Yolanda Poullard looks back on her time in the Army and misses using her leadership skills. While serving, she led more than 150 soldiers on a communications team. They helped connect units around Iraq. But since she left the military, Yolanda has struggled to find that new chance to guide others. Now, she may help lead veterans to the clinical mental health care many need.

Warrior Care Network has been a life-changing experience for Yolanda. She lives with invisible wounds of war. “My life was full of depression and sadness,” she said. “You come back from the war and you’re a totally different person. I just couldn’t function.”

“I needed someone to help drive, cook, sleep, help me raise my daughter. I wouldn’t do anything. I tried so many programs, and I wasn’t getting anywhere. I still felt the same. I guess this is how I would have to live the rest of my life.”

She eventually listened to the suggestion to try Warrior Care Network. She said she started to notice a change as soon as the evaluation process started.

The clinical treatment provided by Warrior Care Network partner Operation Mend helped Yolanda carefully relive her traumas to find effective ways to cope with each issue. Cognitive treatment retrained the brain, while mindfulness efforts helped Yolanda address stress in her life.

“After my treatment, it brought brightness back into my home, and we could all function as a family.”

Yolanda also appreciated how Warrior Care Network stayed with her when she returned home. Clinicians used monthly calls to provide follow-up care for Yolanda. She also had new knowledge to use every day.

“When I came home, it’s like ‘how do I live?’ Warrior Care Network provided the tools and skills to help me.”

“It is really what took me out of this dark hole and gave me my life back.”

The three weeks Yolanda spent at Warrior Care Network were life-changing, for her and her family.

“I can honestly say Warrior Care Network helped me learn life skills to handle my invisible wounds.”

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programs are producing significant outcomes and changing the dialogue by taking action on what could be done. As we continue our holistic approach, we are incorporating other programs and broadening our influence in the mental health space.

I am encouraged by our efforts to improve our approach to mental and brain health. This is a very exciting time for us — and while we have every reason to be pleased, I love that we are never satisfied. In order to take our Network to the next level, we must continue to be comfortable in challenging each other and confronting the brutal facts in a healthy way to ensure we are adopting proven best practices. It’s an honor to be part of Warrior Care Network.

Mike Richardson
vice president of independence services and mental health
Wounded Warrior Project

In the centuries since the Greek poet Homer began his epic poem, The Iliad, by describing the warrior Achilles’ debilitating rage, which was caused by actions that broke the hero’s moral code, poets, philosophers, and military leaders have understood the concept of moral injury: damage done to one’s conscience when they act — or fail to act — in a way that breaks their own moral code.

Only recently has medical science really begun to assess the extent of the psychological damage that results from participating in, witnessing, or learning about acts that violate one’s moral code. More importantly, in the last several years clinicians and researchers examined whether existing evidence-based therapies that were specifically developed to treat post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can also effectively address symptoms that result from morally injurious experiences.

The Road Home Program’s Director of Research Dr. Philip Held is one of the leading experts in moral injury. Dr. Held and colleague Dr. Brian Klassen have published a series of articles in academic journals in the last two years to build a body of medical evidence and help clinicians more effectively treat warriors who are affected by moral injury.

While the majority of the published research is very data-driven and clinically focused, an article published in 2018 in the journal Psychological Trauma has been widely read and shared by veterans and their loved ones as its narrative thematic approach vividly captures the realities faced in combat and the resulting struggles veterans faced.

Using a series of interviews with veterans who were involved in morally injurious situations, the article “I knew it was wrong the moment I got the order” is a narrative thematic analysis of moral injury in combat veterans that documents the consequences for veterans who reported acting in ways that were inconsistent with their deeply held beliefs.

While other papers have provided therapists across the country the guidance to treat moral injury — especially how the evidence-based Cognitive Processing Therapy can be used to effectively address moral injury-based PTSD — the narrative thematic paper offers a unique perspective provided by veterans about struggling with “injuries” to their conscience.
Using Virtual Reality as Therapy for PTSD

Emory Healthcare Veterans Program uses Prolonged Exposure therapy and Virtual Reality Exposure therapy to heal invisible wounds. Our highly skilled team of professionals is led by world-renowned clinical psychologist Barbara Rothbaum, PhD, who pioneered Virtual Reality Exposure therapy as a treatment for PTSD in veterans and service members.

There are many approaches to treating PTSD, and after several decades of research, our program has determined Prolonged Exposure therapy to be the most successful in healing invisible wounds. This process treats PTSD by asking the patient to recall the memory repeatedly in a therapeutic manner so that he/she will feel more comfortable with the memory and gain a sense of mastery over the experience, rather than experiencing anxiety and avoidance. Avoidance is a common behavior for those suffering from PTSD, and although facing the memory head-on seems intimidating, revisiting the wound is the only way to heal it.

“This form of treatment is successful because the trauma needs to be emotionally processed so it can become less painful. The process is like the grief process. When a loved one dies, it is extremely distressing, but by expressing that hurt (say, through crying), it gradually becomes less upsetting. Eventually, we can think about that person without crying, although the loss will always be sad. Those with PTSD devote much effort to avoiding thinking about the trauma because they mistakenly view the process of remembering as too agonizing to tolerate,” said Dr. Rothbaum.

Sometimes recalling the memory is difficult because it has been locked away for so long. Virtual Reality Exposure therapy, an extension of Prolonged Exposure therapy, immerses the patient in a virtual world that is reminiscent of his/her traumatic memory. As the patient describes the memory to the therapist, the therapist can recreate scenes of the memory for the patient to see through the VR monitor and headset.

“We wanted to see if the Virtual Reality Exposure therapy would have anything to offer them — as another treatment alternative. And it did. They got better,” said Dr. Rothbaum.

“Patients reported that experiences that have haunted them for decades don’t bother them anymore.”

“We wanted to see if the Virtual Reality Exposure therapy would have anything to offer them — as another treatment alternative. And it did. They got better,” said Dr. Rothbaum.
This summer, UCLA Operation Mend took another step toward removing barriers to care. Operation Mend gave the children of its warriors the chance to travel with their parents to Los Angeles and attend UCLA Recreation Summer Camps for three weeks this past July so their parents could focus on what they truly needed to do to heal — participate in Operation Mend’s Intensive Treatment Program for PTSD and mild TBI — without worrying about their children’s safety or well-being.

In addition to covering the airfare, hotel rooms, food, camp fees, backpacks, and supplies for all of the warriors’ children, the funds raised by the Spark Campaign were also used to cover the cost of weekend outings for all families and other program participants to the Automobile Driving Museum and to the Natural History Museum. It was so gratifying to see the children build their own community alongside their parents.

The Operation Summer Camp campaign exceeded its goal by $20,000, thanks to the generosity of 81 donors in 13 states. The remaining funds will be used to continue providing opportunities like Operation Summer Camp that ensure our warriors’ children’s needs are met so their parents can get the treatment they need.
Strength and Sacrifice: 10 Years Running

This summer, Home Base, a Red Sox Foundation and Massachusetts General Hospital program, hosted its 10th annual Run to Home Base presented by New Balance 5K/9K fundraiser. This year marked an important milestone for the organization as Home Base celebrated the 10th anniversary of its largest fundraiser.

A total of 2,464 participants from 41 states raised $2.3 million in support of Home Base’s mission to heal the invisible wounds of war for veterans and their families. Included in the 2,464 participants were more than 700 veterans, active duty, guard and reserve service members; 88 participants who raised $2,500 or more individually; and 59 10-year participants.

“The Run to Home Base’s “10-Year Runners” were recognized during a special pre-race ceremony, which featured Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker; Boston Mayor Marty Walsh; Peter L. Slavin, MD, Mass General president; and Boston Red Sox Chairman Tom Werner.

Chris Gemmer, a Navy SEAL and Home Base veteran, spoke about the impact Home Base has had on his life.

“Along with the exceptional care I received, and with the support of the other veterans and active duty service members in my treatment cohort, I was able to look into the mirror, face many of my issues, and begin to deal with them,” he said.

“Home Base provided a path to healing I struggled to find on my own. Home Base gave me hope.”

Held before a Red Sox vs. Yankees game at Fenway Park, the ceremony recognized veterans and military families who have benefited from Home Base, first responder champions, community and national partners to include the Warrior Care Network, and Home Base staff.

“Home Base is truly the product of a grateful nation,” said retired Brig. Gen. Jack Hammond, executive director of Home Base. “We are continuously growing and expanding our boundaries, both geographically and intellectually, to reach new heights in offering innovation and rigor to help veterans and their families facilitate successful transitions to civilian life. As we celebrate this significant milestone, we look forward to many more.”

Sometimes the most painful injuries are not physical. Working with veterans and their families makes us acutely aware of the statistics related to veteran suicide and how it affects the population we work with daily. Being able to recognize the signs is important.

Contacting the right support is crucial.