

Summer 2023

Mind Matters

The RAF Mental Health Network's Quarterly Newsletter

Mindfulness and Meditation
Mental Health Awareness Week
Sport In Mind
Your Network Needs You!



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Chair's Letter

Sqn Ldr Caroline Krolkowski

A very warm welcome to your new look Network newsletter. Sadly Cpl Chris Nance moved on taking his excellent skills with him. But I think you will agree that Flt Lt Chris Hallworth has done a sterling job with his Editorial debut.

It has been a real privilege being Chair of the Mental Health Network for the last 12 months. I work alongside some very hard working individuals who devote their spare time and effort, whether at station/Unit level or on the Committee, to reducing the stigma of mental health, signposting support and providing a platform for peer engagement.

The Committee has undergone a period of internal reorganisation; as a team of volunteers it is critical to ensure that we can balance delivery to our primary roles while effectively supporting the Network. We always welcome new members to share ideas and help us deliver our programme of events so if you would like to help, please do get in touch.



We will shortly be publishing our programme for 23/24 on our Teams site so please keep a look out for what's coming up.

As I look forward to my second year as Chair I would like to thank all those who are committed to supporting mental fitness and wellbeing. Thank you for all that you have done and continue to do.

Editor's Letter

Flt Lt Chris Hallworth

It's a great privilege to take over as the editor of the RAF Mental Health Network's quarterly newsletter. First of all, I'd like to thank Cpl Chris Nance, my predecessor, for all his hard work on previous editions of the newsletter.

Mental Health (MH) was something I had given little thought to until my own issues arose following the UK's withdrawal from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021. I had spent time in the country and the images on the news brought it all back and triggered what I now know was PTSD. I suspect many are similar and comprehending peoples' MH can be difficult if not experienced personally. By sharing our experiences, discussions around MH will hopefully become normalised.

The RAF Mental Health Network exists to offer signposting so members of the Whole Force can access the help and support they need as well as to promote good mental health. Everyone has their own way of dealing with their own MH. For example, I couldn't quite get in to meditation and ended up taking to the hills, walking around like a Cheshire version of Julie Andrews, just with a better singing voice. Everybody's experience of poor mental health differs and hopefully seeing experiences from across the RAF Family will encourage others to identify and access help if they



or people around them need it.

Throughout this newsletter, you will find hyperlinks with most of the articles, so click away! On page 12 there is the Signpost section, with lots of links to get support if you need it or for promoting and maintaining good mental fitness. There is a lot of support out there which can sometimes be overwhelming so take time to look at the various charities, both military and civilian.

We're always looking for new articles, ideas and committee members so please feel free to contact me on the RAFMHN's Teams [site here](#). There are lots of opportunities to help out across the year in the multitude of events across the RAF. I hope you enjoy the new look newsletter. Feedback always welcome, especially if it's positive!

Mindfulness and Meditation: What, why and how?

Nigel Morton

Below is an extract from Nigel's article on mindfulness and meditation. You can read the full article [here](#). Weekly mindfulness sessions are offered by the [Defence Mindfulness team](#).

These days, we all seem to be busier than ever, with little time to do the things we need, and less time to do the things we want. An analogy that is often used is of a glass of muddy water: shake it up and it stays cloudy, but let the mud settle to the bottom and the water becomes clear. Meditation and mindfulness can help you achieve that calmness and clarity, and a degree of stillness and tranquillity, even in the hustle and bustle of modern life.

Are mindfulness and meditation the same? Well, yes ... and no. Mindfulness is a quality and meditation is a practice. If you are meditating, you will almost certainly be mindful and if you are being mindful you are, in a sense, meditating. So, if that is the 'What', what about the 'Why' and the 'How'? Something happens and we respond, often automatically, and that habitual response may be something we would wish to change. Being more mindful, growing the ability to be in the present moment and have a greater 'present moment awareness' gives us the chance to dwell in the 'gap' between stimulus and response, and choose a reaction which might be kinder, more altruistic, more balanced than our habitual one.

You can be mindful doing anything – simply by gently drawing in your focus to whatever you happen to be doing. Don't force your mind into a particular channel, but just keep your focus in the here and now. If your mind runs back to the past, or forward to the future, or does the almost inevitable wandering on from thought to thought then just bring your focus back to the present

In terms of meditation, there are many different ideas and options to investigate. A very basic, traditional and effective method is to use the breath as a focus, a practice called 'The Mindfulness of Breathing'.

RAF Reserves Mental Health Defence Connect Support

MACr Kev Beresford & AS1 Lizzie Bayley

Kev and Lizzie are serving members on the RAF Mental Health Network Committee and, as reservists, provide invaluable insights into the different challenges Reservists may face alongside their Regular counterparts. They have created and established a Defence Connect page so all can access support and advice with their own devices. They say:

We wanted to create a Wellbeing page for all Reserve personnel; a platform that would be available for all ranks and ages and we chose Defence Connect as it offers easy access from any electronic device. This makes it a resource that can be read via a smart phone and is available 24/7.



The RAF Reserves Mental Health & Wellbeing Resource page contains information and signposts to a variety of wellbeing and mental health links for personnel in times of need, or to help manage and promote their mental fitness. We update the page regularly with new material, useful ideas and tips.

Please help spread the word by forwarding [this Defence Connect webpage](#) to the wider Reserves community and their CoC to help raise awareness of this free resource. We welcome any new information or wellbeing events across the RAF which can be added to the site's calendar."

Included on the Reserves' DC page is information about Op RESTORE, the new name for the Veterans' Trauma Network. The Network supports veterans with service-attributable injuries, no matter how long they have served. For more information, check out the DC page or click [here](#).

#ICYMI MH Awareness Week

AVM Tamara Jennings, RAF MH Champion

13-19 May was this year's Annual Mental Health Awareness Week. Run by the Mental Health Foundation in the UK, the week provides a focal point in the calendar to raise awareness and understanding around Mental Health, developing the conversation around the impact this may have upon individuals, their families, colleagues and friends.

The focus this year was Anxiety. AVM Jennings provided an excellent intro to the week.



Anxiety is something that we will all feel from time to time, and it can affect different people in different ways. For most of us it is a normal emotion we feel at times of pressure; maybe when we are due to give an important briefing or to sit an exam, particularly relevant for me as my daughter starts her A Levels this month. Some of us might get anxious when starting a new job or a new relationship, for instance, and others may have anxiety related to financial or family issues. It happens in a range of circumstances and is mostly something we can manage and overcome.




When we stop being able to control our anxiety the emotion can become overwhelming, and this is when it can become a mental health issue.

Anxiety is one of the most common mental health issues in the UK. Building awareness of the problem and the way it affects individuals and having the conversations as to what and where help is available is important. In fact, as we so often say, having that initial conversation with someone can often be the start of the path to recovery and the earlier this happens the better. Having a week dedicated to raising awareness and destigmatising mental health provides the opportunity to ensure mental fitness and positive wellbeing remain part of the conversation.

#ICYMI MH Awareness Week

Events held at RAF Brize Norton & RAF Boulmer



ROYAL AIR FORCE BOULMER

RAF Boulmer
Health and Wellbeing Day

18 May 23
1000 - 1600, Hart Building

Stands including:

- 'Time to Talk' Video.
- 'Mindfulness in the MOD'- External Speaker
- 'Dealing with Breakdowns' – Online presentation.
- 'Moral Injury' – External Speaker.
- Mindfulness Sessions - External Delivery
- Coping Mechanisms for Anxiety
- Civil Service Charity
- Worry Tree
- 'Boulmer is great, change my mind'
- Samaritans
- Healthy Eating using new cooking equipment
- Workplace mobility/stretching workshops
- SSAFA Volunteers stand.
- Online media presentations



If you have any Mental Health or Wellbeing events you would like us to advertise, please get in touch at our Teams site by clicking the RAF Mental Health Network logo below.

Alternatively, if you'd like to get in touch and talk about your event in a future newsletter, we'd love to hear from you.

RAF Brize Norton
Station Health and Wellbeing Day

Guest Motivational Speaker

Al Sylvester MBE



ROYAL AIR FORCE COMMUNITY SUPPORT

FITNESS CHALLENGES



OFFERS & DISCOUNTS

INFO STALLS

SPORTS TASTER SESSIONS

HEALTH & WELLBEING DAY

1200 - 1500

WEDNESDAY 17 MAY 2023

STATION GYM



FREE HOG ROAST @ 12:00



GUEST SPEAKERS

Sport in Mind: Fishing Fanatic

FS Michael Dalziel

'Sport in Mind' is kindly provided by RAF Sports and highlights stories of how people have used physical activities and sports to help maintain good mental fitness. This edition is from FS Dalziel who explains how his interest in fishing has helped improve his own mental health.

Since my early years of fishing as a child and through teenage life, investing in the sport with tackle instead of toys for Christmas presents, which later was rewarded winning multiple under 18 championships before joining the Royal Air Force at 19. I always viewed fishing as my escape from life struggles and took me to my "Happy place". This philosophy continued later into adulthood with my love for fishing only growing, as it became more than what it once was. It became a day out, an experience in a tranquil and reflective environment the combination of the unknown and excitement every time I went, and it gave me fulfilment with the chance to show my best self and improve others when competing against fellow anglers in and outside the service, with whom I now share mutual respect and friendships with.



"The best way to describe what fishing does for me; It silences all the noise and refocuses my mindset during those invaluable hours away from the increased workplace stress from a highly successful and decorated 27 year RAF career, family life, personal battles and reliving past experiences with PTSD I face on a day-to-day basis."

The importance fishing has to my life overall cannot be understated, and that was best proved during 2012. During my second tour to Afghanistan with the RAF Regiment, we were assigned to Camp Bastion as a full Sqn deployment, on the evening of the 14 September the base encountered an insurgent attack by 15 Taliban highly trained soldiers. Following the aftermath of being under fire by Taliban Forces, that saw 10 of my fellow comrades from 51 Squadron RAF Regiment seriously injured and a number of coalition forces killed. The incidents during 2012 6mth deployment pushed my mental health to its most devastating which resulted in a complete breakdown and thoughts of suicide. Life in the armed forces has never been easy for those serving and their families especially, due to the constant changes of both living situation and mental state of the serving members.



Following the Sqn's return home two months later and only 2 days into annual block leave, I immediately began seeking medical support at RAF Lossiemouth, SAAFA and DCMH clinics. It was at this point I was diagnosed with PTSD and Tinnitus in my right ear. Following these diagnoses in early 2013, I began attending sessions of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) which is a talking therapy that helps manage your current problems by changing the way you think and behave (nhs.co.uk, 2019).

The entire time posted in Scotland both before and after my tour in Afghanistan held one constant...no fishing. Now picking up my rod wouldn't have stopped the events that unfolded on enemy territory, but doing so when returning would've potentially helped save what was an extremely difficult time personally, with family ties being cut and questions surrounding my marriage, later answered through special counselling with Relate.

My aims here: I'm just hopeful that someone who maybe is struggling themselves reads stories like this, and realises the significance of firstly, accepting your own issues that are affecting you mentally and dealing with them correctly, and secondly what introducing a new dynamic to your life can do for combatting such issues

I chose to speak up as a result of the worst time period I could ever imagine, and it was the best decision I ever made. If you're struggling with anything no matter how small or large, I encourage you now to do what I did a decade ago, seek professional mental health support and make that change.

What I've shared here today not only shows the issues those in the armed forces may face during their career but ways in which you can combat them. I cannot stress enough the importance of having a passion or outside work activity has done for my life, and I again would encourage anyone but especially those serving, to find one whether it be a sport, club or project with an existing community that makes you feel welcome. Maintaining that healthy work/life balance has for most always been difficult, but a good start would be understanding how crucial finding something, anything that perhaps down the line saves you, like fishing did for me.



If you are a current or ex serving member of the UK Armed Forces and are struggling with your mental health, the 24-hour helpline at combatstress.org.uk/helpline are there to assist you/your family. Just call: 0800 138 1619 and a member of the team will be there to help.

Your Network needs YOU!

Hands up if you can help the RAFMHN!



Regardless of how much time you are able to offer there is a role for you as part of the Network Committee. We are looking for Project leads to help deliver activities throughout the year. So whether you have an hour a week/month to spare, or know when you will have capacity, we would love to hear from you.

Click on the RAF Mental Health Network logo below to take you directly to our Teams site!

Signpost

Useful links

SAMARITANS

COMBATSTRESS
FOR VETERANS' MENTAL HEALTH

**CAMPAIGN
AGAINST
LIVING
MISERABLY**

**ROYAL
AIR FORCES
Association**
The charity that supports the RAF family

 **Royal Air Force
Benevolent Fund**

 **ROYAL
AIR FORCE
Families
Federation**


togetherall

HeadFIT
FOR LIFE

HEALTH & WELLBEING

 **Mind**

CivHR Civilian HR People Portal
Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)

 **ROYAL
AIR FORCE
Mental Health
Network**