

THE PROGRAM

LETTERS ON LEADERSHIP

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- LETTER ON LEADERSHIP #91 -



I am a Wounded Warrior - physically, mentally, and emotionally. I was caught in an ambush and nearly died after being seriously wounded by an improvised explosive device (IED) while serving our country in its war against terrorism. I underwent more than 50 surgeries before electing to have my left hand amputated. I suffer from PTSD, depression, and anxiety. I know personally just how difficult it was to fight insurgents in Iraq. It pales, however, in comparison to the war I rage on PTSD, depression, and anxiety. My war against insurgents is over. My battle with PTSD, depression, and anxiety will never end. There are no shortcuts or secrets for me. It is hard work. Every single day. This requires toughness. Without it, I will fail. Unfortunately, none of us are born tough or resilient.

We define toughness as staying “mission-focused” in the face of physical, mental, and emotional adversity. Often, doing this in the face of emotional adversity is the most challenging of the three. We’re human, and we have emotions – there’s no way around

that. We cannot control whether we have emotions. We feel happiness when things go our way and sadness or anger when they do not. However, even though we cannot control our emotions, we can always control our responses to them. Always. The correct response is always mission-focused. Ask yourself, "What response to this natural human emotion will help my team, my family, my coworkers?" Although everyone feels emotions, some people are nearly overwhelmed by them. It is very challenging to remain mission-focused when anxiety or depression cloud your vision. While we may not be able to truly control our emotions, we can employ strategies to lessen their impact.

The problem is rarely the problem.

Overthinking is rarely the solution. 99% of the harm of a challenging situation is caused in your own head by you and your thoughts. 1% of the harm is caused by reality. Most of the time, the problem isn't the problem. The problem is the way we think about the situation. Overcoming overthinking involves practicing mindfulness, setting realistic goals, and challenging negative thoughts. We must consider incorporating activities like deep breathing or meditation into our routine to manage anxiety. Discussing your feelings with a trusted friend or professional is also helpful. Bottling up overthinking can be challenging; instead of suppressing it, try acknowledging your thoughts without judgment. Consider writing down your thoughts - how you feel and why you feel that way. Developing a healthy outlet, such as regular exercise or engaging in hobbies, can also be a powerful and effective release. Accept that overthinking is challenging to overcome. Cut yourself some slack and work incrementally to improve it.

Self-rejection is poison.

Sometimes, we are not confident in our abilities, attributes, and strengths. We may fear failure so strongly that we reject ourselves before anyone else has a chance to. This can lead us to operate solely in our comfort zone, but that's a sure path to mediocrity. External failure or rejection can allow us and push us to drive forward and improve. Do not deny yourself the gift of failure and improvement because you feel you are not good enough. Don't think you're qualified for that opportunity? Apply for it anyway. Worried that your presentation isn't perfect? Present it anyway. Never overthink yourself into self-rejection. The more you do it, the stronger the habit becomes and the more powerful the poison gets.

Conduct a self-debrief and evaluation.

Although we can't change the past, we can always learn from it. Through past experiences (both good and bad), we can usually discover ways to positively influence the future. So, ask yourself what you can do to positively impact the future, then lean forward and act. If you don't feel there is a clear action, take a deep breath, be at peace, and let it go. Very few days are a concrete "1" (good) or a "0" (bad). Typically, there is a little bit of both. Regardless, if your day was a 1, a 0, or somewhere in between, learn from it. Figure out what made you successful or struggle, learn from both, and either continue or change the respective behaviors that caused it. Don't beat yourself up over a 0-day. Use it as an opportunity to get better. And then try to string together as many 1-days as possible.

Be present in the now.

All you have is the now. How you act now can help right your past and create good for your future. Make peace with yesterday, bear down, and attack the now.

Acceptance is peace.

No amount of anxiety will change your future. No amount of regret will change your past. For me, peace is found in acceptance. Acceptance of imperfection. Acceptance of uncertainty. Acceptance of the uncontrollable. I became stronger mentally and emotionally once I understood that I don't have to understand, tolerate, or even forget, but if I want peace, I must accept.

I battle with depression and anxiety every day. These five strategies don't always guarantee me success in fighting those dark shadows. But when I follow them and am honest with myself, I can battle through and find some light. These five steps allow me to look at depression and anxiety as a tunnel. If I stay focused on what works, eventually, I'll walk out of the tunnel into the light. On the flip side, if I stray off course or don't follow through with these steps, depression and anxiety become a pit that I will fall deeper and deeper into until I lose sight of the light. I have done very little in my life by myself. I have always surrounded myself with great teammates I can trust to help me attack and hold me accountable. No matter where you are in the process, no matter how your evaluation is going, teammates can help us battle and persevere through whatever depression, anxiety, stress, or fear we may be facing.

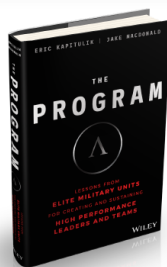
Attack!

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