TRANSITIONING VETERANS

HOW WE GET IN OUR OWN WAY... AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT!

INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP STUDY GUIDE

Spending too much time in your cave?
... Maybe it's time for a new plan.

DANNY FACTO
JOHN HENRY PARKER

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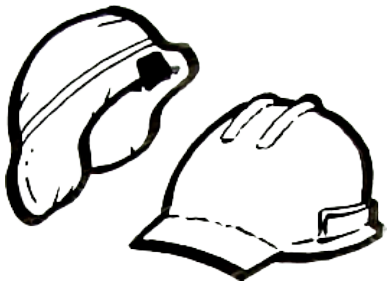
TRANSITIONING VETERANS

How We Get in Our Own Way...
and What to Do About It



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1979 – 2009

OEF Combat Veteran 2001 & 2003

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Subjects include: PTSD, PTSD Veterans, post traumatic stress disorder, Veteran suicide, self help books for men, Veteran reintegration, get out of your own way.

Harvesting Wisdom
PUBLISHING

TRIGGER CAUTION

This work is about healing and recovering from triggers and trauma.

Be mindful as you review and engage this material. Take breaks as needed and work at your own pace. This work is most effectively engaged in pairs or groups to help you bring out your best solutions to support your growth.

If you are a Veteran in crisis, call the Veteran Crisis Line at 800- 273-8255 press “1” for Veterans, or text 838255.

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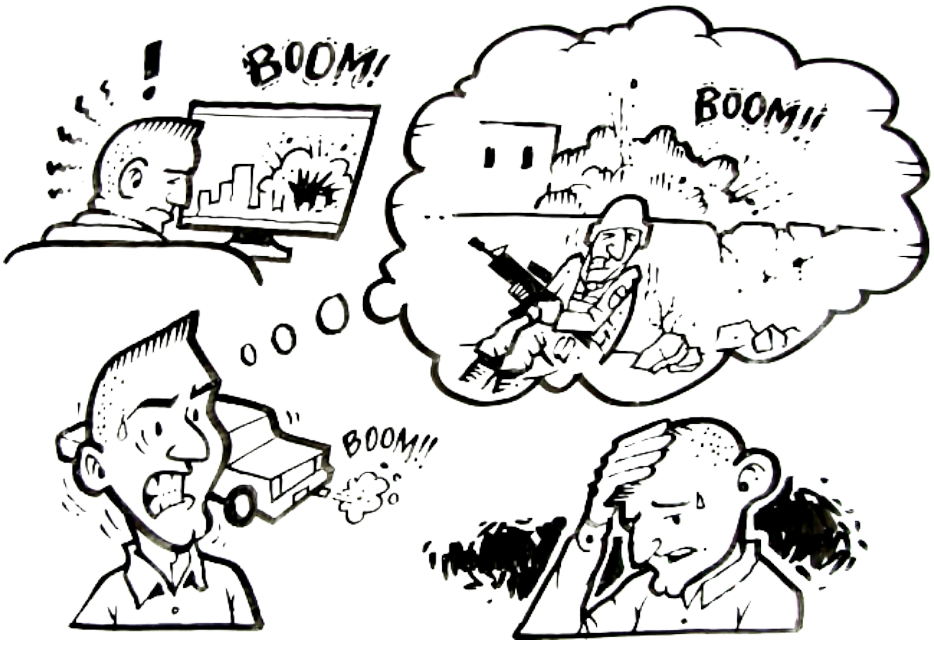
CHAPTER 1

Managing the Critical Mind



Consider what triggers your critical mind and begin to build a list of them.

Trigger: _____

From 1-10 (10 being most intense), rate the typical intensity of this trigger:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

How long does it typically take to recognize you've been triggered?

Instantly / 30 sec / 1 minute / 5 minutes / 15 minutes / 30 minutes / 1 hour / 3 hours / 5 hours / 10 hours

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Trigger: _____

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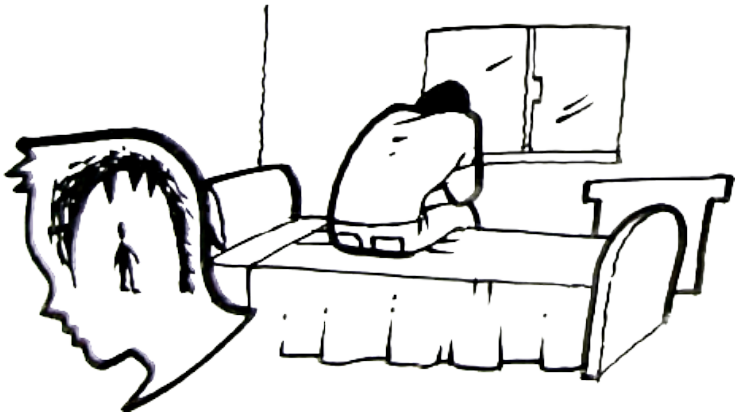
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

How long does it typically take to recognize you've been triggered?

Instantly / 30 sec / 1 minute / 5 minutes / 15 minutes / 30 minutes / 1 hour / 3 hours / 5 hours / 10 hours

How to wake up when you are self-absorbed, hyper-vigilant, and checked out.

Your critical mind has been issued orders by you, your rational mind, to take over and run the show... whether you remember issuing the order or not.



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The prime directive of your critical mind is to preserve your life and keep you safe. You're leaking energy when your critical mind keeps you constantly preoccupied.

How much time do you estimate you spend per day in hyper-vigilance assessing threats?

10 Min / 30 Min / 1 Hr / 2 Hrs / 3 Hrs / 5 Hrs / 7 Hrs / 9 Hrs / 12 Hrs / 14 Hrs / 16 Hrs

Begin to journal your thoughts about what is at stake in your life when your critical mind is keeping you self absorbed in a threat assessment mode:

Instead of being "in" the movie of your triggers and trauma, *watch* the movie.

Become the observer *of* your triggers and traumas, instead of being a participant *inside* of them.

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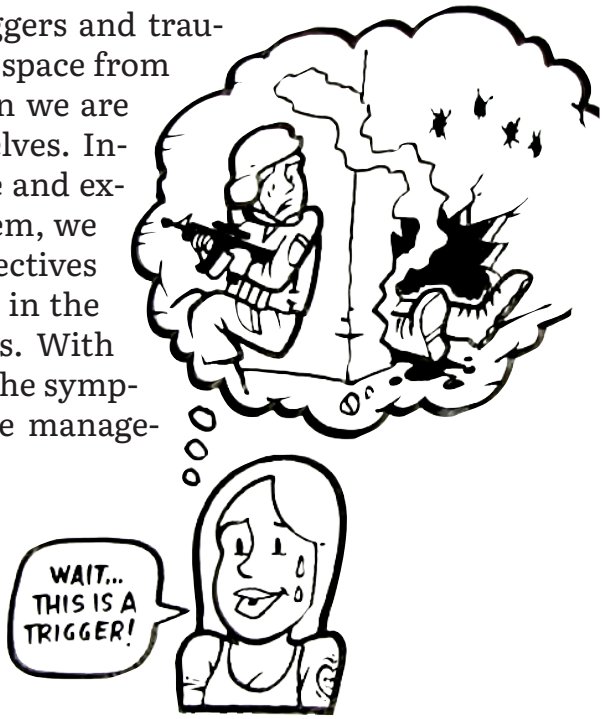
By learning how to pop out of being in our triggers and traumas, we begin to create a protective and healthy space from what we sense and experience in our body when we are triggered and what we observe outside of ourselves. Instead of holding our triggers and traumas inside and experiencing the body tensions that come with them, we can create an observation post to gain new perspectives and new resources. The net effect is a reduction in the intensity our triggers and traumas hold over us. With practice, our skills of observation intensify and the symptoms of our triggers and traumas become more manageable.



"When we learn to observe our triggers, we are no longer inside of them"

Skills Development Exercise:

From this moment forward, begin to make note of when you find yourself triggered. The instant you notice you are triggered, imagine you can pop outside of yourself to observe the situation instead of being caught up in it. Become the observer

Does this reduce the intensity of your experience?

Keep practicing and notice how the intensity of your responses continues to lessen over the weeks and months that follow.

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Perfectionism

Allowing yourself to suspend the need for perfectionism while you learn something new is important...and here's why...

Somewhere during this audio series, your critical mind is going to hear something it doesn't like and it's going to call bullshit! It's probably going to go ape shit and tell you to turn this off.

It's going to struggle to let your rational mind move back into command.

That's just the way it works.

So expect it, notice this struggle, and keep going anyway. One major nugget from learning something new can make a huge difference in your transition and in your life.

Begin to list examples of when your critical mind calls bullshit on anything it sees or hears from others and how this triggers you:

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Your critical mind works for you, not the other way around.

If your critical mind is stuck on being perfect and perfectionism, nothing will ever be good enough and it will delay or prevent significant personal growth.

In war fighting, if you're not perfect people get hurt or worse, but you're most likely not listening to this in the middle of a firefight.

For the time you're investing to learn something new, ask your critical mind to give you space and to stand down while you go through this. If necessary, use your rational mind to tell it to shut the hell up.

When you're not in actual danger, regardless of how much your critical mind has been running the show, up until now, it won't take orders from anyone else but you, and you know that.

Our rational mind and our critical mind are like two starving wolves that need to be fed...

But they can never be fully satisfied. As you transition back into the world, the question you have to ask yourself is...

Which one am I feeding?

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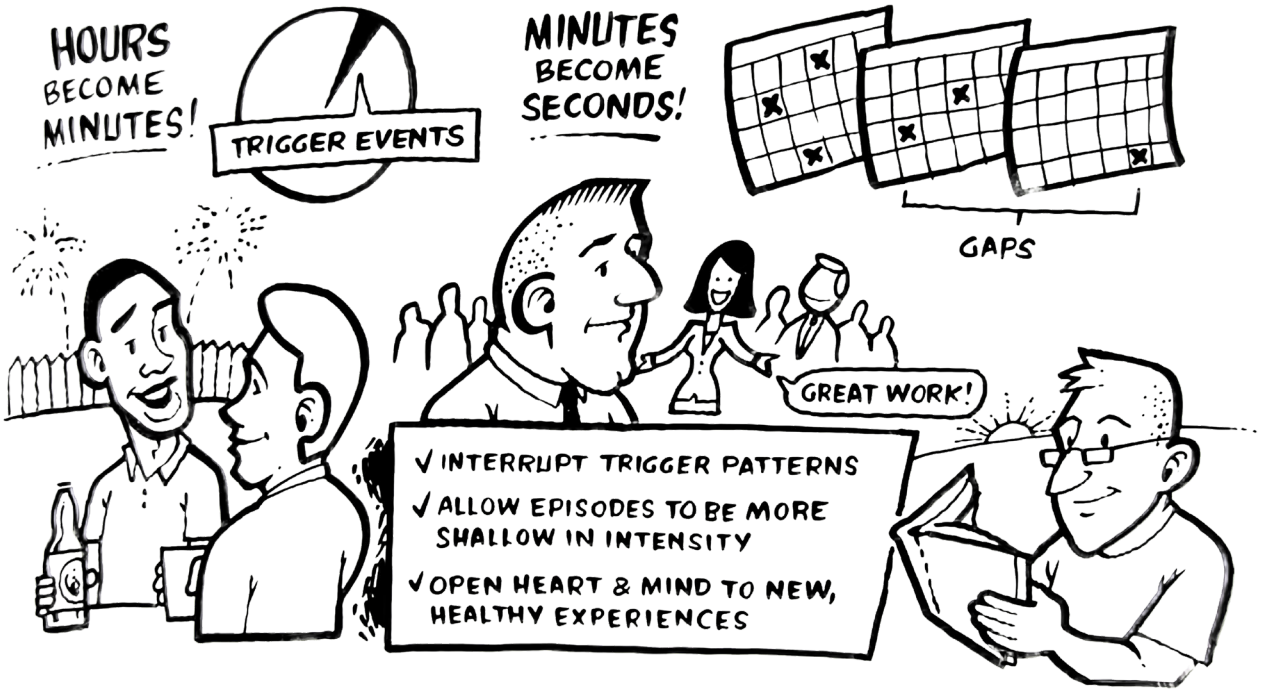
CHAPTER 2

Step 1: Interrupting Your Triggers



Would you like your life to get a little easier?

You now know the difference between your rational mind and your critical mind and you are beginning to build a list your triggers.

When we are triggered it can be like we have no choice but to ride out the episodes that follow but continuously assessing threats when they're not really present takes a huge toll over time.

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Begin to list examples of situations you avoid because it stresses you out. It is important to be specific, so think of specific times this has happened:

If your life got easier, what does this mean to to you? Begin to journal your thoughts:

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IT IS NOT OK TO NOT KNOW WHAT TO DO!!!!

When we are triggered, our critical mind is on overload and can't solve this problem on its own. No matter what we do, it still feels threatened and loops back, around and around and gets stuck in this threatened state.

It can't solve this on its own. It needs your help.

If you've done a lot of things to keep your critical mind from getting out of control and nothing's working, it's more likely your brain is doing the best it can but doesn't know what to do when it gets triggered and stuck.

In critical situations, when lives are depending on certainty, people were watching and relying on you to have the answers, it wasn't ok to look or act confused.

So what do we to? We master the art of looking, walking, talking and acting certain, even when Were not.

And because we've been trained to have the answers at all times, it's not ok to not know what to do.

A big part of solving this riddle is learning how your critical mind works and how to retrain it.

Your brain is very elastic and it instantly adjusts to any new experience, no matter how extreme.

When this happens, your brain and critical mind go into overdrive to keep you save and alive.

The problem is, it adjusts to such an extreme level of hyper-awareness, that it doesn't know how to reset itself, back to a normal state on its own.

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And this is why your critical mind keeps looping back, around and around. It can't stop.

This is where you come in.

You know when you're not actually in danger, but your critical mind is working overtime, as if you are. Part of you gets that your critical mind is stuck and can't stop while the other part understands, you're really not in danger.

Up until now, your critical mind has simply taken over when this conflict happens.

What's needed is a pause right at this moment to give you some space to process and react differently the instant you find yourself triggered.

And here's how to do it, to create the pause.

It starts by allowing yourself to stop and recognize when you're triggered or about to be.

The instant, the nanosecond you realize this is happening, the next step is to remember your brain and critical mind are stuck and will continue to loop, around and around unless you interrupt it.

So are you ok with your brain not knowing what to do when it gets triggered and stuck?

By being ok with not knowing what to do, YOU can create the possibility of something new, like a radically new response when you're triggered, instead of looping back around and around.

Are you ok with not knowing what to do when your critical mind gets stuck?

When you think about not knowing what to do, what comes up for you? Take some time to journal your thoughts:

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The quality of your life resides between your triggers.

With practice, learning how to recognize when you're triggered begins to shorten the duration of the episode and it shallows the depth of our reactions.

By recognizing sooner, our triggers begin to become more contained and we start noticing they are shorter and shallower with each passing week.

By recognizing sooner, our triggers become more contained and we start noticing they become shorter and shallower with each passing week. This just takes practice.

Shorter and shallower reactions allow us to rebound very quickly to shift the focus of our attention. As a result, we get triggered less and less. Our trigger events become fewer and farther in between, like little bleeps instead of full blown episodes.

And it's the gap between our triggers, where the quality of our life resides.

The goal of this work: Instantaneous awareness when we are about to be, or when we have been triggered, to minimize the length and depth of the episode.

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CHAPTER 3

Step 2: Tactical Breathing

Oxygen is the antidote for stress and anxiety

The quality of my life resides between my triggers

Being triggered wears us out and the people around us. Tactical breathing helps to bring us back to the present moment and allows us to self-regulate.

Chances are, when you're triggered, your brain is cycling up and overthinking every possible catastrophic outcome.

Another part of tactical breathing that instantly brings you to the present moment is noticing what's happening in your body as you are breathing.

Noticing body sensations is one of the fastest ways to help you snap out of being triggered.

We're going to practice some more tactical breathing but this time, as you breathe in, notice the sensations of air filling your lungs, and as you continue breathing, notice the sensations of your feet on the floor, your back against the chair, your muscles starting to become more relaxed. Noticing body sensations helps you become instantly present in the here and now.

Take a deep breath in through you nose for five as you notice your lungs filling with air.

Hold for five as you notice your feet on the floor.

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Out for five through your nose as you notice your body relaxing.

And hold for five.

And relax.

One more time.

In for five.

Hold for five.

Out for five.

Hold for five.

And relax.

Noticing your body sensation puts you into your body instead of just being in your head.

Being fully present and aware of your breating helps us learn to self-regulate.

This is tactical breathing.

Practice this anytime you have tension and anxiety; it will begin to help you relax when you need it.

Ok, so now that you've learned Step 1, to interrupt your triggers by recognizing your critical mind doesn't know what to do. And Step 2, that oxygen is the antidote for stress and to practice your tactical breathing. Let's move on to learn the third step in this simple process, shifting the focus of your attention.

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CHAPTER 4

Step 3: Shifting the Focus of Your Attention

If you find yourself in a hole, what's the first thing you should do?

Stop digging.

It is much the same when interrupting our triggers, we need to stop digging. We need to shift away from the negative thoughts that follow.

This third step to retraining your brain is about preparing in advance for what you want to focus on when you interrupt your triggers.

Wherever you focus your attention in the seconds and minutes following your triggering moments, whether your thoughts are positive or negative, healthy or unhealthy, your thoughts create a chemical reaction in your brain.

It's pretty simple; negative thoughts create toxic and harmful chemicals. Neutral to positive or resourceful thoughts create healthy chemicals.

The miracle of the brain we share as humans; We can imagine an experience we've had, positive or negative, and our brain creates the same chemical reaction as if we were there.

Shifting the focus of your attention to powerful and meaningful moments you've experienced in your life, creates a chemical reaction in your brain that mirrors the actual experience.

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Discovering your first resource state

Exercise: It is important to take your time and think about a specific moment in your life when you felt a sense of happiness, gratitude or even joy? Begin to take some notes about this experience; be specific.

As you step back into this experiencing, imagine you can step back into the exact moment when the experience was most intense. Imagine you can see what you were seeing, hear what you were hearing, and notice what was happening in your body.

Where was this experience showing up in your body?

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As you experience where this was showing up in your body in that moment, what is the temperature of the experience? is it hot? Is it warm? Or is it cold?

What words or phrases would you use to describe how this experience caused you to feel

What single word would you use to describe this powerful experience?

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This is your first resource state. Whenever you find yourself interrupting your triggers, or anytime you need to be fully present, immediately say to yourself the key word you have created to describe your resource state.

Practicing Tactical Breathing with your resource state

To fully anchor your resource state, from this moment, practice focusing on your resource state. Find pictures, music, videos, audio clips that represents your resource state. Keep this present and easily accessible.

Exercise

If you are right handed, use your left hand. If you are left handed, use your right.

Put your thumb, index finger and middle finger together and begin your tactical breathing with a slow inhale through your nose for a count of five.

As you hold your breath in for a slow count of five, bring up in your mind the resource state you just created. Imagine the word you create to describe it.

As you exhale through your mouth for a slow count of five, allow your resource state to deepen and become fully present.

As you hold your breath in for a slow count of five, notice where your resource state is showing up in your body.

As you breathe in again for a slow count of five, notice the sensations of air expanding and filling your lungs.

As you breathe out for a slow count of five, notice your fingers together and how easily and comfortably they are anchoring your resource state and your breathing together.

As you hold for a slow count of five, notice your jaw and neck beginning to relax.

And as you breathe out for a slow count of five, notice the air leaving your lungs.

And relax.

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Describe what you are experiencing:

The future as a powerful resource for the present

After you've had some time to really master tactical breathing and accessing your resource states, imagine it's three to five years from now and think about how you have grown.

Can you imagine this?

Let this sink in. You are older, a little wiser, with lots of memories of how you grew through these difficult times.

Just let that sink in for a moment.

Imagine how you are choosing to live your life.

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As you imagine this future version of yourself, begin to imagine how you want your life to be. Where do you to live, what do you want to have, think about your family and friends.

Take some time to describe what you want:

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Bringing the power of your future back to now

Step into this future identity and what you have created as if it is right now, as if it has already happened.

From this place, imagine you could turn around and actually look back toward now.

And as you do, begin to think of the good and healthy choices you made right now to take better care of yourself... to take charge of your life and imagine the conviction you have gained from learning how to manage your triggers and emotional responses. Imagine how this has allowed you to create what you really want in your life.

Imagine all the good choices you had to have made to create this incredible moment in the future.

This is another way to deepen the resource states you have created, by focusing on the future realizations you will surely have in the years to come. They are going to happen.

By focusing on the future you want to create, it helps you make better choices now. And, it will help you be more fully present now.

Describe your experience of creating a compelling future, turning back to look back to now and the choices you have made to improve your life:

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CHAPTER 5

Provisioning Your Mind for the Journey Ahead

Identity - Mission - Meaning – Purpose

Who am I? & Who am I becoming?

Directions:

Who you are becoming is an ever-evolving process, it takes time to consider how to repurpose your life after military service. Your first draft of this document will likely be both interesting and challenging. Be sure to date your first draft and save it in a special place. As you return to it in the coming months and years, notice how you have expanded your thinking and possibilities and create a new draft that builds upon your last. Over time, you will be able to compare your first draft with your future drafts to provide evidence of your expanding awareness. Consider this document a declaration of what you intend to do with your life, how you want to live it, and why. Share it often with people close to you so that you can fully internalize what you are declaring.

Definitions:

Identity: How you view yourself and how others view you

Mission: An assignment or charge determined by one's self or assigned by others

Meaning: A sense of significance in the world that your life matters

Purpose: A sense of determination and resolve that is congruent with one's identity, meaning and mission

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Identity: What is your new identity?

Mission: What is your new mission?

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Purpose: What gives you purpose?

Discovering your second resource state

Exercise:

It is important to take your time and think about a specific moment in your life when you were 100% clear about something you really wanted to do, have or accomplish in your life, where you did absolutely anything it took to get it. You just had to have it.

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As you step back into this experiencing, imagine you can step back into the exact moment when this experience was most intense. Imagine you can see what you were seeing, hear what you were hearing, and notice what was happening in your body.

Where was this experience showing up in your body?

As you experience where this was showing up in your body in that moment, what is the temperature of the experience? is it hot? Is it warm? Or is it cold?

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_____

_____

_____

What words or phrases would you use to describe how this experience caused you to feel?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

What single word would you use to describe this powerful experience?

_____

This is your second resource state. Whenever you find yourself interrupting your triggers, or anytime you need to be fully present, immediately say to yourself the key word you have created to describe your resource state.

Practicing Tactical Breathing with your resource state

To fully anchor your resource state, from this moment, practice focusing on your resource state. Find pictures, music, videos, audio clips that represents your resource state. Keep this present and easily accessible.

Exercise

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If you are right handed, use your left hand. If you are left handed, use your right.

Put your thumb, index finger and middle finger together and begin your tactical breathing with a slow inhale through your nose for a count of five.

As you hold your breath in for a slow count of five, bring up in your mind the resource state you just created. Imagine the word you create to describe it.

As you exhale through your mouth for a slow count of five, allow your resource state to deepen and become fully present.

As you hold your breath in for a slow count of five, notice where your resource state is showing up in your body.

As you breathe in again for a slow count of five, notice the sensations of air expanding and filling your lungs.

As you breathe out for a slow count of five, notice your fingers together and how easily and comfortably they are anchoring your resource state and your breathing together.

As you hold for a slow count of five, notice your jaw and neck beginning to relax.

And as you breathe out for a slow count of five, notice the air leaving your lungs.

And relax.

Describe what you are experiencing:

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CHAPTER 6

Who Are You Becoming?

Let's create some resources to help you stay grounded as you move forward.

There are other resource states residing inside of you already but you haven't discovered them yet, so let's do this now.

Think about a few people you admire most. They can be anyone you choose, living or not, or anyone from history.

Take your time, let this settle in...who are they?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

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Think about each person, what do you admire most about them? Think of four or five words for each person that capture your admiration.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Look back over these meaningful words you have chosen and think of these important people and how you admire them, and how they have influenced your life.

Choose five of these words that resonate most deeply with you.

_____

As you consider this smaller list of words, what are you experiencing right now?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

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As you reflect on these meaningful words and what you are experiencing, also reflect on why these words resonate with you so deeply. They resonate deeply because you see them in yourself.

As you reflect on this experience, take a few moments to take each of these five words and further describe them in your own terms, what do they mean to you?

1. _____

_____

_____

_____

5. _____

_____

_____

_____

4. _____

_____

_____

_____

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4. _____

_____

_____

_____

Put these five words in your smartphone to access them easily, put them on your screen saver, write them on sticky notes and put them on your bathroom mirror, on the visor of your car, put them anywhere you can see them regularly. You will create a constant reminder and resource state to help you stay grounded.

If you don't have a goal, make your first goal finding a goal.

If you were completely surrounded, with no food and low on ammo, you have the advantage of attacking in any direction. There's plenty of everything you need in every direction.

This exercise is about choosing your new objective and moving toward it with certainty.

Remember, you can get everything you need in any direction you choose.

MISSION

Finding a new Mission:

A mission is defined as "an assignment or charge, determined by one's self or assigned by others."

Your daily life is no longer determined by the military assigning you missions. You must learn to do this yourself.

What are your mission choices? To go to school, to get a better job? To start a business?

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Describe some choices and objectives you have for a new mission:

Of the choices you are considering, which one comes up for you first when you think about it? Instantly, no hesitation?

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Look off into the future. What do you visualize accomplishing with your new mission?

IDENTITY

Look off into the future and describe the identity you have created:

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Once you have your Identity and Mission clear, what begins to take hold is something that throws you out of bed every day.

When you think of how your new mission and identity will drive you toward your future, what comes up for you?

PURPOSE

Now that you have started to define your mission and identity, can you feel this sense of purpose is already taking hold, right now?

This is how you create a deep sense of meaning and purpose that throws you out of bed everyday.

You have created an identity that gives you meaning and purpose. So what is your immediate mission to take your first steps toward who you are becoming?

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Let's review what you've created so far:

Identity: How you view yourself and how others view you

Mission: An assignment or charge determined by one's self or assigned by others

Meaning: A sense of significance in the world that your life matters

Purpose: A sense of determination and resolve that is congruent with one's Identity, Mission and Meaning.

What does this mean to you?

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Make one of your very first action steps to share the work you have done with someone you trust and respect.

Be advised: “Never take advice from someone who is more messed up than you are”

The best way to master all the transition strategies you’re learning is to share them with other veterans and their family members.

Wherever you go in life, revisit the lessons learned here. Get a journal to chart your progress, and to help you organize your go forward strategy from here, download The Veteran Transition Map and Action Plan at harvestingwisdom.com.

Always be a student. Never stop learning.

Continuously read books or listen to audio books that inspire you, and look for teachers and mentors who will help you get where you want to go and become who you want to be.

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ACTION STEP/Exercise

The world is exactly the same since you went into the military or became a veteran, but you have changed.

Go the to the closest bookstore or better yet, go online.

Find the self-help section.

Look for audiobooks or books that capture your attention.

Invest in them.

Focus on who you are becoming.

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And lastly, whenever you get stuck or fall back on your action plan, here is the mantra to snap you out of your critical thinking…

“Progress… Not Perfection”

You will certainly have moments where you forget to stop and recognize your critical mind has jumped in and taken over.

When this happens… Simply stop and recognize what’s happening… Give yourself a little grace to keep learning and growing and simply repeat the mantra “Progress, not perfection” and move on. It will pass.

And remember…

The past is done… the future hasn’t happened yet… all you really have is right here and right now. Make it count.

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