

# Operational

# Stress

# Control

**3M for the Mind**

**In this day and age, stress is an unavoidable part of daily life, and in today's Navy, it's all about how you handle it.**

Story by MC2(SW) Elizabeth Vlahos

Technically speaking, stress is the way we respond to challenges to the body and mind. Stress is not necessarily a bad thing; in fact, it's necessary for health. Stress often leads to quick, clear thinking and heightened energy. It's a normal and expected response to demanding circumstances, and it can push us to higher levels of performance when used to our advantage.

When stress piles up or reaches extreme levels, though, it becomes a liability rather than an asset. It can chip away at our job performance, threaten our relationships at home and at work and put our mental and physical health in jeopardy. Left unchecked, it can lead to stress injuries, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or other serious mental health issues.

The Navy is committed to reducing stress injuries and ensuring the psychological well-being of its Sailors by focusing on building their ability to bounce back from stressful times. To this end, the Navy's Operational Stress Control (OSC) program was launched.

# A Sailor On The Brink: The Importance of Seeking Help

**How the chain of command acts** can mean the difference between life and death for a Sailor in distress. While the Navy releases official statements and drafts policies about the importance of ensuring Sailors' psychological well-being, nothing speaks louder than the actions of the leaders on the deckplates or at the scene. Whether it is the leading chief petty officer or the department head, front-line leaders have the power and responsibility to make a difference. I know, because I've been to the brink – and had it not been for them - I'm not sure I would have made it back.

My story is not to invoke pity or sympathy, but to give you some personal insight as to how important it is to seek help before you're at the breaking point. This is one of those lessons that I would not wish even my worst enemy to learn the hard way.

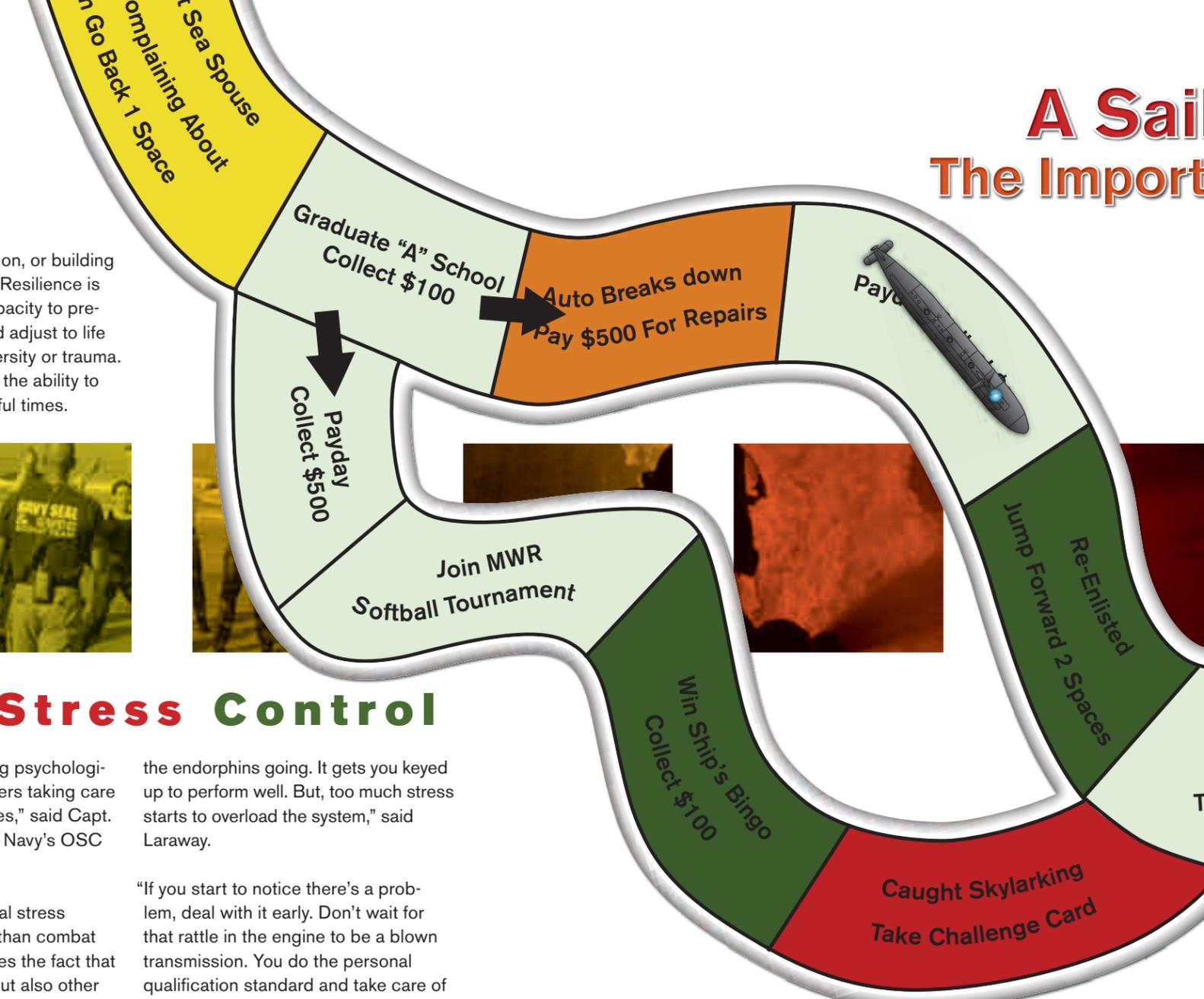
It was January of 2006. My ship had been unexpectedly deployed to support a potentially volatile political event in Africa. I had already been under significant personal stress at the time of the deployment. I was doing reasonably well in my rating, but I was not really well suited for it. As a result, my frustration with my job began to affect my performance. I had been unable to travel home for Christmas that year, which greatly bothered me because my dad's sister had been diagnosed with breast cancer almost three months prior.

I was having issues with the other Sailors in my shop – our interactions with one another were antagonistic at best, and hostile at worst, causing a great deal of stress in the shop. Long story short, by the time my ship received her 24 hour notice to deploy, the fire was already under the pressure cooker.

Add the pressures of an open-ended deployment to the sick stew that was brewing in Weapons Division, and life seemed to grow increasingly unbearable with each passing day. I remember isolating myself from my friends because I'd talked about the same problems time and time again, and I was tired of boring them to death with the same story, as I saw it.

No matter how much sleep I got the previous night, I was exhausted each day, physically and emotionally. The minute the workday was done, I'd head straight for my rack, desperate for the safety of sleep, only to be paralyzed at reveille the next morning, dreading the day before me. Some days were so bad that after chow, I was in the head forcing myself to throw up to cope with my stress.

I felt trapped, with no way out. Even before the mission, I had given some thought to converting from my current rating to a job better suited to my skills, but I felt that if I were to change ratings, I was giving up. As one of the few females in a male-dominated rating, I felt tremendous pressure from within to stick it out for at least my first tour.



OSC focuses on prevention, or building psychological resilience. Resilience is defined as the human capacity to prepare for, recover from and adjust to life in the face of stress, adversity or trauma. In a nutshell, resilience is the ability to bounce back from stressful times.



## Operational Stress Control

"[OSC is] about promoting psychological health. It's about leaders taking care of Sailors and their families," said Capt. Lori Laraway, head of the Navy's OSC program.

The concept of operational stress control is a little broader than combat stress control. It addresses the fact that not only combat action, but also other day-to-day stressors might permanently harm an individual. Many sailors operate in an inherently hazardous environment.

Shore-based Sailors may not be involved in hazardous duty, but are often juggling the demands of work, family, school and other stressors. Operational stress is a fact of life throughout the Navy.

Laraway is quick to point out that stress is often a good thing – to a point.

"Stress challenges us to do our best. That little bit of anxiety before the physical readiness test or advancement exams helps to get the adrenaline and

the endorphins going. It gets you keyed up to perform well. But, too much stress starts to overload the system," said Laraway.

"If you start to notice there's a problem, deal with it early. Don't wait for that rattle in the engine to be a blown transmission. You do the personal qualification standard and take care of preventive maintenance up front so that you don't have problems down the road," she said. "We have it figured out for our ships and our planes. Now it's time to figure it out for our people, and that's what our program's really about."

Think of OSC is a preventive maintenance system - 3M - for the mind.

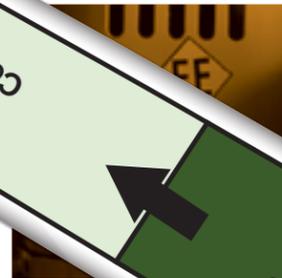
"Sailors know what 3M is," Laraway continued. "They know how to do the quals to keep things up to standards. It's almost inbred by the time you get out to the fleet, but we aren't as quick to know we have to take care of our people the same way.

"Good leaders know this. We're building upon what has been working in the Navy for 200-plus years, which is good leadership. We're trying to provide more awareness, more tools to help leaders know what to look for so that they can identify potential stress related problems early. If it's an engine, we've got the checklists so we know what to do; we go through and we figure it out. We've got to provide the same checklists and skills for leaders so they know how to intervene with their people."

OSC has adopted a model that recognizes that stress reactions occur across a continuum, or stress zones. The



model uses four colors - green, yellow, orange and red - to help people understand the different zones. The Green Zone signifies readiness – the Sailor, while not free from stress, has built up a good foundation of resilience and is coping well. The Yellow Zone signifies a stress reaction – the Sailor is experiencing a normal response to a stressful situation, but one that can cause some distress such as trouble sleeping or increased irritability.



## OSC is 3M for the mind

The Orange Zone signifies a stress injury – the Sailor needs to admit that his or her stress may be more than what they can handle alone and that they need to seek help. The Red Zone signifies a stress illness – the Sailor can no longer function well and needs medical attention to heal and return to full duty.

By making tools and training available, OSC aims to help leaders, Sailors and their families identify their own and others' stress indicators, and most importantly, know what to do to return to the Green Zone.

OSC is for all Sailors and their families; anyone can be affected by stressors. Separation from loved ones during a deployment is extremely hard, but communication can help - especially letting each other know about issues of concern - and working together is the best solution. But, if that doesn't work, seek help before stress becomes a problem.

The Navy's OSC program, a line-led and owned program that is supported

by the Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, integrates various policies and initiatives under an all-encompassing canopy. OSC awareness training, which includes signs, symptoms and mitigation strategies for stress injuries and illnesses, has been presented to more than 84,000 Sailors as of Dec. 31, 2009.

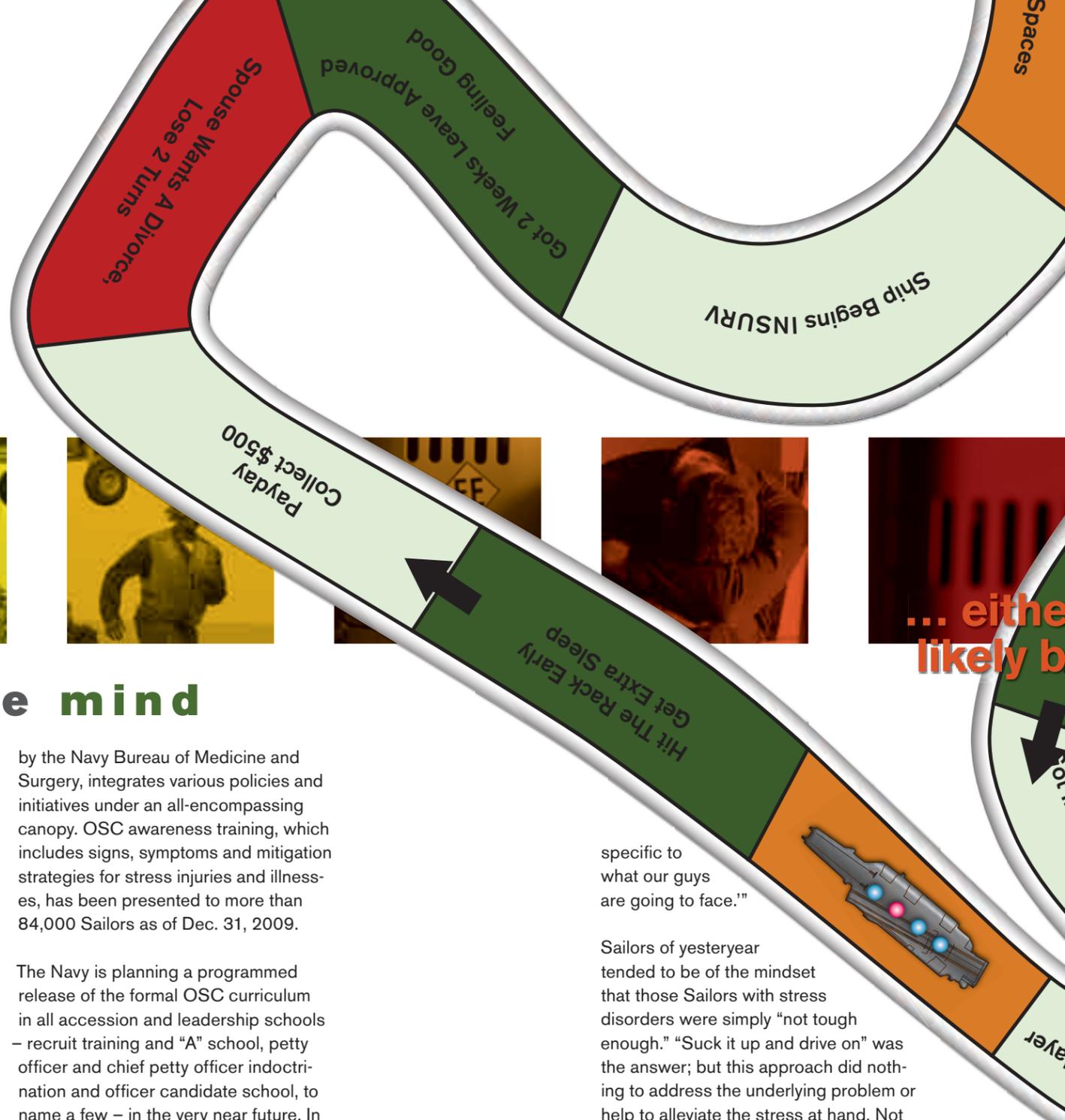
The Navy is planning a programmed release of the formal OSC curriculum in all accession and leadership schools – recruit training and "A" school, petty officer and chief petty officer indoctrination and officer candidate school, to name a few – in the very near future. In addition, specific pre- and post-deployment OSC training is being delivered at all Navy Mobilization Processing sites and Returning Warrior Weekends.

"We've developed operational stress control training for some community-specific organizations," Laraway added. "EOD came to the Naval Center for Combat and Operational Stress Control in San Diego and said, 'You know, we really want to get training that is

specific to what our guys are going to face."

Sailors of yesteryear tended to be of the mindset that those Sailors with stress disorders were simply "not tough enough." "Suck it up and drive on" was the answer; but this approach did nothing to address the underlying problem or help to alleviate the stress at hand. Not only did the problem refuse to go away, it festered and usually became worse. The results were often catastrophic for the Sailor's friends and family.

Today's leadership has become better educated about stress and recognizes that Sailors can only tolerate extraordinary stress for so long before they either let off some pressure or shut down. In fact, OSC is dedicated to



**... either I sought help or I would likely be dead by my own hand ...**

This, unfortunately, was a fight that I was losing with each passing second. Every day seemed to bring another harsh reproof over yet another deficiency. My shipmates in Weapons were ruthless, or so I felt.

The days seemed to morph into one another, creating an interminably waking nightmare, and it wasn't long before I had lost all hope that my situation would improve. Pretty soon, the only thought going through my mind was, "It's not going to get better ... I'm not going to get better." I remember sitting against a ready-service locker topside, wondering what was keeping me from walking into the gun shop, pulling out a 9mm and a magazine and ending it all right there. I didn't want anyone thinking that I was psycho, of course, so I kept quiet about it.

Things finally came to a head in January 2006 – my shipmates and I verbally came to blows with one another while a distinguished foreign official was visiting the ship, fortunately, not near enough to overhear any of the discord. Afterwards, our leading petty officer handed us each a counseling chit and read us the riot act, threatening to put us all on report if there were any further infractions. I could not imagine feeling less like a Sailor than I did that afternoon.

After evening chow, our chief called us individually into his office and made us read our personal remarks from our counseling chits, beginning a discussion as to what to do about the atmosphere in the division. When it came time for me to say my piece, my chief looked at me and asked, "What are we going to do with you?"

My initial thought was to tell him that something needed to be done about my shipmates' insubordinate attitudes, but at that moment it clicked in my head that my problems ran deeper than I was previously willing to admit. There was no way that I could keep on the way I was any longer. For the first time, I had a clear look at how precariously I was teetering on the brink. For me, the immediate threat was simpler, and much more serious, than that of NJP; either I sought help or I would likely be dead by my own hand within the next 24 hours.

It took a few tries, but I finally blurted it out. "I think I need to see a mental health professional."

His immediate response was expected, but understandable considering I worked with weapons, "Are you thinking about harming yourself?"

I couldn't bring myself to make such an admission, even though the seed had planted itself in my head, so I said that I didn't want my situation to get to the point where I would consider harming myself. In retrospect, though, I think my chief realized before I had said anything that it had already gotten to that point.

I told him about how I'd been going to bed right after we knocked off for the night, how I dreaded getting up in the morning, how no matter how much sleep I'd gotten the previous night, it was never

helping Sailors navigate the minefield of stress so that, should the steam under the collar reach the critical point, Sailors know where to turn to bleed the excess pressure.

The goal of the entire OSC program is to move Sailors, families, and commands toward the ready Green zone.

for the fifth day in a row. You address stress up front. Our focus is psychological health, wellness and resilience, and we can prevent a lot of these other issues. Oh, and by the way, if they do creep up, address them early!"

Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy (MCPON) (SS/SW) Rick West



## Going – And Staying – Green

Moving toward Green is a shared responsibility of Sailors, family members and command leaders, as well as medical personnel, chaplains and other caregivers.

Laraway compares the importance of monitoring one's psychological health and operational stress control to one's cardiac health.

"The time to think about your heart health isn't when you're in the back of the ambulance and somebody's pumping on your chest," she said. "It's about adjusting how you live every day.

"It's taken the American Heart Association 50-some years of a concentrated ad effort to get the general american public to this point in time.

"That's where we need to be with psychological health. We need to get people to realize that you don't address stress when you're in a crisis, having flashbacks or you haven't slept

issued a challenge to the fleet to take care of those in distress, and to seek help if they themselves are feeling the pressure.

"I want each and every one of you to knock down the barriers that discourage our people from seeking help early, before the stressors end up in injuries, illness, or in the worst case scenario, death. Shipmates, there's a stigma out there, and it is preventing a lot of our people from seeking help."

According to Capt. (Dr.) Paul Hammer, NCCOSC director, part of eradicating the barriers that often prevent Sailors from seeking psychological health care, is approaching stress injuries as one would physical injuries.

"Let's say two Sailors are down at the naval station," said Hammer. "They meet each other and they're walking along, and one says, 'Where are you going?' 'I'm going to my therapy appointment.' 'Occupational therapy?'



## That day, my life turned around for the better!

'No, no, my psychotherapy.'  
'Oh, okay. See you at 1500 when you get back.' No big deal.

"I want people to think, 'I need to go talk to somebody about this. I need to work this out.' That's what I want."

Hammer's goals are echoed by West who summed up his expectations to the fleet.

"We need to get rid of that barrier," said West. "The bottom line is, we are not alone, and we are here to help each other. Lives depend on it, and I am depending on you." 🌱

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enough. He told me that he recognized what I had told him as the classic signs of depression, and then said he would meet with our division officer and department head the following day.

The next morning, I felt how I imagined a surgical patient in a morphine haze would feel. I was dazed, but in no real pain. Early that afternoon, I was called into combat information center. When I got there, my department head pulled me into a side room, where my chief, our division officer, the ship's independent duty corpsman, and our CMC were waiting.

The CMC informed me that they were pulling me from Weapons until further notice, but he made it clear that I was not being punished – they were just looking out for my well-being. He then informed me that I was being reassigned to Medical to help our independent duty corpsman with records, patients' vital signs, PMS and other duties. I understood that they weren't concerned about whether or not I ever fired another weapon; they just wanted me to get better and thrive again.

That day, my life turned around for the better! Naturally, I hit a bump every once in a while, but for the most part I was saner, happier, and healthier than I was in Weapons. Even working out of my rating, I still made second class off that exam cycle. I finally came to the same realization that my chain of command did – I had potential to thrive in the Navy, but not in my current rating.

Once I acknowledged this, and made peace with my limitations, I started pushing for a conversion to a different rating, one that I originally wanted when I joined the Navy.

Our command career counselor helped me put together a conversion package. It took me three tries during the course of that year, but one year and four months after I was transferred from Weapons, my hard work paid off when I was approved for a direct conversion to my new rating. You couldn't manufacture a drug, legally or illegally, that could get you as high as I felt when I got the news – I felt like the weight of the world had been lifted off my shoulders. Also, once I converted, I was able to qualify on the ship's small arms and stand watch again, so my removal from Weapons did not mean the permanent end to my qualification to operate a firearm.

My story has a happy ending because my chain of command cared enough about me to throw me that lifeline when they saw I was drowning. That said, I didn't ask for help until it was almost too late, and I likely suffered needlessly in the process. I tried to "suck it up" and "tough it out" to where it almost cost me my life. I was clearly in the Orange Zone but didn't have the capacity to see it. Today, the Navy's Operational Stress Control program is working hard to educate all Sailors about the affects of operational stress and about the resources available to them to find help.

**DO NOT BE AFRAID TO REACH OUT FOR HELP.** Getting help will not kill your career. I know, because the help I received saved my career – and my life. 🌱

*The author's name has been withheld for privacy reasons.*