

EN 106

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Silence is the real enemy: A Post-Service Battle

Most Marines share a certain characteristic trait associated with type A personalities. I think it's fair to assume every Marine has an above average level of strength, regardless if it's physical or mental strength. Marine's are very proud of this and will go to great lengths to protect this quality as a norm amongst their ranks. The problem is when this pride turns into a degenerative way of thinking that infests the majority of Active Duty Marine units and jeopardizes Marine's individual mission readiness, mission capabilities, current health, future health, and their overall well-being. The issue I am addressing is nothing unheard of by most Marines, past or present. The notion that strength, notoriety, and heart is earned through mentally toughing out physical and/or mental injuries. Where verbally requesting to visit medical staff, for what may seem like a minor injury, can warrant a negative reaction from your supervisor. A social phenomenon that has existed for years, which exposes our military members to an environment where injuries, or the mention of an injury, can equate failure, weakness, disappointment, and accusations of deceit.

Naturally, this negative attention toward a young Marine from his Sergeant is going to teach a behavior. It's going to teach that individual Marine what he should expect anytime he has

an injury complaint or medical issue. It's also going to teach everyone who witnesses any sort of negative interaction over an injury that injuries mean trouble. In this military world where democracy is not spirit of the law and a traditional hierarchy exists, it's best not to be a thorn in the side of the ones who decide your fate. The issue is not that medical care is not readily available to any and all Armed Service members. The issue is not that small unit leaders are telling their Marine's that they can't go to see the Doc. The issue is that the mindset of utilizing these medical services is frowned upon unless absolutely necessary. It only requires the notion that a Marine is letting his unit down by not being available for training, the daily routine, or a significant event. Even implications that their injury was because their body could not handle what others could. All of these factors lead to a common mindset amongst all ranks- *you do not go to medical unless you absolutely have to.*

This bizarre, self-inflicted, social norm leads to Marine's self-diagnosing, self-treating, and self-medicating. This essentially leaves themselves prone to other injuries or worsening their current injury. It can also lead to injuries that fester over a long period of time, leaving Marine's to deal with these problems when the onset begins well after they have completed their service. After the military to civilian transition happens and the symptoms become too harsh to ignore, a veteran will seek help at his local VA (Veterans Affairs) hospital. Unfortunately, for this veteran who had nothing but good intentions to serve his country honorably; he will only receive limited benefits from the VA. Since he decided his pride and reputation was more important than his own physical and mental health, he never saw a Doc during active duty. This means no medical documentation was entered into his medical record. Now, the VA has no way of proving he sustained any injuries during his service. This makes his current condition non-service connected, because your word is just not good enough. Rightfully so, many people have

attempted to abuse VA services for disability compensation that they were not actually entitled to. It just so happens that a completely unrelated mindset while on active duty conflicts with the VA's post-service filtering process for validating service-connected disabilities. While the previously mentioned Veteran may still receive free medical treatment at the VA for his long overdue injury, he will not receive disability compensation benefits he is entitled to due to the technicality.

As I reminisce on my own upbringing in the Marine Corps ranks, I remember several occasions that took place which shaped my own outlook on sickbay. One of my first injuries was cellulitis in my knee, three weeks prior to graduating boot camp. In my mind and what was already ingrained my head, this was detrimental to my platoon and threatened my graduation date. The infection spread so bad over the next few days and it started to impair my ability to march and walk normally; a limp became noticeable to others in my platoon. Limpers were common in boot camp, as most were dealing with blisters, stress fractures, rolled ankle pains, and other common injuries associated with intense running, hiking, and marching. I was determined to fake it as long as I could and reassure that everything was fine because I didn't want to be placed on bed rest. If that happened I would miss out on participating in the Final Drill competition against the other platoons. This is something I practiced hard every day for the past 2 months with my platoon. It was a team effort and a team is only as strong as its weakest link. I'd be damned if I was going to be that weak link. However, the infection got so bad that I eventually had to say something. Simply supporting myself on that leg was rapidly becoming impossible. Of course, my initial approach was met with a scorn and skepticism from my Drill Instructor. He had some choice names for me and they indicated I was softer, more feminine than most; or a female dog whichever description you prefer. I didn't exactly know what the correct

course of action I was supposed to take. My Drill Instructor was upset because one of his best drillers couldn't be in the back of the formation, where the Drill Masters grade the platoon on competition day. At the same time, I knew I wasn't able to perform to standard, let alone above average. I wasn't sure if a real Marine would've just sucked it up and bit down the pain to satisfy the unit's needs to achieve victory. Was I wrong for taking care of myself first?

Another instance, when I was a young Lance Corporal (E-3) and I was stationed in Okinawa, Japan. I had participated in some water activities at the beach one Sunday. Mostly swimming and snorkeling, but there was a lot of exertion. I ended up making a rookie mistake and not replenishing my body with water and electrolytes that night. The next morning, I woke up with cramps and a severe headache because of the dehydration. When I showed up to unit P.T. (physical training) that morning, I informed my Sgt. of my status. I wasn't looking forward to this. I even debated creating a bigger problem to make it sound more dramatic, in turn making it more accepting. My complaint of a headache and muscle cramps was met with, "Get the sand out of your v*gina, Eidson." As harsh and ignorant as this may sound, this is common and almost expected. This kind of communication was seemingly light-hearted but it definitely wasn't meant to be taken lightly. I was allowed to go to medical that morning and miss unit P.T. I was severely dehydrated and needed two I.V. bags to feel normal again. Upon returning to my unit from medical, I was welcomed with jeers and insults insinuating that I had the Navy boys flush the sand out for me. These are the type of things Marine's laugh off and joke with one another about, but it somehow affects our behavior when the next injury or unfortunate circumstance happens. No one wants to be on the receiving end of this type of roast parade. Remember, pride and strength are what Marine's live for. Weakness and failure is not something Marine's want to be associated with, especially in the eyes of their brother's.

As many times as I encountered this nonsense, it began to grow on me as normal. When I matured into a young NCO (Non-Commissioned Officer), my first reaction when unit P.T. commenced was to go down the line of the Marines who had medical chits or weren't standing in formation because they had a reason to miss training. Looking at this from a leader's perspective, it is important you don't be too easy on the Marine's you are in charge of. They can act like children sometimes and find petty excuses to abuse the system and take the easy way out. Medical was a great excuse for lazier, less ambitious members to skip P.T. This also contributes to the culture of being skeptical toward Marine's who are requesting medical. Therefore, I too became guilty of trying to influence my Marine's to prioritize training over "minor injuries". I did it, why shouldn't they? That's what us Marines do, right?

In search of validation of my perspective and experience, I took to an online survey via my personal Facebook. Encouraging all servicemembers, past or present, to offer any input regarding this issue. As expected, I didn't get many like or even many public comments attached to the thread. However, I was flooded with personal accounts of Marine's I knew on a personal level who have been to many units and served in many locations. Officer ranks to Staff NCO ranks all the way down to junior level troops messaged me offering their experience with the subject. The unanimous consensus was an agreeance with my position and perspective on this issue. Every single Marine and naval doc that responded to me concurred that this problem exists. I received a response from a good friend and mentor of mine, Master Sergeant (E-8) Marco Lozano, "Does a bear sh*t in the woods?", when I asked him if he had any experiences like this during his 24 years of active service in the Marine Corps.

A former junior Marine that was once under my care, LCpl. Chris Gordon, gave a public comment on the Facebook survey thread stating, "...I'll admit I didn't like going to BAS/Sick bay

for something like my knees, but I did, then when I'd return to my Company, I felt ridiculed and looked down on whenever I'd return with a chit...” Not all Marines are like LCpl. Gordon though; they might be more intimidated by the judgment. So, they choose to ignore the knee pain and keep training. As one might guess that will lead to bigger problems down the road.

Corporal Steven Howell Jr., stated, *“Yeah, maybe once or twice when I was a boot I was intimidated about participating in sick call.”* Corporal Howell, a former Battalion member of mine, specifically states that when he was a young troop he was intimidated to use a free medical service that is provided to him to keep him healthy. Why on earth is this happening?

Master Sergeant Marco Lozano provided a way of clarifying the state of mind that manifested itself into this epidemic. *“Short answer, we learn in Boot Camp that the mind is stronger than the body. What we fail to address is that while the body can make up for that gap for a short period of time, it takes on excessive cost which we normally look away from by using such punchlines as, Pain is weakness leaving the body and If being a Marine was easy, it wouldn't be the Marine Corps. We try to maintain high standards for good reasons but fail to acknowledge that there is turning point in which those standards start to pull in negative losses.”* MSgt. Lozano also shared a personal account where he became ill during a formal military school. He was class commander at the time and absolutely could not afford to look weak amongst his peers and instructors. His status as Class Commander depended on him being present and able to perform his demanding duties. He opted to forgo the medical visit and soon came down with pneumonia because of his willingness to neglect himself for the success of the unit and his status as Class Commander.

A major, very common injury that Marine's deal with and several of my brothers shared with me, is PTSD. PTSD is not something anyone discussed while I was active duty. That was

the quickest ticket to receive a lot of negative attention for being weak minded or full of it. Claiming PTSD is probably the biggest violation of active duty members when it comes to medical issues. It's attributed amongst the weakest forms of injuries. *A Marine, being defeated mentally? Yeah right! He must've never been worthy of the title in the first place, reality weeded him out.* Even if a Marine is known to have combat experience and have legitimate encounters with the enemy. He will still have skepticism in the form of, "Oh it wasn't that bad", or "He didn't even fire back!" There is always a downplay of every injury and a reason to continue to push forward. It's all about mission accomplishment.

When you employ the concept "train like you fight" and let warfighters interpret that however they want. Implementation can get dangerous for the participant's health. The Marine Corps is known for making training very realistic, pushing boundaries to the extreme. Yet, it's not necessary to cultivate an environment where you push your Marine's through real injuries during a training session. Marines are expected to train like athletes, or combat athletes. So why shouldn't there be an expectation to heal and take care of our bodies like combat athletes? Why is everyone allowing an environment where medical issues can't be dealt with expeditiously, without fear or shame?

It's extremely important for us to address this issue before the culture becomes worse. Before small unit leaders continue to believe they have the power and authority to regulate when their troops can and can't or shouldn't go to medical. Let's end this before another veteran who was just trying to sacrifice for his unit's success and serve honorably gets denied disability compensation. We owe it to all our brave servicemembers to be taken care of.

I believe the first step to solving this problem is educating everyone, from the top down. Naval personnel in the base hospitals as well as Naval docs who are embedded in Marine units.

Everyone needs to be aware that their expertise and leadership is needed to identify their Marine's medical issues. Marine's aren't coming out and being vocal about their problems because of this manufactured stigma. If medical staff on all levels are aware of this issue, they will surely be compelled to keep a closer eye on their Marines and convince them to get treatment if any injuries are obvious. Marine leaders to be aware of the fact that they aren't medical professionals. Their opinion of their troops' injuries matter to their troops. If you, as a leader, project displeasure and disappointment every time a Marine reports a medical issue, your troops will start to negotiate what a good enough cause is to come forward with. It's important to let go of this responsibility to weed out the malingerers and less than honest Marines. It's more important to get everyone the medical attention they require rather than jeopardize a Marine's health to deter malingering. Let the Naval docs, Naval Officers, and Naval staff do their job and place the responsibility on them to decide what is a legitimate medical claim. If enough sufficient medical evidence is discovered that a military member is being deceitful about an injury or the extent of an injury; a letter of discovery should be sent to his or her parent command detailing the infraction. It will then be up to the command to decide if disciplinary action should be taken. This makes it fair for the Marine's to get the help they need and deters the rest from abusing the system.

Marines can be trained through safety stand-downs and Battalion training days on this issue, as well. Marines are required to receive quarterly, bi-annual, and annual training regarding sexual harassment, operational security, safety awareness, DUI awareness training, and other forms of educational prevention training. Periods of instruction should be given regarding implementing the importance of reporting injuries as soon as they are discovered, having them treated, and creating a positive environment where Marines feel like they can be treated without

consequence. Stressing the importance of maintaining a sound mind and body will encourage marines to take better care of themselves so they are more prepared when it is time to confront a real enemy. It's also imperative that the classes contain information regarding the VA system and how they determine service-connection. If a Marine understands that his doctor visits during active duty service directly correlate to his ability to prove what physical and mental illnesses he/she acquired during service; that Marine will be more susceptible to revealing what's bothering him. I think stressing the importance to not stay silent and outlining the negative consequences (i.e. not being able to claim injuries post service) of doing so will deter this behavior from continuing.

A subtle indication of the severity of this silence and shame can be found within this very paper. I have compiled a few personal accounts of my own experiences and experiences of some very close friends I have served with. You'll notice I was not able to provide any other examples for you. Of the million+ veterans and active duty members who have served or are serving, I was not able to easily locate another example of the issue discussed. This does not indicate that this is not a problem or that the problem is small scale. The absent findings completely solidify the issue, Marine's aren't talking about their problems because of this learned behavior. They aren't comfortable with their injuries being discussed openly in online articles, social media, or any place where there is an audience. I was only able to extract personal accounts from a select few because of the relationship and trust I have built with these men over the years. They feel comfortable enough to talk to me and tell me about this because there is no judgment or harsh treatment in return. Only one Marine was comfortable with responding to my Facebook post and talking about his negative experience with this in a "public" fashion. The rest were more discreet and chose to communicate with me one on one on Facebook messenger. This

should indicate how deeply Marine's carry this mindset, even after they aren't actively involved in that world anymore. This dangerous culture of masking injuries in order to appear fit for duty is slowly decreasing mission readiness and detrimental to the VA's efforts to treat prior servicemembers. Choosing to ignore this issue and continuing down the same path will only delay the inevitable of a handicapped combat force. Pushing through a common cold to receive top notch training is one thing; ignoring structural damage, tissue damage or even head injuries can change a person's life forever. It's time we progress from a barbaric mindset to a smarter, healthier way of taking care our nation's heroes.

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