" or "not now but perhaps later" to the demands that may be placed upon us.

Health will only be possible in a life that is balanced, and a mind that is at peace. A very helpful approach to live is one called "mindfulness". Essentially this is a way of living that focuses on being mindful of the present moment. It recognises that we can't do anything to influence what has happened in the past and we can do little to influence what might happen in the future, but we can live well in the present moment. One form of stress is anticipatory, in that we imagine a whole range of negative possibilities that might happen in the future. A mindful approach would see us trying to fully appreciate the positive aspects of the present moment and leaving the future to be dealt with when it arrives.

Mental health can emerge from having a clear mind and thoughts. We need to give the mind enough time to process thoughts, and so silence is important to allow that to happen. When we fill our life with the noise of television and radio, the mind will use our rest time and specifically our sleep time to process unresolved issues. This may lead to us having restless sleep as well as nightmares. We must have time in our normal day for silence to allow the mind to do the work it needs to do.

Nurturing for the Soul (Spirituality)

Our soul is different to our mind. The soul is our unique human identity that can provide the vision and inspiration to direct the mind. Our soul is our real self - where we find true identity and purpose - a place where God provides us the character to love and be loved, and experience creativity and emotions. The soul is nurtured by love and affection, and is the essence in which relationships are lived out in the world. The soul however has free will, to choose good or bad behaviour. The soul can also be wounded, by guilt and ungodly, inhuman activity. God constantly tries to inform our souls to make good, right, just and loving choices in the way we live our lives. This is what our conscience is- the intuitive prompting of God. But evil is real and also tries to influence us. It has no power over us other than suggestive temptations, which we can choose to reject.

The nurturing of the soul to enable us to live healthy, well balanced and enjoyable lives, requires something more than the rationale that cognitive behaviour therapy can offer the mind. Spirituality provides the framework for positive nurturing of people's souls, and for healing of wounded souls. St Paul in his letter to the people of Corinth said that the three most important things in life, and the foundations of spirituality and soul nurture, are ***faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love*** (1 Cor 13).

Love. Clinical tests have proven that people being nurtured in "love" experience additional releases of endorphins and dopamine which lift the human spirit. Love also improves our immune response. A life lived in providing and receiving love, promotes good health. Spirituality in all its forms and in all religious traditions has identified that the source of love is God, and indeed Christians say, "God is love".

Faith. The second element of this triad is "faith". Faith is a religious concept whereupon the person has belief in God or a divine or higher power. All faith traditions have teachings and stories that have nurtured and sustained behaviour of individuals and communities for centuries. Faith structures provide people with concepts of identity and life purpose that empowers them in lives lived with compassion for others. All faith traditions have practices and sacred rituals that nurture the soul. The most basic of these are personal prayer and meditation, reading sacred texts, as well as regular community worship. All can promote health.

Hope. A third important nurture for a healthy soul is to have a strong sense of "hope". A person who might otherwise worry about events in the future can place a trust in God to shape future events, and even work through our human efforts, for a more positive outcome than might otherwise be expected. Hope based on faith in God has sustained many prisoners of war, in situations that were completely beyond their control.

Healing. Spiritual and religious traditions have long established practices and concepts for healing of the soul. The "intentional" prayer for healing, involving the laying on of hands and appeal to God's miraculous power to intervene in a person circumstances is the most basic form of spiritual healing. A particular form of prayer that has been most successful in healing the body and the mind as well as the soul is known as meditation. Essentially this spiritual practice involves quietening our minds to allow God to place smoothing and restorative thoughts and emotions in our being. Some forms of meditation involve saying a repeated mantra prayer like "Come Lord Jesus" or an intentional desire or vision word like "Peace" or "Contentment" to help obtain the state where communication with God is achieved. Meditative practices are clinically proven to lower heart rate and blood pressure, as well as stimulating the production of serotonin.

Where notions of guilt or shame are wounding the soul, the spiritual actions of confession, desire for forgiveness, the receiving of absolution, the intention to make reparation for any wrong and the desire to behave appropriately, have provided many people with healing. This can be done best thorough another person as confessor, but also through an internal forum with God direct.

The popular media personality, former SAS soldier, and survival expert Bear Grylls, states in his book, A Survival Guide for Life, "*Faith matters. Jesus Christ has been the most incredible anchor and secret strength in my life. It is so important to have his guidance as we navigate through any jungle*". I encourage every person to explore, experience and nurture the spiritual dimension to life. Jesus promised us in John 10:10 that, "*I have come to give you life, and life in all its fullness*". It is a gift freely given and a remarkable source of health and nurture, for which atheism or secularism have no comparable contributions to make.

Nurturing our Relationships

A positive key to health is to have life giving interactions with our friends, workmates, and family. Relationships are intimately connected to the state of our health. We are people in need of connection and belonging. When relationship struggle our health will also struggle. We need to invest in life giving relationships, and give appropriate time and attention especially to our most intimate relationships.

But the reality is that relationship nurture is both challenging and a lifetime task. It is normal that all relationships have their ups and downs, and Veterans and their families will normally have faced extraordinary pressures particularly from the stress of separations and the extra health crises that have come their way.

One important key to nurturing relationships is maintaining effective communication, but the most critical need in our intimate relationships is love. St Paul gave good advice in saying, "*Love is patient, love is kind, never jealous, boastful, proud, or rude. Love isn't selfish or quick-tempered. Love doesn't keep a record of wrongs. Love rejoices in the truth, but not in evil. Love is always supportive, loyal, hopeful and trusting. Love never gives up…. Three things will always abide – Faith hope and love, and the greatest of these is love." 1 Cor 13.* That Paul should list so many things that love is not, indicates the many challenges that arise in living out loving and caring relationships. But certainly, relationships grounded in loving attitudes will have the best chance of success.

As with other aspects of health, having a specific intentionality to nurture relationships is important. There are many books and words written about relationships, but a well-intentioned attitude will prepare us all well for whatever challenges arise. Never-the- less some other guideposts are helpful .A classic assistance in relationship nurture is Gary Chapman's book, "*The Five Love Languages*". In this work he proposes that all of us have different predispositions to giving and receiving love. These include oral words, written words, acts of

service, physical touch, and the giving of gifts. We need to determine our preferred love language and the love language of others, to be more aware of what others need.

Relationships can survive many challenges, but one thing that is a relationship killer is the loss of trust and integrity. We will all face many temptations in life and all of us will sometimes fail, but people will normally be forgiving as long as we are honest and face up to our faults and failings. But when we lie, cheat or steal and do not own up to our mistakes, we greatly risk immeasurable harm to relationships. It takes great courage to be honest in the face of our failures, but it healthy in the longer term.

Where we are having relationship difficulties we should be prepared to take relationship advice or counselling. A chaplain, Psychologist or social worker could provide this. It is said that a problem shared is a problem halved, and all of us should have the humility to accept support and advice from experts.

We normally learn best from our mistakes, and with the right intentions, being open to admit and learn from our mistakes in relationships, and making appropriate corrections will endear us to others. At the same time, being forgiving and understanding of others is also a vital ingredient in healthy relationships. Clearly relationships are dynamic and may seem complicated, but if we get back to St Paul's words, recently echoed by Pope Francis, acting loving is key. Pope Francis says, "No matter what the question, no matter what the issue – Love is the answer!"

Developing Future Life Purpose

"Without a vision, people perish" – Proverb

Research has shown that the most significant factor in sustained health and wellbeing is to live in the hope and inspiration of having a sense of positive life purpose. This might involve us undergoing a search for meaning, and a need to discern what our real gifts and needs are. In VCA we address this aspect through Life Coaching .

Our Veteran Life Coach can can guide you through processes to discern your gifts and capacities and identify future pathways for you to develop. Coaching is a future focused, results generation pursuit with the principal aim of moving people forwards, transporting them from where they are to where they want to be. This can be in the area of health and fitness, career, finances, faith , relationships, time management, life mission, creativity / self-expression or whatever goals a client may have.

Our coach is somebody in your corner, who sees aspects of your life better than you currently see them and can enable you to see the road to get you there as soon as possible. Life Coaching will empower you develop your full potential whilst navigating the obstacles in your path.

Engage in life coaching and live life to the full!

One of the most common future life purposes for veterans who have struggled with many issues is to use these experiences to be a companion , mentor or coach for other veterans. Training is available through ESO and funded by DVA to become accredited Welfare Officers.

VCA was founded on a premise of Veterans helping Veterans and we could certainly use your voluntary support in many areas, including advertising ,advocacy, fundraising, administration and companioning other veterans.

Personal Health and Wellbeing Plan

I commit to develop my resilience and improve my health and wellbeing by nurturing myself in the following areas:

An exercise regime involving:

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A nutrition regime involving:

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Positive mindfulness involving:

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Spiritual nurture involving:

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Building better relationships and supportive connections involving:

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I will work towards a future life purpose involving:

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I affirm that I am committed not only to improving my own health and wellbeing, but I want to be supportive of other veterans and their families needing help.

Signed……. *Date* ……