**Peace of Mind: Summary of Research**

Introduction

Even for well-trained soldiers, the psychological toll of combat is heavy. The typical and incorrect understanding of a post-combat veteran is that either he or she has Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or that he or she is 'fine.' In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Most veterans who go through combat emerge somewhere on a spectrum between ‘fine’ (i.e. psychologically healthy) and having full blown PTSD. Prof. Brom explains, "the notion that one could go through combat and not need to process the experience is like thinking you could jump into a lake, swim around for a few minutes and reasonably expect to come out dry." Yet, most veterans do not require formal treatment.

Peace of Mind is a program that helps Israeli combat veterans process their shared combat experiences after their conscription service. The program is run though Herzog – Israel Center for the Treatment of Psychotrauma (ICTP), an internationally renowned psychological trauma treatment, training and research center based in Jerusalem, Israel.

Since 2007, Peace of Mind (POM) has worked with 62 groups of between 15-20 participants in ages ranging from 21-35. The groups participate in a nine-month program that includes three primary workshops, including a week outside of Israel, hosted by a Jewish community. The groups meets once more, six months after the program for a follow-up workshop. Additionally, individual treatment is provided for those participants who show the need for more intensive care.

ICTP is affiliated with the Hebrew University of Jerusalem’s Baerwald School of Social Work. As such, programs are evaluated closely. Assessments are done according to international academic standards. Data is collected from participants, mental health professionals, and host communities. The quantitative and qualitative data are astoundingly positive.

*"We all finished our military service and started our personal [lives]… but deep inside we were all affected by it. POM understood … gathering us in a group that has fought together … made the perfect conditions of trust and support. A few months after I finished my process with POM I can definitely say that it helped me a lot. I understood the reason for my behavior and got the tools to have a better future. I feel like I'm not carrying this bad feeling of cargo anymore." - Eyal Oz, Participant, Fire Island, NY, 2012*

Satisfaction with Peace of Mind

Participants are polled on many factors at various point during their involvement with the program. The first time is before the group meets. Surveys and questionnaires are administered a second time during the program, a third time at the program’s conclusion and finally six months after the program concludes.

After the program concludes:

*“The benefits of POM to both the hosting community and the veterans cannot adequately be described… Putting names to faces, who until now were anonymous men and women in green uniforms… POM really personalizes the IDF for us. They didn't know that the Diaspora Jews love them and consider them modern-day Jewish heroes.”-Rosanne Koenigson, Highland Park, NJ, multiple time Community Organizer*

* 92.5% of participants rated their overall satisfaction with POM as “Extremely satisfied” or “Very satisfied.”
* When asked, “Which element of the program is totally essential to its success?” among the most frequent answers of the participants, besides the professional aspects, were disconnecting from daily life and connection with the host community.
* 76.7% (over three quarters of participants) reported either “extremely increased,” or “greatly increased,” emotional and physical self-awareness.

*“POM helped me a lot. By being abroad, by being hosted, we were able to disconnect from day-to-day life; and especially being able to speak for the first time about things that otherwise we never would have discussed. We shared stories that we’d kept deep inside ourselves for years… We were able to unload, to release.” –POM Participant, Toronto, Canada, 2013*

Post-traumatic symptoms and post-traumatic growth

Veterans often leave their service with a variety of symptoms. Only about 25% show now symptoms, the other 75% suffer from various levels of post-traumatic symptoms or of depression. The average level does not reach the level of full fledged PTSD; a minority of about 20% do reach that level. The Peace of Mind program does reduce symptoms somewhat, but for those with clinical levels treatment as part of the program is being offered.

An interesting phenomenon is “post-traumatic growth”. Only in the past 20 years the recognition has grown that people do not only experience negative consequences, but a majority of veterans do report on some positive effects, such as their increased appreciation of life, a greater sense of personal strength, warmer and more intimate relationships and a recognition of new possibilities in one’s life. Peace of Mind boosts post-traumatic growth in the participants and this is not only visible in the numbers, but also in people changing their lives.

Six groups were tested in a controlled study. They were divided into three test groups and three wait-list groups. All six groups had gone through similar combat experiences, at similar ages, at approximately the same time. The test groups went through POM; the control groups did not participate in POM. All testing was done concurrently.

The control groups, which did not go through the Peace of Mind program, showed no significant change in the PTG factors. The test groups, which went through the Peace of Mind program, showed a 10% increases in overall PTG scores. These data show that POM is an effective method of helping combat veterans process their experiences so they can have psychologically healthier lives as members of society.

Social Support

Soldiers who go through combat typically do not feel they can share their experiences; not with their closest confidants and not even with the comrades with whom they fought. Such veterans frequently report feeling that no one can understand them. This feeling is quickly transformed into a cloistering, which leads them to feel that support from significant others, family or friends is not available.

During POM workshops, participants learn how to share those experiences. By sharing they are unburdened and in so doing, they rediscover their ability to connect to the outside world and open up. POM participants indicate that after the program, they avail themselves of social support more than they previously had, especially with their significant other and with their friends.

Participants come to realize that they can use their wider social circle to feel supported. They become more intimate and more able to use their intimate environment to feel supported. This claim is supported by the partners of POM participants as well. The intimacy between participants and their spouses or significant others is increased. In this way, POM improves the private lives of its participants as well.

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Most of the group members stay in touch for decades even after their conscription military service; frequently they continue to server together in the IDF reserve. This increased sense of social support improves the quality of their lives and further strengthens their ability overcome future combat challenges.

Flexibility

Flexibly is one of the best predictors of one’s ability to cope with trauma. However, soldiers are trained to be tough, mentally and physically. Trauma further leads one to become inflexible. Individuals that have both trained as soldiers and experienced trauma have doubly learned a rigid toughness. That inflexibility is detrimental to developing psychological resilience. Learning how to be more flexible is a significant factor in developing psychological wellness.

POM teaches its participants increased coping flexibility. It does so by structuring its time in alternating blocks of group therapy time and leisurely social events. This model has shown success in developing flexibility, which is very difficult to do. 60% of POM participants report increased coping flexibility following the 3 months program.

Long Term Follow-Up Results

POM meets with participant groups six months after they complete the program and frequently keeps in touch with them for much longer. The surveys completed six months after completion clearly indicate that the progress made during the program is lasting. Moreover, many POM participants report that their spouses, families, significant others, and friends remark how much more open and sharing they are after their involvement in POM.

Conclusion

*"The war is finally over and now I can start living my life." - Moshe Maimon, Participant, London, England, 2014*

Peace of Mind was created, in 2007, by a team of uniquely qualified trauma specialists at METIV, Herzog Israel Center for the Treatment of Psychotrauma for an underserved population of the Israeli society; namely, IDF veterans who experienced intense combat during their service. Since then, over 900 men and women have been helped. The ICTP, as a research associate of Hebrew University, tracks all the programs it runs. The results of Peace of Mind are astoundingly positive.

For more information please contact, Alon Weltman, POM Director
Email: AlonW@HerzogHospital.org
Phone: USA Office: 212-444-1669, Israel Office: +972-2-644-9666