



Women Veteran Total Life Fitness Retreats as a Holistic Wellness Approach to Facilitate Reintegration

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White Paper Total Life Fitness Retreat

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Theme

Living well and being *life fit* can promote healing, recovery, resilience and community reintegration for female Veterans.

Intent

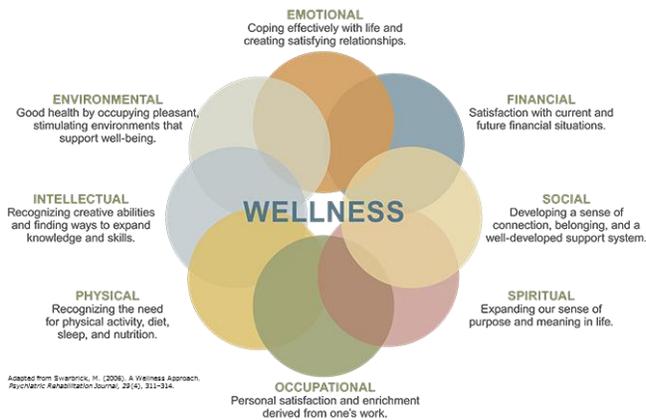
Over the course of a five-day retreat, women Veterans will be introduced to the concept of *Total Life Fitness* [based on the Department of Defense’s (DoD) Total Force Fitness (TFF) and wellness models and the VA’s patient-centric “Whole Health Program”] and its “life dimensions” to help build a strong foundation of living fit while building resilience. The Veterans will engage in events and activities that model strategies of healing beneficial to recovery from trauma and manifestations of such trauma that come from transitioning from the military into civilian life.

Note: *TFF and Total Life Fitness are purposeful approaches to engaging life dimensions connected with healthy living that utilize the concept of performance to help define activities and behavior within dimensions. Throughout this paper, Total Life Fitness TLF will be used to suggest an approach and model similar to popular conceptions of wellness. Labels matter when it comes to defining a concept to groups or populations; thus, for Veterans, fitness resonates with experience, especially for recent Veterans who have experienced elements of TFF. Consideration of perspective and “culture” of military organizations stress performance, being able to fill a role or complete a task, which yields a better connection with “fitness.” Even within the DoD, TFF has taken on different labels: for the Army, it is “Durability;” for the Air Force it is “Comprehensive Fitness;” for the Marines is it “Semper Fit.” Additionally, the notion of resilience is an important element of TFF and TLF. Resilience suggests the capability to confront adversity and emerge stronger with an increased capacity to face future challenges. In terms of the military experience, developing resilience is critical to mission success and the transition from active duty Veteran status.*



Background: Total Force Fitness and Wellness

In 2009, the DoD identified a paradigm of wellness and comprehensive fitness labeled *Total Force Fitness* for service members (and their families) to help promote performance and resilience before,



during, and after deployments.¹ “Beyond just physical fitness, TFF encourages you to focus on your whole self and those life domains that are key to health and performance.”² “Life” dimensions for TFF include nutrition, spirituality, physical exercise/recreation, and several others (see diagram). Striving to achieve optimal health and performance from the Total Force, a condition of “readiness” in both military and civilian personnel, is critical to mission success. Studies indicate a variety of physical, behavioral, social, and environmental factors can impact personnel over time.

“Keeping fit means more than just physical fitness—it requires a comprehensive approach that focuses on the mind, body and spirit working together. Stress and associated symptoms, such as headaches or anxiety, can reduce the ability to maintain appropriate weight, fitness, and nutrition. They increase the likelihood of developing chronic pain or impairing your body’s normal functions. As a warrior, familiarity with stress management skills and maintaining a healthy lifestyle before, during and after deployment can reduce depression, prevent a progression to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and it may well reduce the chances of diminished work performance, obesity, and injury.”³ Elements of TFF include eight life domains related to health: social, physical, environmental, medical and dental, spiritual, nutritional, psychological, and behavioral.

By attending to each of these domains, the individual (and in this case, the organization) can promote a solid foundation of wellness and health (fitness) in its force that engages prevention, improves performance in real time or over time, and restores fitness following events such as deployments, physical trauma, and emotional stress. The TFF model aims to intervene “left of bang,” where “bang” is events, activities, or situations that might shock or challenge the individual, such as combat or deployments. Coordinating efforts left and right of bang, or after the shock or challenge, to prevent physical and mental injury, boost individual and social resilience and promote recovery, is critical to sustaining health and readiness.⁴

As in TFF, models of wellness outside the DoD depict a wheel of interlocking life dimensions. Wellness is defined more generally as a state of being and actively pursuing good health. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) advances an eight-dimension model,⁵ including

- Emotional—Coping effectively with life and creating satisfying relationships;
- Environmental—Good health by occupying pleasant, stimulating environments that support well-being;
- Financial—Satisfaction with current and future financial situations;

¹ The 2010 issue of *Military Medicine* (Volume 175) provided a comprehensive overview of TFF including individual articles that addressed each of the life dimensions, provided a literature review of pertinent research and publications, and offered application to military personnel and organizations.

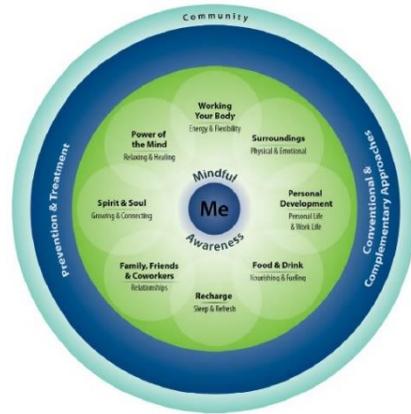
² Total Force Fitness: Your roadmap to peak performance. (2018, February 26). Human Performance Resource Center, U.S. Department of Defense. Retrieved at <https://www.hprc-online.org/articles/total-force-fitness-your-roadmap-to-peak-performance>

³ Total Force Fitness – Overview. Real Warriors. Retrieved from <https://www.realwarriors.net/active/treatment/totalforcefitness>.

⁴ Total Force Fitness

⁵ The eight dimensions of wellness. (2017, October). U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Retrieved from <https://www.samhsa.gov/wellness-initiative/eight-dimensions-wellness>

- Intellectual—Recognizing creative abilities and finding ways to expand knowledge and skills;
- Occupational—Personal satisfaction and enrichment from one’s work;
- Physical—Recognizing the need for physical activity, healthy foods, and sleep;
- Social—Developing a sense of connection, belonging, and a well-developed support system; and
- Spiritual—Expanding a sense of purpose and meaning in life.



The National Wellness Institute advances a six-dimension model of wellness with similar life domains: occupational, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, social, and physical.⁶

The DoD and its individual services have utilized the principles and concepts of TFF to build service-specific approaches to performance and readiness through wellness and health. These efforts find utility in departments and policies that promote resilience and readiness. The DoD has established within the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) a department called Office of Force Resiliency (OFR) that is currently in the process of codifying TFF in policy and Department strategy.

The Veterans Administration (VA) also packages a wellness-like approach in its Whole Health Program.⁷ Designed to promote Veteran involvement in their treatment and health overall, its Whole Health Wellness Wheel involves similar life dimensions critical to wellness. The model also contextualizes the kinds of support provided to the Veteran to achieve and sustain wellness. This model starts with the Veteran, supported by both conventional and alternative approaches (including VA personnel, “coaches,” and other individuals) who offer support, and finally identifies the community as an enabler of whole health. Central to the success of this effort is the mindful Veteran who accepts the benefits of achieving and sustaining whole health and practices self-care. Professional care encompasses a host of medical and behavioral interventions, including providers, tests, medications, supplements, surgeries, examinations, treatments, and counseling. Complementary approaches such as acupuncture and mind-body therapies are likewise incorporated. The outer ring represents the people and groups to which the Veteran is connected.⁸

Wellness

The TFF model is not unique. Engaging dimensions of mind and body that promote whole health is a popular and evidenced-based approach.⁹ Wellness as a concept has roots in alternative approaches to health found in traditional medicine. Definitions abound for wellness, but common themes include a state of health without illness, a whole-body approach to achieving and sustaining a condition absent of disease, and a continuing effort to achieve well-being.



⁶ The six dimensions of wellness. National Wellness Institute. Retrieved from https://www.nationalwellness.org/page/Six_Dimensions

⁷ Whole health for life: components of proactive health and well-being. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Retrieved from <https://www.va.gov/PATIENTCENTEREDCARE/resources/components-of-proactive-health.asp>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Evidence-based medicine portal for wellness therapies. Wellness Evidence. Retrieved from <http://www.wellnessevidence.com/wellnessevidence>

Roots of wellness date back to the 1800s in Europe and lifestyle choices that were antithetical to then contemporary living in highly urbanized areas. The choice to be more active out-of-doors, eat healthier foods, abstain from certain foods and beverages, visit spas, and practice nudism were seen by a growing legion in Europe and across the Atlantic as ways to mitigate the side effects of affluence, indulgence, and inactivity. The meaning of “healthy” for this movement was more than the absence of being sick; it transformed the approach into healthy living as a lifestyle of moderation and self-restraint.¹⁰ In the 1950s, the term *wellness* was popularized by Dr. Halbert Dunn as a movement where the individual is on a constantly changing and improving journey of health toward “higher functioning.”¹¹ The distinction he made between good health as a “passive state of homeostasis” and wellness as an active and ongoing journey continues to drive wellness programs. By the 1990s, the concept and vernacular associated with wellness had reached mainstream discourse about health and later health care. As an antidote to spiraling costs of care, and as an attraction for employee retention, small and large businesses began to feature wellness activities and events in employee assistance programs. Wellness has become synonymous with quality of life while also being a global yardstick and motivator for increasing healthy living around the world.

Lately, with wellness reaching the workforce, the economic, cultural, and social implications have been explored. Wellness has become a national and global industry. The global wellness industry in 2017 was valued at 4.2 *trillion* dollars,¹² and wellness programs for the affluent have proliferated. “The trend has developed a reputation for being quite expensive and elitist,” and at the “... more luxury end of the market, wellness also became a way for people to show off their wealth more subtly than by buying an expensive handbag or car—instead, they could go to exclusive yoga classes and drink expensive juices—a trend that we call ‘wellthness’.”¹³ Concurrently, a conversation continues on how to make wellness accessible, inclusive, *and* affordable in a way that spans a continuum from self-directed care to community care. Even with the commodification of wellness in terms of trends or fads, this holistic approach has become a pervasive paradigm, an irrefutable influence on increasing quality of life, and an important guide for healthy living with implications for mental, physical, and emotional health.

Total Life Fitness

Wellness is an acceptable and evidence-based approach to healthy living and good quality of life. In the DoD, performance and fitness are critical to mission success at both the individual and unit levels; “left of bang” requires attention to behavioral dimensions similar to those found in most comprehensive wellness programs. TLF is “a purposeful approach to engaging life dimensions connected with healthy living that utilizes in part the concept of performance, or engaging in and working toward task completion, to help define activities and behavior within dimensions. TLF, similarly to TFF, suggests that engaging in meaningful tasks that connect to performance forces adherence to an overarching program that enhances quality of life and helps build resilience. In many cases, adhering to TLF can aid recovery from trauma, while also developing individual and social skills, such as mindfulness and social resilience, to directly deal with issues of recovery and help create a pathway to healthier living. Even if injury from trauma is not acute or is absent, consistent attention to TLF dimensions as described in TFF or captured from

¹⁰ Blei, D. (2017, January). The false promises of wellness culture. *JSTOR DAILY*. Retrieved from <https://daily.jstor.org/the-false-promises-of-wellness-culture/>

¹¹ Cited in Blei, 2017.

¹² Global wellness economy monitor. Global Wellness Institute. Retrieved from <https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/industry-research/2018-global-wellness-economy-monitor/>

¹³ Bearne, Suzanne. Wellness: Just expensive hype or worth the cost? (2018, September 1) *The Guardian*. Retrieved at <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/sep/01/wellness-hype-superfoods-yoga-price>

popular conceptions of wellness in similar programs^{14, 15} can promote recovery, resilience and healthy living.

Important to TLF and other concepts of wellness is that performance (participating in and the persistence of remaining engaged in activities and events that are part of TLF is critical to deriving the maximum benefit from the approach. Integral to accruing the benefit of the program is the persistence to be active in activities across the life dimensions. With a foundation of TFF, experiencing physical, mental, and emotional trauma from deployments and combat may create less of an impact on the individual, their family, and military unit while instilling resilience to prepare for future challenges and missions. Many Veterans find transition into civilian life and reintegration into communities difficult due to the continued impact of physical and emotional trauma. Healing from such injury, while also trying to recover from associated negative behaviors such as addiction, depression, homelessness, and the potentiality of suicide, can be difficult. Applying TLF can help mitigate the impacts of trauma and aid in recovery.

Wellness Retreats

The DoD has programmatically embedded TFF across the Force and is now incorporating it into policy, strategy, and training. The Armed Services have started to centralize TFF into offices that concentrate on resilience and manage programs that address “harm to self, harm to others” behaviors, suicide prevention, and sexual assault, where prevention is critical to decreasing incidents, events, or behaviors. As indicated earlier, the VA is charting a patient-centered, Whole Health approach to serving Veterans, and offers its clients a wellness program utilizing the institution and VA personnel. For those Veterans who don’t utilize the VA, unless an individual is connected to a wellness program through their place of employment or medical provider, there are fewer opportunities to learn about wellness, what constitutes a wellness program, and how wellness can be applied to daily living.

Retreats offer an opportunity and “forum” for awareness and introduction to wellness through seminar-like sessions on components of a wellness program; a “destination” usually in scenic or natural places that impose a disconnect with everyday life and allow for attention and “in the moment” reflection on wellness efforts to model behavior critical to the dimensions, such as yoga, kayaking, hiking, art, music, writing, and meditation; and group sessions that explore the wellness concept, its application to everyday life, and tools or guidelines on how to implement application. A plethora of retreat options are available, many falling within the approach just mentioned, including a range of options for recreation-based activities and locations, what’s offered at the retreat, and its intended audiences.

Veteran Retreats

There are a growing number of event and place-based activities for Veterans that provide a chance to engage in an activity with other Veterans over a set amount of time. Many of the activities take place in nature, such as surfing, horseback riding, fly fishing, hunting, white water rafting, and scuba diving. Some of these activities are adaptive and cater specifically to disabled Veterans. Other retreat-like events feature creative arts such as painting and writing. Commonalities of these events are bringing Veterans together in a healing and community-based setting and utilizing recreational or arts-based activities as a means to facilitate healing. There are also retreats specific to those who suffer from PTSD or Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), while others include couples/spouses in the retreat. These events often include counseling and introduction to emotional and behavioral skill-based training. Many of the retreats utilize elements of wellness as part of their theme, involve a natural setting, and offer recreational activities. All retreats involve groups with similar experiences and feature group sessions that concentrate on issues

¹⁴ Eight dimensions of wellness, SAMSA.

¹⁵ Whole health for life, Veterans Affairs.

related to their military experience; however, wellness as a comprehensive life approach is not primarily advanced as a foundational theme.

Female Veteran Retreats

Military experience affects male and women Veterans and their families differently. Because a larger number of males than females are involved in combat, PTSD and physical trauma, including TBI and its emotional impact, affect more male than female Veterans. For male Veterans, sharing common experiences during retreats reinforces the notion of “tribe”, advanced by Sebastian Junger¹⁶, becomes a means to create a community, and provides critical support. Activity-based programs such as surfing, hunting, and fishing typically appeal more to male Veterans. Although women Veterans suffer PTSD at a similar rate as male Veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, many women Veterans’ PTSD can be attributed to military sexual trauma, a far different experience than combat and socially more ambiguous. Other factors that contribute to a rocky transition and reintegration for women Veterans include socially conflicting expectations for women, mothers, and warriors as well as the common pressures of being a single parent.

Few retreats cater to women Veterans. A few exceptions include retreats hosted by the Veteran’s PATH organization¹⁷ and sponsored by two non-profits, Cornerstone and CenterPoint Retreats. Featuring a three-day (Cornerstone) and a six-day retreat (CenterPoint), the goals of the retreats are similar. CenterPoint offers their retreat “... to recover from whatever way female Veterans feel that the war has personally affected them, whether that is healing from combat stress, PTSD or MST, readjusting to civilian life, building better relationships, or addressing other personal issues.”¹⁸ Moreover, for returning female Veterans, the ‘comfort zone’ in the civilian world is smaller and constricted, and thus, the:

... range of activities, self-expression, and ways of being with others and one’s self can narrow in an effort to ensure safety and predictability. As a result, confidence in one’s ability to negotiate relationships and unfamiliar situations can drop. These retreats provide an open and affirming forum for women to take steps toward the fuller life that they envision for themselves. The nourishing natural environment, and the support of others on a similar path, gives women on the retreat a series of opportunities to recognize their strength and capabilities, and to practice new ways of managing unfamiliar situations and relationships.¹⁹

The two-retreat programs utilize nature as healing balm and also highlight an intensive immersion experience of community and supportive relationships that for many women Veterans who feel isolated is hard to come by. Participants are also introduced to self-regulation and recovery and the skills needed to create a supportive community when Veterans return home. Outdoor activities are used for recreation and building community “... as a vehicle for building relationship skills and practicing self-regulation.”¹⁷ Group discussions, journal writing, and other components to help process and integrate the experience are scheduled into each day, as appropriate for the group and individuals. Retreats feature upwards of 25 to 30 people, with several activities such as group discussions and recreational events done in smaller groups of 10-12.²⁰

¹⁶ Junger, S. (2016). *Tribes: On Homecoming and Belonging*. NY: Twelve.

¹⁷ Veterans PATH. Retrieved at <https://www.veteranspath.org/index.html>

¹⁸ Retreat information 2018-19 OEF/OIF women veterans retreats. Veterans PATH. Retrieved at <https://www.veteranspath.org/pdf/2018-19-Retreat-Info-Wmn-Vets.pdf>

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid

Summary

Although a plethora of Veteran retreats are offered by nonprofits around the country, there are far fewer retreats offered to female Veterans. Since 2011, only about 300 female Veterans have attended CenterPoint retreats. Retreats specific to female Veterans feature different goals and activities than their male counterparts, with different issues and experiences addressed. There does not seem to be female Veteran retreats in North Carolina, where there is density of Veterans overall.

Women Veteran Total Life Fitness Retreats at the Rose Haven Center of Healing

Pamlico Rose is developing the *Rose Haven Center of Healing* to provide a residential reintegration experience for women Veterans in recovery. The Center, when done, will be comprised of a rehabilitated 1892 farmhouse, extensive produce gardens, meditation “healing gardens,” and a historic barn.



Pamlico Rose and other community partners are designing TLF Retreats for women Veterans. The intent of the retreat will be to promote awareness and introduction of mind/body fitness, with adaptation of TFF and VA *Whole Health* and life dimensions, to help build a strong foundation of living well while building resilience. In addition, retreat participants will experience “strategies” of healing through engagement of events and activities. These strategies are beneficial to recovery from trauma and manifestations of such trauma, or other issues related to transitioning from the military to reintegration into communities after service. More than other retreats for Veterans, the goal of this retreat is to introduce women Veterans to *total life fitness* and to demonstrate how the personal and interpersonal skills that are critical for healing and reintegration can lead to a healthier quality of life.

A pilot five-day retreat is planned for May 20-24 in Washington, NC and will use Rose Haven as the center of the retreat. The retreat will accommodate four women Veterans. The focus of the retreat will be on developing awareness of **concepts that underlie wellness and healthy living**. Additionally, participants will receive an introduction to behavioral and interpersonal skills that are critical to achieving *total life fitness*, while building resilience. The retreat will also provide activities that utilize those skills and helps to develop overall *total life fitness*. Group discussion sessions will occur in the evening, offering participants a group setting to reflect on the dimensions and activities and the utility of wellness in creating resilience and promoting a better quality of life.

The goals of the pilot retreat are:

- *receive introduction to total life fitness to promote wellness and build resilience;*
- *learn to choose, cook, and enjoy foods that optimize your health and well-being;*
- *participate in discussions on behavioral and interpersonal skills to help manage daily life;*
- *receive a health screening on site from area hospital;*
- *actively take part in yoga, creative arts, kayaking, biking, and gardening;*
- *engage with other women Veterans with similar struggles and life experiences; and*
- *complete a three-month course through an online app consisting of daily lessons that continues the development of wellness.*

Periods of free time will allow reflection on the retreat experience and its connection to one's own life, while offering opportunity to draw support from fellow women Veterans attending that have traveled a similar path. Retreat staff will offer both professional and personal experience in the overall understanding of wellness and the military experience and more specifically to life domains and activities that enable its expression.

Following the retreat, participants will be enrolled in a three-month wellness and resilience course accessed through *Sweet Relief*, an online app designed for alternative approaches to pain management. The course features daily 10-minute lessons that extend learning on concepts introduced in the retreat and frequent opportunities to engage in activities that promote wellness and develop further skills introduced in the retreat.

Content includes education on mindfulness practices, modeled activities such as yoga, art therapy, nutrition recommendations, communication skills training, and opportunities for community engagement with cohort. The online curriculum was developed by Dr. Tracy Jackson, an MD who works in alternative pain management, and is one of the pilot retreat's "faculty." The content has been informed from Dr. Jackson's engagement with patients and is currently in beta testing (early 2019).



The *Rose Haven Center of Healing* is based in Washington, NC, a town of 10,000 on the Pamlico River. The Center is located in the historic district of the city, just three blocks from the quaint waterfront and its ¾ mile long harbor

promenade. The mission of Pamlico Rose is to develop and advance programs that provide opportunity to at-risk Veterans to reintegrate into their communities. The community of Washington is set in North Carolina's "Inner Banks" region and offer a natural tapestry that encourages outdoor activities. Contrary to the notion of a retreat being staged in a remote or isolated location, this retreat is staged in a small-town environment, in a historic district, where community is important and promoted. The Center offers ample opportunity to "get away" and support those activities that are usually featured in other retreats. The concept of an "urban" retreat, however, places the learning, activities and discussion in an environment that is not isolated and approaches the reality of community where retreat goers will continue on their journey of fitness and wellness after leaving the retreat. In addition, many of the retreat support organizations and personnel are local to Washington and eastern North Carolina.

The purpose of the retreat is to enable learning and application of a strong foundation of wellness and fitness. It is almost a certainty that many or all female Veterans interested in these retreats have experienced some sort of trauma or stress in their military careers. A pilot assessment program will be used to measure efficacy the initial retreat through individual feedback, gains in understanding of fitness/wellness, and longitudinal feedback on the utility of the learning/modeling approach. Also, it is planned that mindfulness and anxiety management behavioral scales will be administered pre and post-retreat and at the conclusion of the online program.



Finally, the underlying theme of the retreats is total fitness and building resilience. The notion of fitness, especially with relevance to the DoD’s TFF program, highlights performance in support of mission, and the importance of resilience to prepare for new or different challenges. Although this connection might not translate into the more popular concept of wellness for many; the use of the term “fitness” may in fact turn potential retreat goers against attending because of its association with physical fitness. However, the population being served are Veterans who would likely understand the connection between total fitness and life performance, and the critical need to develop resilience.

About: Pamlico Rose Institute for Sustainable Communities (Pamlico Rose) advances programs to promote reintegration and building resilience in at-risk Veterans, including female Veterans and historic rehabilitation/re-utilization of historic structures to help foster community. A Washington, NC 501(c) (3 nonprofit), Pamlico Rose works at the intersection of community/resilience and opportunity — providing for those in need using history and preservation as a foundation.