



Total Life Fitness as Prevention Wellness & Resilience-building Programs for Female Veterans

Pamlico Rose and Total Life Fitness: Pamlico Rose Institute for Sustainable Communities (Pamlico Rose) advances wellness and resilience-building programs for female Veterans to ease the struggle of the post-military service transition to civilian life, including social and community reintegration. At the core of this effort is [Total Life Fitness](#) (TLF), a holistic approach that integrates knowledge of concepts and principles of healthy living coupled with the development and application of life skills across dimensions of wellness, mind, body, soul,¹ and community. TLF also features *persistent* and *meaningful* attention to daily activities and skills that are multifunctional in nature to provide a lasting foundation across dimensions. Inherently critical to these daily activities and skill development is the notion of self-transcendence, whereas participants are taught to reflect on "the capacity to expand personal boundaries and be oriented toward perspectives, activities, and purposes beyond the self without negating the value of the self and the present context."²

TLF Programs: Pamlico Rose offers various TLF programs at the Rose Haven Center of Healing in Washington, NC. The Center, dedicated to serving female Veterans, consists of an 1892 farmhouse, adjacent barn, and 1/2 town block of meditation and produce gardens. It is situated in Washington's historic district, three blocks from the Pamlico River.

- 1) **TLF Retreats** – Currently,³ Pamlico Rose offers wellness and resilience-building retreats for female Veterans who may be struggling with issues from their military service and/or reintegration that often stem from military sexual trauma or other trauma-inducing experiences. The retreats introduce “living fit” as a critical foundation and approach to healthy living and building resilience. Over three days, activities like yoga, art/creative expression, hiking, and nutritional meal preparation complement sessions on behavioral and social skill development and self-transcendence, all while participants develop supportive relationships with other female Veterans and faculty/staff. You can learn more about our first two retreats [here](#) and [here](#). Pamlico Rose intends to offer 5 -6 retreats per year, with a mix of ‘Introduction to TLF’ sessions and topic-specific sessions with themes such as art/creative expression, gardening, woodworking, kayaking, and

¹ When wellness is described as an approach, the phrase “mind, body and spirit” is most often used. Soul is used here to refer to the non-corporal life dimension and denotes a more inclusive and meaningful concept that may or may not involve faith-based belief systems while also focusing on the emotional/feeling sentient quality of being human.

² Pamela Reed defines self-transcendence as the expansion of self-boundaries in multi-dimensional ways. For example: (a) inwardly in introspective activities; (b) outwardly through concerns about others' welfare; (c) temporally, whereby the perceptions of one's past and future enhance the present; and (d) transpersonally through connections with a higher or greater dimension. Reed (2018), *Self-Transcendence Theory, Nursology* (October 19, 2018.)

³ Our April 3-5 Art-themed TLF retreat and 2020 TLF retreats through June were suspended due to COVID-19.

road biking. Each participant will receive three Continuing Education Credits (CEUs) from Beaufort County Community College in their Continuing Adult Education Community Learning Program.

- 2) **“Virtual” Wellness and Resilience-Building Retreats** - Due to COVID-19, Pamlico Rose staff and affiliated subject matter experts, several who have experience in instructional design and online or virtual delivery, are working to adapt the TLF retreat program to a flexibly timed virtual retreat program curriculum. Social distancing has dramatically altered the delivery methods that support learning efforts, including education, professional training, and more comprehensive face to face events, such as retreats. Mental health services have mostly moved to a “telehealth” format. Due to these impacts, risk factors, such as reticence to self-identify, lack of social support networks, and reticence to seek help/treatment at the VA, or geographical proximity to VA services, many women Veterans exhibit could easily be accentuated or become risk factors especially if the virus continues to cycle seasonally. The move to a virtual retreat format will allow a similar in-depth approach to TLF as the face to face retreats and offer opportunity to build critical support relationships with other retreat participants.
- 3) **Reintegration and Resilience (R&R) Residential Program** - Planned for a Spring 2021 launch,⁴ Pamlico Rose will offer a Total Life Fitness residential program for female Veterans in the later stages of recovery from substance abuse. A cohort of four female Veterans will reside in the Haven House and participate in a formal program providing opportunity to engage fully in the benefits of *living fit* through guided activities concentrating on wellness, healthy living, resilience, and building community. Residents will help maintain the gardens, take part in daily mindful and transcendent activities, share meal preparation for dinners following TLF nutritional guidelines, volunteer a set number of hours with local non-profits, and be involved in a weekly hybrid TLF course. Residents will continue personal counseling and therapy while at Rose Haven through the local VA or local social service agencies and will be expected to remain alcohol and/or drug free while in residence.
- 4) **TLF Hybrid Course** - Pamlico Rose, in partnership with Beaufort County Community College (BCCC), will offer an 8-week extended TLF online course, “Principles and Skills of Wellness and Resilience.” The course is designed to fulfill a variety of needs, including: a) an 8-week post-TLF retreat leaning extension; b) an R&R learning requirement for residents; and c) a standalone online TLF course for female Veterans. All iterations will offer a robust and comprehensive treatment and exploration of TLF to benefit personal and professional development, *and an opportunity to build community for the participants*. It will have a pre- and post- modular component to augment “course” objectives and extend learning to up to 12 weeks through Bloom’s application stage. The

⁴ The rehabilitation of Rose Haven Center of Healing’s Haven House (HH) is scheduled for summer/early Fall 2020. Once completed, the HH will house retreat participants and the residential program.

course will utilize BCCC's Blackboard web platform and will be offered through their Community Learning Program.

- 5) **Higher Ed Reintegration Course** - Pamlico Rose is also exploring the development and design of a "reintegration" course for Veterans considering enrollment, or having enrolled, in community college or a 4-year college or university after leaving the military. The course will be modular, online, and utilize both asynchronous and synchronous methods in its delivery. The course will cover a variety of topics that impact the academic success of Veteran students, such as learning styles, social and interpersonal skills, writing, healthy living while a student, and mitigating stress from academic expectations.

Female Veteran Transition/Reintegration

All Veterans moving through transition and eventual reintegration experience similar challenges. However, not all Veterans experience challenges or the severity of the effect of them during this phase, and female Veterans are often at greater risk for certain issues. For example, a greater percentage of female Veterans are **likely to leave** the service with mental health issues that often stem from gender bias, Military Sexual Trauma (MST), and domestic abuse that took place during their military service and can lead to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Research (demographic data, surveys, case studies and anecdotal narrative) exposes the different and often additional social, economic, cultural and institutional challenges female Veterans experience **after leaving** the service. These challenges center around gender and biology: gender role expectations and bias; life stressors related to power asymmetry, victimization, and poverty; and biobehavioral responses to stress related to trauma. In other words, female Veterans experience challenges all Veterans face, and then there is an additional layer compounding the difficulty of their post-military life that often is a continuation of challenges and behaviors that many faced while in the military. "Women's experiences in the military are different from men's, so their transition needs to be different, too."⁵ Women in the military may deal with a complicated trauma history as well as greater scrutiny of their emotional state and mental health. In general, women Veterans are significantly more likely to experience mental health difficulties as compared to civilian women and Veteran men.⁶

Female Veterans experience similar stress and anxiety as male Veterans with regard to the effect of their service, such as trauma, and suffer from depression and substance abuse, and accelerated rates of joblessness and homelessness. They also face an ambivalent reception regarding their service and identity as a Veteran. Struggling to be considered equal to their male counterparts while on active duty, or in the Guard or Reserves, female Veterans and their service are often overlooked or minimized by society, and even fellow Veterans. This

⁵ Retired Army Col. Ellen Haring, director of research for the advocacy group [Service Women's Action Network](#) (SWAN).

⁶ Sarah Osborn, A Call to Improve Suicide Prevention for Women Veterans (January 6, 2020), <https://swhr.org/a-call-to-improve-suicide-prevention-for-women-veterans/>.

leaves them with a confounded identity as it relates to their service to their country. Female Veterans often lack a strong social support system, especially with other Vets, which has been found to be critically important in healthy living. Women make up just 16% of the force, thus making it less likely to connect easily with other female Veterans, especially if many choose not to self-identify. For those who have used the VA's services, they often encounter similar treatment they endured while in the military from male patients and staff, although efforts have been made to correct these concerns.

In addition, female Veterans usually make less in their civilian jobs than male Veterans. They are more likely to be divorced and single parents, and often struggle to obtain childcare assistance, having to rely on family and friends. These additional elements unique to women further constrain the ability to pursue personal wellness and professional growth or education opportunities. Finally, female Veterans enter a civilian world much differently than the military one, and like male Veterans, navigating successfully in it requires behavioral and social skills that differ greatly from the more regimented, hierarchical military culture.

Total Life Fitness as Support to Suicide Prevention

Considering the aforementioned hurdles, it is not difficult to understand why suicide rates in female Veterans are two times higher than non-Veteran women, and increasing. Risk factors are plentiful. A primary risk factor is MST, as women who have experienced military sexual trauma show higher rates of suicidal ideation compared to those who reported combat-related post-traumatic distress. Other risk factors are substance use disorders, eating disorders, psychiatric conditions such as bipolar disorder, depression and PTSD, intimate partner violence, and emotional regulation and distress tolerance.⁷

The concept of wellness as prevention is widely accepted in our society as a public and individual health enabler. Vice Admiral Regina Benjamin, the US Surgeon General in 2011, stated, "The National Prevention Strategy... will shift our nation's health-care system from one based on sickness and disease to one focused on prevention and wellness. We need to stop diseases before they start and allow all Americans to be healthy and fit."⁸ Studies have shown the benefit of some type of wellness programs to suicide prevention.⁹ One of several policy recommendations in the 2018 report, *Mental Wellness Needs of Military Women: Community Driven Solutions*, was to "provide funding for alternative therapies like meditation, yoga, massage therapy, acupuncture, etc. Many military women pay out of

⁷ Suicide among Women Veterans, Fact Sheet/Issue Brief, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), 2019, https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/docs/Literature_Review_FSTP_Womens_Mental_Health_Emotional_Well-being_508_FINAL_06-18-2019.pdf.

⁸ Regina M. Benjamin, Public Health Rep. 2011 Nov-Dec; 126(6): 774–776.

⁹ Ey S, Moffit M, Kinzie JM, Brunett PH. Feasibility of a Comprehensive Wellness and Suicide Prevention Program: A Decade of Caring for Physicians in Training and Practice. J Grad Med Educ. 2016 Dec;8(5):747-753.

pocket costs for therapies that they find to be more effective than traditional approaches which rely almost solely on counseling and medication.”¹⁰

The intent of TLF is to promote the centrality of wellness and healthy living to female Veterans while building physical, mental, and emotional resilience as they transition from the military and reintegrate as a civilian and Veteran into previous or new communities. 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 is informed by both the DoD’s approach to wellness, *Total Force Fitness*, and the VA’s Whole Health Initiative that advances wellness and healthy living in Veterans. TLF is both holistic and integrated. It engages in persistent and meaningful multifunctional activities and practices that connect across life dimensions, such as social, physical, nutritional, medical, environmental, and transcendence (moving beyond ego and connecting with something larger). For example, a guided nature walk connects the social, physical and transcendent life domains, and preparing, cooking and eating a meal combines nutrition with the social and transcendence domains.

Critical to female Veterans who struggle with anxiety and stress is the development of behavioral skills, including mindfulness and anxiety management, as well as social skills, such as social resilience and interpersonal competence to help build confidence and trust necessary for successful reintegration. These life skills are threaded in most TLF activities, as is transcendence. In recovery programs or during personal or community crises, turning one’s attention and focus to those in need helps reduce individual stress and anxiety by being both in the moment and transcending ego. Activities that involve human movement, nature, creative self-expression, and the setting of personal goals or end states, such as gardening, art-making, woodworking, hiking, yoga, meditation, cooking, are repeated and aligned to bring the most benefit. All TLF programs are based around the importance of persistent attention to activities that engage multiple life domains, develop life skills, and usually are transcendent in nature.

TLF supports primary prevention efforts in combating suicide by fortifying the foundation of wellness while building resilience and a sense of community. The *living fit* approach seeks to mitigate risk factors and strengthen protective factors. For instance, social connectedness to a community of female Veterans is important to wellness and resilience building and an important protective factor in suicide prevention. The desire and need to be a part of a cohort of female Veterans was a common theme brought out by most participants in our post-retreat survey. However, social and community reintegration also means engaging with and being a part of many different groups. To this end, TLF advances interpersonal and connecting skills to address that need. Our Center of Healing is located in a community-minded historic district and many individuals and groups have been instrumental in its

¹⁰ Mental Wellness Needs of Military Women: Community Driven Solutions written by the Service Women’s Action Network <https://www.servicewomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/2018-Annual-Summit-Report-Final.compressed.pdf>.

development. Our TLF retreats and the R&R residential program do and will involve engaging with many of these groups, thereby providing ample opportunity to apply interpersonal and community-building skills.

For more information:

Dr. Robert Greene Sands
CEO, Pamlico Rose
robert@pamlicorose.org
[805-320-2967](tel:805-320-2967)

