



Journal of Veterans Studies

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Brave, Strong, True: The Modern Warrior's Battle for Balance

Kate Hendricks Thomas | Innovo Publishing, 2015. 170 pp. ISBN 978161314094

Current mental health treatment, both in practice and ethos, falls short in addressing the needs of veterans reentering civilian life. In *Brave, Strong, True: The Modern Warrior's Battle for Balance*, Dr. Kate Hendricks Thomas highlights the struggles of returning veterans, their disconnect with mental health clinicians, and how a paradigm shift in the way military personnel are trained and reintegrated into civilian life may build on the experiences of veterans as a tool for, rather than a detriment to, improved mental health. Throughout the book, Dr. Thomas seamlessly weaves personal accounts from veterans and herself with recent research supporting her view that cultivation of the psychological skill "resilience" may be the missing component necessary for successful reintegration.

Dr. Thomas grew up in a military household, her father a Marine, and entered the Marine Corps herself, reaching the rank of Captain in her six years primarily serving as a Military Police Officer. After returning stateside, she received her Ph.D. from the University of Alabama in Health Promotion. She is currently an assistant professor and director of the public health program at Charleston Southern University. Thomas' research focuses on the cultivation of resilience and mental fitness for active duty military and veterans. She also conducts resilient leadership training with various professional groups through Just Roll With It Wellness. Her culmination of personal experience, education, and research result in a raw, emotional, theory-driven, and evidence-based look at the mental health of veterans. Thomas provides important insight into how veterans view the mental health field, and how their traditional approach may alienate veterans by labeling significant events as the cause of their poor mental health when they see these events as sources of personal growth. Thomas' own research is referenced throughout the book, highlighting her desire and dedication to veteran mental health.

Brave, Strong, True consists of three distinct parts, each building on each other and providing the basis for the author's belief in resilience training as a solution to the existing mental health issues among military personnel. Part one lays the foundation for the book, highlighting the current mental health conditions found in active military and veterans. Here, Thomas introduces the reader to her own personal struggles with mental health during her time in the military and transitioning to civilian life. She also discusses military culture and what it means to be a warrior and to be self-reliant, even in the face of serious health issues. Thomas writes, "Warrior subculture tends to promote the belief that acknowledging emotional pain is synonymous with weakness and, specifically, that asking for help for emotional distress or problems is unacceptable" (p. 52). This warrior mentality, ultimately, contributes heavily to the mental distress many veterans face, with "silent suffering" seen as a virtue, not a flaw. Indeed, Thomas acknowledges that current mental health approaches are often in direct opposition to this culture, labeling veterans as "patients" who are ill or sick. In her view, civilians, regardless of their education, lack the perspective and therefore empathy to understand the experiences of veterans, often labeling the experiences of veterans as damaging to their mental health when veterans themselves view the same experiences as character growth and toughness.

Part two outlines the theoretical background, which suggests that resilience is both a solution to helping military veterans' transition back into civilian life and a skill that can be cultivated in

individuals. Dr. Thomas breaks down resiliency theory and discusses the three ways in which it can be developed: social support, self-care, and spirituality. The idea of social support is one that is already heavily developed through military training, with personal accounts throughout the book highlighting the level of trust and dependence soldiers have on each other. The key, according to Thomas, is to continue to develop this support network into civilian life and facilitate it through programs and events bringing veterans together for a common cause. Social support helps to develop resilience in individuals through having an outlet to express frustration and stress. As individuals continue to call upon their social support networks, they begin to develop a sense of resilience in the face of stressful situations.

The concept of self-care is not alien to military personnel, as physical health and fitness are crucial factors in military service. However, as the author describes, self-care is more than physical health. Self-care requires finding a balance between physical, and the chronically overlooked mental health. Extreme physical fitness often directly diminishes mental health through obsessive behaviors and a general lack of dedication to mental health. Yoga provides a particularly useful activity for striking balance between physical fitness and mental health. Thomas writes, "To build resilience, healthy practices that lower stress, regulate the nervous system, and bring attention to muscular imbalances are the building blocks of a self-care regimen" (p. 96). Yoga, along with other practices, seeks to turn the mind inward, helping one understand the described building blocks of self-care.

The final concept discussed in cultivating resilience, spirituality, seeks to connect the individual to the surrounding world through an attention towards serving others and social support found through organized religion. The author makes clear that spirituality practiced through organized religion is the most successful means for resilience cultivation. Thomas argues that organized religion places an individual in a pre-established social support network, fully developed to provide the subsequent benefits discussed earlier. In addition, organized religion has a strong "service to others" component, which shifts an individual's focus and reconnects them with society. This idea may be particularly important for military veterans, as the months following re-entrance into civilian life have been reported to be the most difficult, largely due to feelings of dissonance towards civilian culture.

The final section combines the previous two sections together and outlines how resiliency theory can be used both for current military veterans in their transition to civilian life, and also as a prevention strategy for future military personnel. Here, Thomas provides her framework for how this would be achieved. First, veterans must work alongside other veterans. Clinicians' lack of understanding regarding the unique experiences of service members is critical in the veterans' struggle to seek mental healthcare. Veterans understand the unique challenges faced in the military and the transition back to civilian life. Secondly, creating supportive communities through nonprofits give veterans immediate access to social support networks and a focus on service to others. Third, it is imperative that these programs are culturally sensitive, avoiding stereotypes and ensuring the programs will be salient to participants. However, with organized religion such an important concept in Dr. Thomas' use of resiliency theory, some individuals may not connect with this idea for cultivating resilience, even those who classify as spiritual. Finally, these programs need to be deeply rooted in theory and rigorously evaluated for effectiveness.

Dr. Kate Hendricks Thomas successfully attaches psychological theory and research to first-hand personal accounts, building credibility and trust in the book for readers of all types. Researchers will see the practical implications and potential future programming and research suggested, while the lay reader will be able to understand how military experience, mental health, and resilience are interrelated and contribute both to reintegration issues and a possible solution.

Throughout the book, Thomas attempts to restructure the narrative around mental health stigma among military veterans and its apparent opposition to the warrior mentality. Thomas, speaking of veterans, writes “Too many of us who are used to appearing strong would, indeed, rather consider suicide than admit to being human, fallible, or broken” (p. 22). This is the mentality that prevents veterans from seeking help: fear they will be labeled as sick or mentally ill. This fear extends to active duty personnel, who share the assumption that being given these labels will negatively impact their military standing. In this, Thomas challenges mental health clinicians to reevaluate their approach to veterans. She suggests practices that work to meet veterans halfway and acknowledge the unique experiences and skills they possess. Clinical interventions may be necessary for some individuals, and these individuals may even recognize this need, but the current diagnosis and evaluation of military service members by mental health clinicians misses its target, due to a lack of knowledge and understanding of military culture, often discouraging veterans from seeking help.

Brave, Strong, True: The Modern Warrior's Battle for Balance gives the reader an intimate, personal look into the struggles of military veterans returning from duty and how the current mental health field is missing the mark in attempting to help these individuals. Thomas references a recent paradigm shift within health promotion fields, one that focuses on identifying and strengthening skills critical to stress management, coping ability, and interpersonal relationships. She argues that to successfully treat military veterans, this same shift needs to occur in the field of mental health. By acknowledging the unique hardships present within military service as foundational to health promotion and resilience, mental health clinicians can begin to serve this population successfully instead of viewing these experiences as damaging to their psyche. Resilience training for both entering military personnel and veterans can begin to teach these individuals the importance of spirituality, self-care, and social supports as a way to promote their mental health. Through resilience training, individuals will be able to build upon the unique skills gained in the service, but also learn important new skills necessary for successful coping and reintegration into civilian life.

Dr. Kate Hendricks Thomas weaves popular opinion, personal accounts, theory, and empirical evidence together into an easily digestible, enjoyable, and thought-provoking narrative for readers of all backgrounds. *Brave, Strong, True* provides compelling theoretical and scientific evidence in support of resilience training for current and former military personnel as an innovative and effective intervention to combat the unique stressors and mental health struggles of active service. Further, the author challenges and refutes perceptions of military veterans, providing invaluable context and perspective into the warrior culture of the military and why the current clinical approach to their mental health alienates this group. Through Dr. Thomas' research and resilience training, military personnel will begin to acquire and cultivate skills essential to maintaining mental balance during their time in the service and reentering civilian life. Early indications from resilience programming for military personnel have demonstrated promising but inconclusive results. Therefore, additional research is needed to explore the effectiveness of these programs beyond what is included in this book. For readers interested in delving further into the empirical justification of this theory, Dr. Hendricks Thomas has written a new book with Dr. David Albright titled *Bulletproofing the Psyche: Preventing Mental Health Problems in Our Military Veterans*, published by Praeger in May of this year.

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