

A Fitness and Resilience Program for Incarcerated Veterans: Program Description and Feedback

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Background

- Approximately 8% (181,500) of the incarcerated population in the U.S. are veterans¹
- An estimated 48% of incarcerated veterans have been told by a professional that they have a mental disorder, compared to 36% of incarcerated *non*-veterans, and are 2x as likely to have PTSD¹
- Veterans with PTSD are more likely to receive Other Than Honorable Discharges (OTH) which limit their ability to receive VA-provided mental and physical health care²
- OTH and mental health struggles are associated with elevated risk for homelessness, suicide, and criminal justice system involvement²
- Exercise has been explored as an intervention to improve mental and physical well-being for incarcerated people^{3,4}

The Intervention: Resilient Warrior+Fitness

- **Home Base's Resilient Warrior (RW) program** uses stress awareness, adaptive strategies, mindfulness, mental focus, and imagery, with the goal of building stress management skills and learning the Relaxation Response for veterans
 - This is a non-VA program offering cost-free services to veterans, with goal to improve quality of life
- The RW program has been implemented within the **Housing Unit for Military Veterans (HUMV)**, the first correctional unit in Massachusetts designed for men who have served in the military
 - This has proven helpful for improving aspects of psychological health for incarcerated veterans⁵
 - Served over 130 incarcerated veterans since 2019
- The present program combines RW programming and elements of Home Base's Warrior Health and Fitness program (WHF) in HUMV
 - 6 weeks of resiliency training + 4 weeks of fitness and movement-based content

Methods

To assess program feasibility and acceptability:

- Participants ($N = 11$) were given self-report surveys
- Surveys were completed before the first (Week 1) and after the last (Week 10) group meeting

Participant Demographics

	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	11	100
Race		
Black or African American	1	9.1
White	10	90.9
Military Branch		
Air Force	1	9.1
Marines	2	18.2
Army	5	45.5
Navy	2	18.2
Coast Guard	1	9.1
Total Deployments		
0	2	20
1	1	30
2	2	20
3	1	10
5 or more	2	20

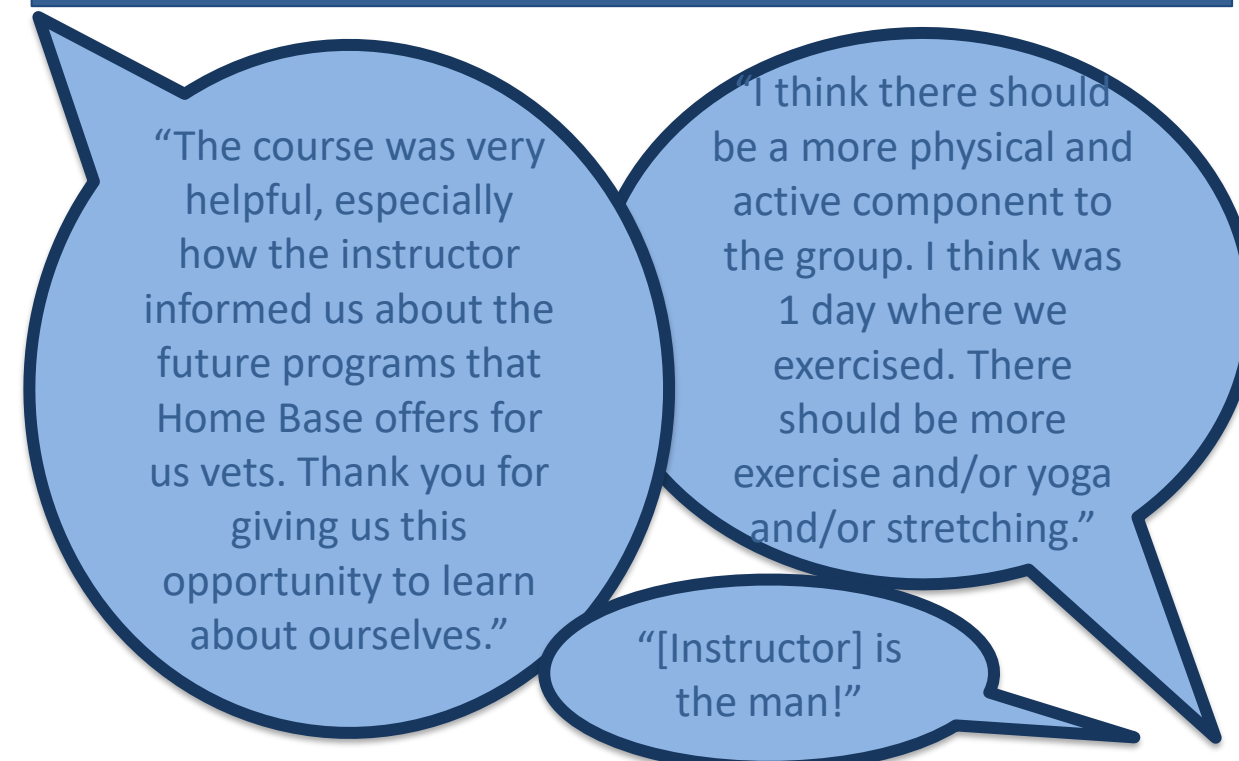
Note. $N = 11$. Participants were an average of 49.4 years old ($SD = 8.7$) and served an average of 6.4 years in the military ($SD = 3.3$).

Results

Survey Item	Full sample ($n=10$)	
	Range	Mean (SD)
Overall, how satisfied were you with the program?	0-100	67.44 (26.96)
How helpful was:		
"the topic of promoting physical activity?"	39-100	72.33 (25.13)
"the 'Cognitive Reappraisal' strategy?"	0-100	59.80 (28.42)
"practicing the relaxation response?"	2-97	58.33 (26.96)
"the Social Support Diagram?"	0-100	55.78 (26.54)
"the 'MINI's'?"	0-98	53.78 (29.32)
"the topic of empathy?"	1-100	52.70 (24.73)
"the problem solving and acceptance strategies?"	0-100	52.30 (33.64)
"the topic of healthy eating?"	0-100	52.10 (37.70)
"the energy battery?"	0-100	52.10 (30.55)
"the topic of improving sleep?"	0-97	41.44 (34.33)

Note. One participant did not complete the post-survey.

"Please use this space to give us any additional feedback about what you liked or did not like about the program."



Discussion

- Overall positive response to HUMV RW+fitness program
- Particular approval for topics of promoting physical activity, learning about the 'Relaxation Response', and the 'Cognitive Reappraisal' strategy
- Combined stress management and fitness programming may be effective for incarcerated veterans.

Limitations:

- Small sample size and engagement fluctuated over time
- Participants were required to be in the program as part of HUMV and thus may not have been independently motivated

COI/Funding Info

There is no COI and funding is internal to MGH's Home Base program.

References

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