



CHANGE YOUR MIND

**Director David Lynch urges veterans
to practice transcendental meditation
to reduce post-traumatic stress symptoms.**

By Laural Hobbes

David Lynch credits transcendental meditation with transforming his life and enhancing his creativity — no small claim for the director, whose acclaimed projects include *Eraserhead* (1977), *Blue Velvet* (1986), *Mulholland Drive* (2001), and *Twin Peaks* (1990-91, 2017).

Now he wants veterans to do the same.

With a raging national opioid epidemic to which veterans are particularly vulnerable, finding noninvasive, nonpharmaceutical ways to help those in psychological distress is an urgent priority. According to the VA, more than 6,000 veterans die by suicide each year. Others turn to alcohol or drugs to cope with PTSD symptoms, which include severe depression, anxiety, and emotional numbness. Careers and relationships with loved ones often suffer.

Lynch believes veterans can thrive by practicing transcendental meditation, or TM, an ancient form of a silent mantra meditation revived by the Indian guru Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in the 1960s. His organization, the David Lynch Foundation, connects folks with TM training. In addition to alleviating PTSD symptoms, TM helps practitioners access a deeper part of their consciousness

that acts as a font of well-being and inspiration.

“I heard a phrase: ‘True happiness is not out there. True happiness lies within,’” Lynch told *Military Officer*. “But the phrase doesn’t tell you where the ‘within’ is, nor does it tell you how to get there. Is it in your heart, in your legs? Where is this thing?”

In the early 1970s, Lynch’s sister started practicing TM. “I heard a change in her voice,” Lynch recalled. “I heard more happiness and self-assuredness. I said, ‘I want this thing.’ And I went and got it.”

Lynch said reaching a transcendental state, which he believes everyone has the capability to do, can take you to an inner treasury filled with happiness.

“Things like stress — traumatic stress — anxiety, tension, sorrow, depression, hate, anger, fear ... all of this starts to automatically lift away. The heavy weight of negativity starts lifting, and you’ve got this gold coming in from within, and life gets better and better.”

ALLEVIATING STRESS

Lynch believes TM will work for everyone, and the broad scope of his organization, founded in 2005, reflects that. With offices in Chicago, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C., the David Lynch Foundation has outreach programs for people who could particularly benefit from reducing stress, such as medical providers on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic, students at low-income schools, inmates in prisons, and veterans suffering from PTSD.

By April 2020, approximately 5,000 veterans had learned TM through the David Lynch Foundation. That month, the foundation launched an initiative called “21 to None,” which aims to reduce veteran suicides by training veterans in TM. The foundation is partnering with the VA on research so that in three to four years, training in TM could potentially qualify as a treatment covered by the VA.

“In the meantime, our Veterans Lifeline [program] is raising funds so anyone who wants to learn [TM] can do it. And we want to expand this to family members because we believe it is



Some of David Lynch’s most compelling projects have included (from top) *Twin Peaks*, *Blue Velvet*, and *Wild at Heart*.

“TM is an incredibly calming and centering way to begin every one of my days,” Marks said.

Marks, the senior intelligence officer for the Coalition Forces Land Component Command during the Operation Iraqi Freedom liberation of Iraq in 2003, experienced some symptoms of PTS upon his return from deployment.

After returning from combat, “all of a sudden, [you have to deal with] the vagaries of living — you’re told you need to care about the number of basketballs at the gym, filling up the car with gas,” Marks said.

But TM was not part of his toolkit then. “You just reintegrated and got your act together,” Marks said. “TM could be the first step that might be able to obviate some of the other [treatments].”

HOW IT WORKS

“There’s nothing magical about it,” Marks said of TM. “It’s just an incredible calm.”

So how does someone access the treasury?

Two-hour training sessions take place over the course of four days with someone trained in TM. A trainer issues a one- to two-syllable mantra. By working with a trainer, veterans become familiar with the technique, get a deeper understanding of how it works, and can report back with questions.

TM involves two 15-20 minute sessions a day. It works best in an upright sitting position — not horizontal, because you might fall asleep, Marks warned.

“You get incredibly centered; you have a minute of run-up before you begin your 20-minute session.

That minute allows you to settle in, open and close your eyes, relax,” Marks said.

Then, you begin to recite your mantra silently.

“In that 20 minutes, I lose track of time and feeling in my hands and feet, yet you’re fully conscious. It really is a sense of transcending below the chaos and roughness and choppiness of the waters,” said Marks.

This period has been compared to swimming in an ocean and seeing activity on the surface — diving gulls, splashing water, flapping fish, cresting waves.

“And then you go 15-20 feet deep, and you think, ‘Wow, it’s really calm down here,’” Marks said. “That’s what TM’s all about.”

While meditating, practitioners continue repeating

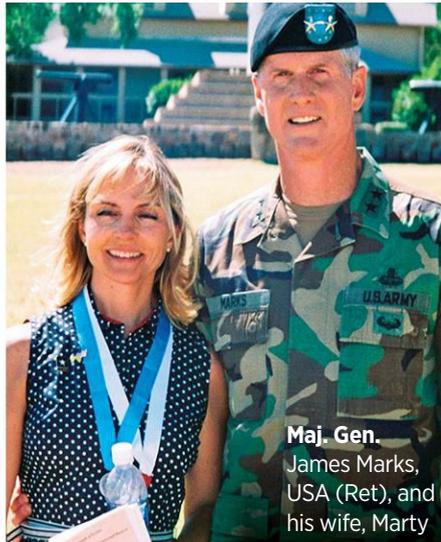
their mantra. Some might realize they’re no longer saying it; they have reached a transcendent state.

“And maybe you’ll say the mantra again, and then it disappears,” said Marks.

STUDIES SHOW PROMISE

“If TM could be ... a covered treatment, then you’ve got veterans and family members who can get access to this training at no cost,” said Marks. “TM can stand up to the benefits of some pharmaceutical solutions, but it has none of the downstream negative effects.”

While anecdotes and testimonies from veterans are compelling, TM’s benefits must be scientifically proven to attain federal funding as a VA treatment option. The available research is promising.



Maj. Gen.
James Marks,
USA (Ret), and
his wife, Marty

In 2012, DoD funded a \$2.4 million clinical trial to evaluate the effects of the TM program on trauma symptoms when compared with prolonged exposure (PE) therapy. According to *The Lancet Psychiatry* in November 2018, the trauma symptoms of both the TM group and the PE therapy group significantly decreased compared to the control group after three months.

Benefits experienced by the TM group tended to be higher compared to those who had PE therapy.

“During the phase 2 trials, TM’s effectiveness was tested against the effectiveness of [PE] therapy,” said Dr. Thomas Rutledge, a VA psychologist who was a principal investigator (PI) on the trials.

He described TM as being “the new kid on the block” at the time. “We wanted to test it against a first line therapy that we knew worked. We found the benefits for PTS symptoms or depressive symptoms were just as good [as PE therapy].”

When comparing the two treatments for additional symptoms such as suicidality, “there appears to be evidence that TM might have worked even better,” Rutledge said.

He does not practice TM himself.

“That’s in part by intention. When you study science, one of the pitfalls you often see are people are often heavily invested in their research ... [which can] compromise their integrity,” Rutledge said. “Even though I don’t practice [meditation], core evidence suggests that it’s good for our veterans — emotionally and physically.”

Additional VA clinical studies are the next step. As part of “21 to None,” the David Lynch Foundation has partnered with the VA to implement a phase 3 clinical trial on the effectiveness of TM to decrease PTS symptoms, suicidal ideation, and substance use disorder. It is expected to begin in spring 2021 as a large-scale trial with approximately 600 veterans. It will be the largest-ever study done on veterans and meditation.

‘It really is a sense of transcending below the chaos and roughness and choppiness of the waters.’ — Maj. Gen. James “Spider” Marks, USA (Ret)

The clinical trial will compare the TM program to present-centered therapy (PCT), a widely used comparison treatment in major clinical trials. A cost-effectiveness analysis will be conducted to determine the cost-saving value of the TM program in the treatment of PTS, and the research will be used to secure government approval for implementing TM as a VA treatment option.

“There is obviously still science that remains for it to be established that [TM] is worth having as a first line therapy [against PTS]. So we still need to establish that. This phase 3 trial ... is the biggest step forward in terms of the science on this,” said Rutledge, who will be a PI on the phase 3 trial, too.

“Wouldn’t it be wonderful if this became a treatment — not an ‘alternative treatment?’ ” said Marks.

A ‘FLAK JACKET’ OF HAPPINESS

Ultimately, Lynch believes all human beings deserve to be free from suffering.

Happiness “is like putting on a flak jacket,” he said. “If you’ve got this ball of happiness glowing inside, the things that used to stress you ... don’t stress you so much anymore. When a pandemic or an enemy soldier comes along, you’ve got more of what it takes to take care of the situation.”

Lynch compared practicing TM to having “money in the bank” to combat stressful situations. “You put on this suit of happiness, and you can weather the storm so much better than without it.

“We’re not supposed to suffer,” he said. “We’re supposed to enjoy life.” IIII

Laural Hobbes is a senior editor at Military Officer.



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Do you want to learn transcendental meditation? For more information, email veterans@davidlynchfoundation.org or visit www.davidlynchfoundation.org/veterans