

Buddy Checks for Mental Health

'There's no judgment here, just a battle buddy looking to get you through the rest of your journey'

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Heather McPaul is **#StillServing**.

Her journey to becoming a Licensed Professional Counselor began with nearly five years of service in the U.S. Navy. After completing tours of duty in law enforcement and anti-terrorism force protection in the Middle East and Japan, she found it tougher than anticipated to return to civilian life.

"I started a blog called 'Life After Service' that chronicled my challenges in transitioning out of the military," said McPaul.

"If I was having a hard time, certainly other veterans were too. I got through my difficulties with the help of therapy and decided that I needed to help give my brother and sisters-in-arms that experience too, but from someone who actually understands and has been in the military."

McPaul is a VFW member at large in New Jersey and has been practicing counseling for the last six years. In January 2020, she opened Symmetry of Self Counseling Center to focus on serving veterans and first responders in southern New Jersey and eastern Pennsylvania.

"My passion is to reach local veterans to try to destigmatize therapy and provide more comfortable and familiar resources," McPaul said.

"I want to help people recover and heal from their professional experiences, decrease the build-up of stress in their lives and learn to handle and better understand their impulses and mechanisms so they can live a happier and healthier life. I specialize in working with sexual assault, post-traumatic stress and grief, all themes that often arise in military service."

The pandemic shifted McPaul's practice to telehealth video services, but that's allowed her to work with more people from different places. She also uses social media to share

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information she feels will be beneficial and speaks to schools and counseling programs to help the community understand the unique needs of veterans.

In everything she does, McPaul hopes to dispel the misconception that therapy is taboo or only for certain kinds of people. She tries to build camaraderie and trust and let veterans know they can use therapy however it's needed. For some, that's working through serious issues. Others benefit from just gaining perspective or learning tools that make life easier.

"It's not always about sharing uncomfortable feelings and getting tearful about it. In fact, I utilize a variety of therapy techniques to help veterans find a way to process things without feeling like they have to share every detail, especially when those details bring up anxiety, shame or sadness," said McPaul.

"I've seen the relief from people, knowing that they don't have to share it all if they don't want to and that they are in control of this process. I'm just the guide. There's no judgment here, just a battle buddy looking to get you through the rest of your journey."

Ultimately, McPaul wants to make a difference for fellow veterans by providing a path to positive mental health and wellness and suicide prevention.

"I want to change the perception of mental health for military veterans. It does not make you weak to reach out to a therapist, especially if they happen to be a veteran too," McPaul said.

"We need to encourage our friends to do this and make it more of an acceptable thing so that our military family members stop trying to take their lives. Reach out, buddy check and let's make this a more commonplace conversation."

To find out more about the VFW's #StillServing campaign or to share your story, visit vfw.org/StillServing.