

The Future of Health Care: Military and Special Forces' Use of Integrative Medicine

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By **Robert Piper**

The future of health care in America and the world at large is integrative medicine. Things like mind-body practices, meditation, yoga, acupuncture, nutrition, and other complementary practices are here to stay.

The Samueli Institute is one of several organizations looking to make integrative medicine available to society as a whole; they are tirelessly working to bring it to the men and women who serve in the U.S. military.

I spoke with [Dr. Kevin Berry](#), the vice president for military medical research at Samueli Institute, on how the military is using integrative medicine. He served in the military for 30 years.

Thanks for the service to our country.

It's been tremendous to be associated with the people I've been associated with. It's been about growth and seeing things that I would never have a chance to see. I think that's why after retiring I didn't want to get too far away from the military. I've been very fortunate to find the Samueli Institute.

I read on your site that over 50 percent of the military uses integrative medicine.

We've done surveys on that, and there are more than what we see in the general population. I think **that may be underreported** -- probably on the civilian side also. I don't think that people think of [it], particularly these young kids that are into muscle-building. They're in GNC and they're buying this and that; that's also a part of this story.

We did a leadership needs assessment -- I'm not at liberty to say which base or which service. So I'll use it in more general terms. We're suspicious to say that it wouldn't matter if it was Army or Navy, or this base or that base. But after 10

years of war, we are seeing that these leaders, the colonels, and the lieutenants are maintaining their physical health, their ability to run and all that jazz, but **we are seeing deterioration of emotional strength**. We're seeing the concerns they have with the tolls on their family, and with it we are seeing this dichotomy on one side there going to it in big numbers, but there's another component that thinks if you go to mind-body or medical massage you are skipping out on being hard.

If you go over to Special Forces, in their contract world they put together a human performance and resilience contract. They haven't awarded it yet, but **they are looking to put hard cash on the barrel head. To bring in a whole group of people that would be working with Special Forces and their family members to build resiliency, to include mind-body, nutrition, to help people work on the work/life balance.**

You mentioned Special Forces. Are the Navy Seals using integrative medicine, as well?

Yeah, all the services. Special Forces have been doing that for probably a lot longer; I don't think they think of it as unusual any more. I think they've just included as just [a] thing that they do. **Martial arts and tai chi** are not that much different; it's a physical discipline that gets you back into the moment. There's pretty good evidence that sharp shooters will lower their heart rate and control their heart rate variability as they're contemplating a shot. I think that's probably true of Olympic shooters.

Can you talk about some the research that's been going on with PTSD?

Yeah, we talk about the right of boom and the left of boom. The boom can be any type of traumatic event; we think we need to be working on both sides. So the pre-exposure work that we've done, that looks to teach soldiers some mindfulness. One of them is called War-Ops Warrior Optimization. It's a proprietary for-profit firm that one of the army generals wanted for his units that were going out to Afghanistan and Iraq back in 2009. They asked us to evaluate if it makes any difference, and it was just four hours of **mind-body activities**. The trends are pretty strong that this **makes a difference**.

We were just talking here in the last day or two that the Marine Special Forces MARSOC is looking like they are going to purchase this training. They are going to take it a step further and try to reinforce it through leadership and leaders to remind people of it while they're deployed. It looks like we are proposing an evaluation of that. Another example of that would be looking at the Benson-Henry approach for a group of people who have been identified with PTSD.

Another approach is **acupuncture** for headaches. We have a study going on at Walter Reed and at Fort Belvoir in the Wounded Warrior community with those

that are diagnosed with PTSD and chronic headaches. We're still collecting data on that one. That's just to give you an idea of what we're doing.

That brings up the question that all Special Forces, Olympic athletes, mixed martial artists in the UFC [...] use the breathing component to curb the stress response. Can you talk about breathing and the stress response?

That's one of the common things we see in many of these type of programs. Whether it's yoga nidra when you're working with a casualty who's physically impaired and maybe recent from surgery. **Becoming mindful, using breathing, and getting the mind to focus on breathing.** Getting the chest expansion to trigger the parasympathetic nervous system, which can balance the overactive sympathetic system. That's just one example, simple, straightforward meditation, starts with breathing. Special Forces units might use tai chi for an example.

Well, thank you very much, it was great interviewing you.