

THINKING OUT LOUD

A Newsletter from the RAF Mental Health Network



IN THIS EDITION

Resilience And
Wellbeing – Inside
Intelligence

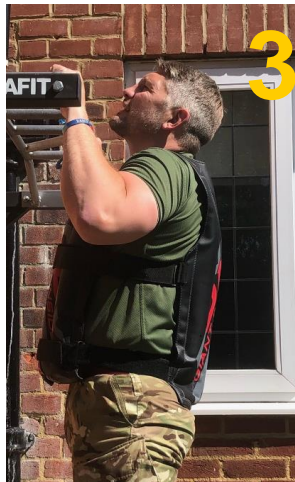
Making A Difference By
Talking

Sport In Mind

RAF Fylingdales:
Wellbeing & Nature
Beach Sweep

Never miss a thing by
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EDITOR'S LETTER

During the 10th-14th May the RAF Mental Health Network put on a series of events with the help of the Time to Change Network for Mental Health Awareness Week (MHAW) 2021, and it was a complete success!



When I found out that the theme for this year's MHAW was 'Connect with Nature' I couldn't have been happier. Being in Nature is something that I absolutely love, whether it's the beautiful sunny beaches of Cornwall or the rainy hills in the Peak District, every time I am out in nature I feel an enormous rush.

I recall a recent walk I completed in the Peak District. It was a cold and wet day, but my partner and I decided to brave the elements regardless. As we slowly dropped down into the valley, I occasionally stopped to embrace what was around me, seeing the rams going about their daily business curious to know what I was doing. In that moment I just took it all in, feeling that ancestral desire being satisfied within. As it was a cold and wet day there were very few people around except for two lads not far behind us. At the bottom of the valley there is a beautiful scene of waterfalls a pool, running water and the backdrop of the wild.

At this point I took a moment again to take it all in and embrace the peace around me. During this I noticed the two lads following me had come down to the pool and started to strip down to nothing. Initially I was confused as to what was going on, but then I saw them both jump into the freezing cold pool and the confusion quickly transformed into admiration, here were two men who were really connecting with nature, embracing it for all it is, regardless of the weather or who is around. They took the plunge and felt the euphoria from it.

Now not only does being out in nature help with your Mental Health, but cold water therapy can also help. Certain case studies suggest that cold open water swimming has helped alleviate symptoms of depression and anxiety in some people. One such [case study](#) involves a woman who had experienced anxiety and depression since the age of 17. At 24 years old, she began a trial programme of weekly open water swimming.

Over time, her symptoms decreased so significantly that she was able to stop taking medication to treat them. A year later, her doctors found that regular swimming still kept her depression symptoms at bay.



So here's my challenge to you, after every hot shower you have before you switch it off turn the temperature right down to cold and see how long you last, do this each day and notice how easier it becomes and how much longer you can do.

This is something that I do myself and I do feel the benefits from it

Let me know of your experience by clicking my name below.

Chris Nance

Editor

SPORT IN MIND: STUART ASHLEY

Story Provided by RAF Sport



Sport has the power to change lives for the better, far beyond the field of play. Its benefits are not hindered by the sport or level of achievement. Participants find structure, fun and encouragement from both team and individual activities. For Stuart Ashley, that Opportunity to help rebuild his life in the RAF through sport has transformed his wellbeing, professional career and how he now lives every day of his life.

Stuart faced the challenges of over 28 years of active service in multiple operational tours in the RAF Regiment. In 2018, those challenges and the pressures of family ill-health had a major impact on Stuart's physical and mental wellbeing resulting in a rapid deterioration in his mental health. Turning to the RAF, Stuart began his journey of recovery one step at a time with the team from the RAF

Personnel Recovery Unit (PRU). One of those first steps was being encouraged to participate in sport to complement and further his rehabilitation.

The impact of that step was dramatic and played a crucial part in assisting other

therapies such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy to successfully recover. As an active rugby player in his past, sport was an enjoyable and competitive pastime for Stuart but work had taken over in recent years.

Following his call for help, PRU started Stuart on the Help for Heroes pathway, trying a range of sports including archery, sailing and curling. It allowed him to begin piecing together a more active lifestyle starting with short 20-minute runs, releasing endorphins and increasing Stuart's focus and concentration.

His increased focus and concentration were just a few of the benefits of sport in his recovery. It helped provide a sense of purpose, drive and strengthened his psychological approach to his job.

This dedication to recovery resulted in a promotion and a new role where he supports others as they develop their skills at the Defence Academy. This was only the beginning of Stuart's new approach to life. While benefitting professionally from those initial 20-minute runs, sporting wise it opened up a host of opportunities.

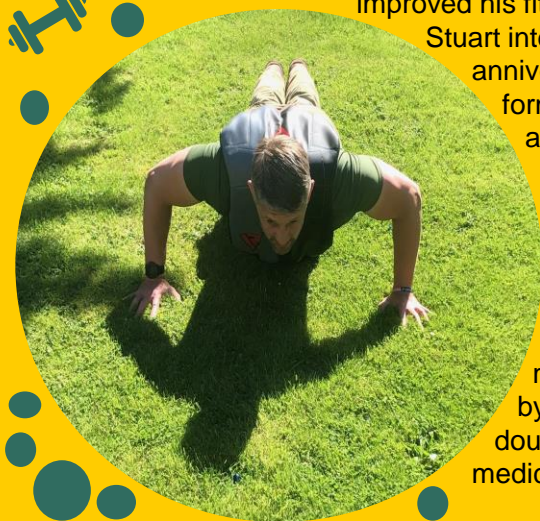
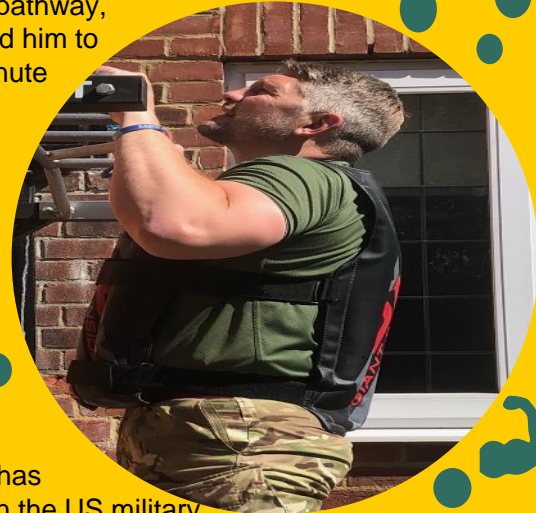
With a passion to push himself further mentally and physically, Stuart has chosen to excel at Murph Training, an extreme workout with its roots in the US military.

The workout consists of a 1 mile run, 100 pull ups, 200 press-ups, 300 squats and a 1 mile run again all wearing a 20lb weighted vests and it's not to be taken lightly as Stuart has chosen to step up from the usual 20lb to a 42lb vest.

Exercising every day has given Stuart a renewed focus at work, a way to manage elements of his life and improved his fitness. This has given Stuart the drive to give something back. In 2022,

Stuart intends to undertake 180 sporting activities to celebrate the 80th anniversary of the formation of the RAF Regiment and centenary of the formation of the RAF Armoured Car Companies and hopefully raise awareness of the benefits of sport and funds for the RAF Benevolent Fund - a long way from the challenges he faced in 2018. But it is potentially the completion of a difficult but rewarding journey that showed the impact sport can have.

There is little doubt in Stuart's mind that it was the mix of traditional therapies and sport that brought about his full recovery and set up the rest of his and his family's life. There is some irony that Stuart is driven by and achieves so much in an individual sporting activity. But there is no doubt that it was the team approach that got him to where he is now – medical, friendship and sporting teams.



RESILIENCE AND WELLBEING – INSIDE INTELLIGENCE

By Jack Duffield & Daz Morrow



Ever since I joined the RAF in 1988, the UK has been involved in one operation or another and, more often than not, with numerous running at the same time right across the globe. Although this is unlikely to change given the focus of the latest Integrated Review with persistent global engagement, what has thankfully changed during that time, as we have become more connected and socially aware, is an increasing acknowledgement of the impact this may be having on our personnel.

As you would expect, A2 personnel (which comprises the Intelligence (Int) Branch, Int Analyst and Int Analyst Linguist Trades) are at the heart of operational planning, building understanding of our adversaries. With the ever-increasing appetite for information and intelligence (there is a difference!) we can expect demands on our personnel to increase too. They will be involved in a wide variety of dynamic and fluid situations, some of which can be quite stressful in terms of operational tempo and subject matter. Because of these challenges the resilience and wellbeing of our people is our top priority, without whom, we simply cannot function.

Helped greatly by the fact that we're relatively small in terms of personnel numbers, the Int Branch and Trade (B&T) has always worked hard to be progressive and proactive. I think it is fair to say that whilst there has always been the aspiration to help and support our people we have perhaps lacked the knowledge and experience to do so in a coordinated and sustainable framework. Thankfully, with the stigma attached to mental health diminishing, there has been a seismic positive change in attitudes, care, support and culture for those who need help. Three such examples of this has been the work supporting those working on the Reaper Force, 1 ISR Wg and the Pathfinder Support Group at RAF Wyton. All of which has made it easier for the Int Resilience & Wellbeing Network to get up and running working on a volunteer basis, with people from across the B&T, up and down the rank structure, all lending their time, support and compassion to make service life what it should be: challenging, exciting and rewarding.

To ensure coherence and to learn from those with experience, our Head of Branch and Trades established the Network under a Gp Capt lead to work together with wider Defence and RAF Mental Health, Resilience and Wellbeing networks. Using national-level guidance, tools and resources, we work with the chain of command to create sustainable life-skills to pre-empt and counter the unique issues and pressures we face collectively and as individuals. Our team has a broad portfolio with thematic teams that cover training, wellbeing policy, mentoring, neurodiversity, professional and environmental factors. We engage across the Whole Force through our External Liaison Team because we understand that some issues we face are not just confined to the Intelligence Community.

Although we're a relatively new organisation, we've been very busy and already launched a Return To Work booklet to support personnel during COVID-19, along with a broader Resilience and Wellbeing Guide, designed as a 'one-stop shop' quick reference guide for our people to easily find guidance and support on the full range of resources within the RAF and wider Defence community. To ensure we reach as many of our globally dispersed and sometimes remotely located people as possible, we have made resources accessible on SharePoint and Defence Connect, meaning that the RAF Intelligence Whole Force can access the same support as those on MoDNET.

If you'd like to browse our resources, join the conversation on Int Resilience and Wellbeing or to get involved with the Network, please check out our forum on [Defence Connect](#). We look forward to hearing and perhaps learning from you!

SPOTLIGHT – JAMES CUMMINS

RAF TIME TO CHANGE – MAKING A DIFFERENCE BY TALKING

I never realised how a small thing can have such an impact on people's lives until I started to talk openly about my own lived experience of mental health. While this wasn't easy to do at first, I came to realise that the things that prevented me from being open about my mental health, were the exact same reasons why I should.

My own mental health story started with being a very emotional child, while this may not have impacted anything life took its toll on me over the next 25 years. I had some hard times with friends, family illness and a break up of my own marriage, and in the second half of my 30s this led me to be in and out of therapy, I have had numerous

breakdowns, periods of suicidal tendencies, and on one occasion had a short stay in a psychiatric unit when I wasn't able to keep myself safe. At all times, nobody in my work environment would talk about this openly, as if mental health was something we didn't really acknowledge. I decided to challenge this by talking openly to people at work, to see if this would make a difference.

From these humble beginnings I soon realised that I couldn't be alone in my experiences, and I reached out across the RAF to see if people might be interested in coming together to speak out openly. I was amazed by the reaction; some people had already taken steps to do this, others only needed to be offered the platform to do so. By forming the RAF Time to Change Network, all of these people came together, supported each other, and started to tell their own stories. While some delivered talks in front of the whole Stations or over skype, others chose instead to do no more or less than talk to work colleagues while waiting for the kettle to boil.

Every time someone talks about their experience of mental health, it impacts the people who hear it. This simple act allows people to hear these stories to recognise how common poor mental health can be, and how normal it can be! Other people, who might be battling their own mental health journey themselves, realise that they are not alone and that there are numerous other people with similar experiences. Even our members of the network feel renewed support and recognition, and pride in the strength they had to overcome dark times. All of us in the network realise that although we are not experts in mental health, we are experts in our own lived experiences and the simple act of sharing these experiences is the key to making a difference.



BE IN YOUR COLLEAGUE'S CORNER

1 in 4 of us will experience mental health problems this year.
If a team mate is acting differently, step in.



time to change
let's end mental health discrimination

Wg Cdr James Cummins is chair of the RAF Time to Change Network, a whole-force network of people who are committed to talking openly about their own lived experience of mental health. If you want to find out more or are interested in being part of this network, then please contact James for more information.

RAF FYLINGDALES: WELLBEING & NATURE BEACH SWEEP



On Sunday 16th May and to help mark Mental Health Awareness Week (MHAW) 2021, the RAF Fylingdales Community collaborated with the Local Whitby Beach Sweep Community and organised a Nature Beach Sweep. Over 30 personnel attended, a fantastic turnout which included Service personnel, MOD Guard Service and families of RAF Fylingdales and the local Whitby community. Following a Health and Safety Brief, Flight Sergeant Keith Burt, Service Community Support Officer, gave a brief talk on Mental Health Awareness and the positive impact of getting outdoors, physical activity and nature. During the day a number of rubbish bags were filled with rubbish that was detracting from the natural beauty of the area. Normally, a picture of the most interesting items found were taken, on this occasion this was a pair of spectacles, hopefully the owner had a spare pair. The Great British weather held off and there was a lovely community spirit in which we came together, talked and helped to clean up our local beach to make it a safe and enjoyable area for all to enjoy and to connect with nature.



USEFUL LINKS

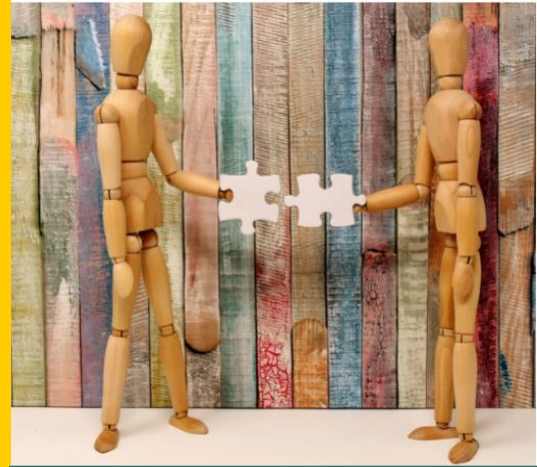
CREDITS

Editor: Chris Nance

Cover Artwork: Emily Altass

Contributors:

- RAF Sport & Stuart Ashley
- Jack Duffield & Daz Morrow
- James Cummins
- Keith Burt



Have you got
a story to
share?

Do you want to share
your story?

Do you have an event
coming up?

Do you have some
useful info you want to
share? To be featured in
future editions please
email:

Chris

RAF Mental Health Network MS Teams Site

RAF Health And Well-Being Portal

RAF Families Federation

RAF Benevolent Fund

RAF Association

Samaritans

Combat Stress

Togetherall

HeadFIT

Campaign Against Living Miserably

