

Stress management program helps soldiers with PTSD

Program helps soldiers deal with severe stress, anger

BY JENNIFER COX

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Army veteran Phil Bauer, 32, has never been shy. In fact, his bubbly personality rarely escapes notice and never fails to entertain.

"I always made the joke that I was glorified proof that bumbles bounce," Bauer laughed.

Even when he walks, it's hard to imagine Bauer in pain.

Yet the New York native suffered unimaginable losses while stationed in Iraq. First, he lost about 20 of his friends and colleagues, then his right leg and, finally, his career.

"I had all the time in [to be a] specialist, but they didn't want to promote an injured soldier," Bauer said.

In January, Bauer found he was not alone. He joined the Jacksonville-based TRACK program for injured soldiers hoping to get a college education and a fresh start with the help of APEX Performance techniques.

The APEX program trains participants to better manage stress and anger and increase their concentration. Bauer says he's proof of the program's power, saying it has helped him recover his positive outlook on life.

Turmoil and torment

In November 2003, an enemy missile hit Bauer's helicopter. After regaining consciousness, Bauer saw he was among the few who survived the attack.

"Outside of Fallujah, our helicopter was hit by a surface-to-air missile, and then gravity took effect, and a 150-foot bounce," he recalled. "When I woke up, my feet were trapped."

But, he said, that was "much better than some of the other people. I woke up."

Bauer's right leg was amputated, and he suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. The newly discharged soldier plunged into a dark period of depression.

"I had spent almost five years basically trying to destroy myself in different ways," Bauer said. "It was just five years of turmoil and torment."

During their one-year stint in the TRACK program, 10 to 12 soldiers like Bauer take college courses together at Florida State College at Jacksonville. They receive stipends, meet with personal trainers and attempt to get re-acclimated to life in the United States.

To help them overcome the psychological roadblocks they suffer, soldiers are also introduced to APEX training techniques.

APEX's Peak Performance Program director, Loretta D'Ambrosio, works daily with injured veterans who need help overcoming mental barriers to succeed in their civilian lives.

During several sessions, the soldiers are put through mental training exercises, which include computer games and emotion-provoking images. While seated in a '70s-style egg chair, the soldier is wired with several devices that send biofeedback to D'Ambrosio's computer. Based on their anxiety and stress levels, she teaches soldiers techniques to help them manage their mental and physical challenges.

"They'll experience, say, a recollection of an event or a re-creation of a performance in here," D'Ambrosio said. "They'll be hooked up to the biofeedback wires, and I'll see on the TV screen exactly how their body responds."

Some of those responses could include increases in temperature, sweat production and heart rate. D'Ambrosio helps them to control these automatic increases during the weekly sessions.

Although APEX is based in North Carolina, D'Ambrosio works exclusively with the Jacksonville-based TRACK program. Louis Csoka founded APEX three years ago after implementing the mental training program at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. He also works with corporations and professional athletes who, he said, have had success with the training as well.

"A big part of their challenge is a mental one," Csoka said. "The kinds of challenges we all face in today's world, I would say it's probably double for them, as far as the ability to concentrate, given some of the injuries that they've had.

"Much of our training really helps them bring things back to a level where they can really use them."

'I'm here for a reason'

Ron Hawthorne, 32, of Jacksonville, a former Army sergeant, joined the TRACK program after waking from a coma stemming from injuries he suffered in Iraq.

"I had a very low chance of surviving - 8 percent - and a 108-degree temperature for three days, which anyone will tell you is practically brain damaged," Hawthorne said. "I feel like it's a miracle that I'm still here, and I believe I'm here for a reason."

Hawthorne, who said he still combats anger issues stemming from his traumatic brain injury, most enjoys the relaxation techniques employed by APEX. D'Ambrosio installed a program on each of the soldier's TRACK-supplied computers that helps them practice these techniques.

"I think APEX is probably the best benefit we have here in the TRACK program," said Hawthorne, who is majoring in early-childhood education.

"I think setting goals is an important base for training that they've set for us because in order for us to achieve something, we have to have it laid out in our mind, and we have to tell ourselves that this is what we're going to do."

Bauer, too, credits his APEX training for helping him to focus and function better under pressure. The APEX training sessions are relaxing and comforting, he said.

"From where I've been, there's no place to go but up," Bauer said. "This really opens your eyes to see that anything is possible."

About APEX Performance

APEX Performance Louis Csoka founded APEX Performance three years ago. It is used not only for military personnel but also for professional athletes and in the corporate world. APEX is a five-tiered program aimed at helping clients control their emotions while in stressful situations.

Goal setting: During this phase, clients identify what they want to accomplish and the small steps they need to take to achieve their goals. Clients decide how they will turn their aspirations into actions.

Adaptive thinking: Clients build confidence through self-talk. They learn to invent quick solutions while maintaining healthy stress levels.

Stress-energy management: APEX uses advanced sensory equipment to help clients thrive in pressure situations. In this phase, clients learn to control their responses and stress levels.

Attention control: This phase is especially important for soldiers who have suffered traumatic brain injuries. Clients participate in exercises aimed at helping them concentrate and focus.

Imagery: In this final phase, clients use each of the techniques they have learned to imagine a scenario in which they are succeeding. The ability to visualize victory goes a long way toward achieving the goal.

For more: Go to www.apexperform.com.

Source: APEX Performance