THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF RESPITE BREAKS ON MILITARY FAMILIES

GIVE US TIME'S CONFERENCE REPORT, 16 MAY 2018







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BACKGROUND

Give Us Time hosted a conference on 16th May 2018, courtesy of Canaccord Genuity Wealth Management, engaging organisations with an interest in respite breaks. The agenda included a scene setter "Social Tourism and Wellbeing" given by Dr Scott McCabe, Nottingham University Business School, clinical feedback from a case study: a respite break attended by beneficiaries from the Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre (DMRC) at Headley Court given by Major Andy Wareham (DMRC), a Beneficiary's perspective and an owner's perspective given by Mr Chris Grech, owner of the Balkan Jewel Resort and Spa. The Conference was attended by representatives from all 3 Services, The Not Forgotten Association, ABF The soldiers' charity, Victory Services Club, Combat Stress, Help for Heroes, RAF Association, RAF Benevolent Fund, RN&RM Charity, RN&RM Children's Fund,

Little Troopers, Kings College London and the King's Centre for Military Health Research.

ABSTRACT

The objective for this conference was to assess the positive impact of respite breaks on the recovery and rehabilitation process of military families in need.

Outcome:

The Conference showed the positive impact of respite breaks on the mental health and stress factors of the service person/veteran as well as their family members. It also shows an improvement in relations and re-connecting within the family: spouses and children.

Despite this Conference's limitations and the fact that research on the subject is not exhaustive, Give Us Time's findings indicate that respite breaks are very beneficial and provide a different way to ease and support in the recovery and rehabilitation process.

INTRODUCTION

In the Defence People Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2017-2020(1), for the first time the importance of military families and their wellbeing in relation to the health of serving personnel and veterans has been taken into account. Military families play a pivotal role in supporting Service people especially, but not only, when transitioning from military to civilian life. It is therefore important to focus not only on the health of those serving, but on the family as a whole: an aspect often overlooked by the charitable sector. Give Us Time was created in 2012 to address this gap in provision and provide military families with a space to rest and reconnect after bereavement, deployment and physical or mental wounds.

Give Us Time has found a simple, but effective solution to support military families affected by military life. Through the use of respite breaks, the charity is able to intervene before stressful situations, such as a demanding deployment, marriage difficulties, anxiety and transition to civilian life, transform into chronic mental and physical health conditions.

Give Us Time takes commercially let accommodation donated by hotels, resorts, holiday parks and private owners and matches these with military families in need of a respite break by virtue of: bereavement, physical or mental conditions, separation, financial circumstances and relationship strains and/or a combination of these factors.

Families are usually referred to the charity by Welfare Units or other service charities but they can also self-refer. Since January 2018, a new feature has been added to the charity's website allowing individuals to nominate a particularly deserving family. Since October 2015, over 350 families, 1,500 individuals, have benefited from the charity's breaks. 45 property owners have been involved and accommodation have been donated in 13 countries.

Give Us Time believes in the importance of respite breaks in the recovery and rehabilitation process as well as in those scenarios in which relaxation, rest and reflection are needed.

The following document summarises the discussion held during the conference as well as providing figures and findings from Give US Time's case studies and survey. The aim of the conference was to highlight the work that Give Us Time carries out and encourage the use of respite breaks as part of the recovery and rehabilitation process.

350+

Families have benefited from our services since October 2015.

SOCIAL TOURISM AND WELLBEING: SCENE SETTER

Our first speaker, Professor McCabe, started his presentation by saying that while holidays are often considered as a frivolous aspect of social life and a luxury, several pieces of research show that holidays play a vital role in providing recovery and relaxation.

Recovery is defined as "a process during which individual functional systems that have been called upon during a stressful experience return to their pre-stressor levels(2)". Holidays or breaks contribute in bringing the individual to their pre-stressor levels. Iwasaki argued that leisure is "an important buffer against stress to maintain good health(3)."

Several pieces of research link holidays and health, highlighting the positive impact of leisure breaks. A key positive impact of holidays is a reduction in stress. This is because holidays offer the chance of reducing stress by removing on-going factors of stress and anticipated threats. They also provide unique opportunities for restorative effects by spending time with family and friends as well as the chance of physical exercise. Research shows a link between breaks and coronary heart disease (4) as well as improvements in chronic conditions, asthma and arthritis amongst older people(5).

The benefit of holidays on one's wellbeing are analysed in depth by McCabe who explores the notion of social tourism, defined as: "All activities, relationships and phenomena in the field of tourism resulting

from the inclusion of otherwise disadvantaged and excluded groups in participation in tourism. The inclusion of these groups in tourism is made possible through financial or other interventions of a well-defined and social nature(6)".

This early work found that the three most important benefits of a respite break were:

- the chance to spend quality time together as a family;
- the opportunity for fun and happy memories;
- the opportunity to spend time away from difficult and/or stressful routines or circumstances.

In particular, it was mentioned how the creation of happy memories helps in prolonging the positive effects of a break, creating a storage of positive recollections the individual can go back to once the break is over.

During the presentation, the concept of wellbeing emerged as particularly relevant and how a leisure break can have an impact on it(7). Wellbeing is defined by the New Economics Foundation as what "gives people a sense of how their lives are going, through the interaction between their circumstances, activities and psychological resources(8)".

The concept of wellbeing is therefore subjective and its perception can be improved by a break away.

Lower perceptions of meaning in life or wellbeing have been attributed to depression and anxiety, stress and the need for therapy.

On the other hand, positive perception of life has been associated with enjoyment of work, happiness and life satisfaction(9). (Steger et al 2006).

Professor McCabe has participated in several pieces of research, all showing how a simple break away from home can lead to transformational impacts, specifically amongst groups of people who have not had the opportunity to take a holiday for a long time.

The above scene setter helps in understanding what the perception of holidays is and what the actual benefits are in terms of physical and mental health, wellbeing and self-perception on the general population.

MILITARY STRESS AND CLINICAL FEEDBACK FROM DMRC AND OTHER FEEDBACK

Respite breaks, reconnection and rebonding

Military life can take a toll on relationships: long stressful separations and constant moving make it harder for spouses and families to find effective and stable support networks. In addition, the concerns for a loved one's safety creates stress and anxiety.

In research conducted by Combat Stress on 100 female partners of veterans diagnosed with PTSD, they found that 45% of those surveyed met criteria for alcohol problems, 39% for depression, 37% for generalised anxiety disorder and 17% for symptoms of probable PTSD.

Furthermore, partners were found to be more likely to face barriers such as stigma when seeking help(10).

When analysing divorce rates among the Armed Forces and veterans, we find a lack of research material which makes it hard to have a clear insight into the current situation. While some studies find that divorce rates range from 3.7 - 12.6% in the military compared to 10 - 20% in civilians (11), the overall analysis is still not comprehensive.

Give Us Time conducted an investigation in 2017 on a sample of 51 beneficiaries who were selected based on the year and month they took their respite break. Families were asked to fill in a non-compulsory questionnaire and, predictably, not all beneficiaries completed the form, which meant that we collected less data compared to the number of beneficiaries we send on respite breaks every year. However, it showed that of those surveyed 15.7% needed a respite break due to difficulties with their partner and 21.6% stated difficulties in the relationship with their children.

Furthermore, of those surveyed, 55% considered separation or divorce before going on a respite break with Give Us Time. Of these, 96% agreed or strongly agreed that the respite break helped keep the family together. The figure is significant and highlights how a break in a neutral environment and in a scenic setting can nurture the family unit, reinforce family relations and ease family dynamics which often change when the serving person is away on duty or after the transition from







military to civilian life.

Our second speaker, Major Wareham spoke about the impact that serving has on the family unit and the work of the DMRC. The Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre, (DMRC) provides complex rehabilitation and physiotherapy for HM armed forces. The centre employs a mix of civilian and military staff and deals with serious musculoskeletal injuries, neurological injuries and complex trauma, including amputees.

Headley Court is the home of the Complex Rehabilitation and Amputee Unit, though the centre will be soon relocated, its mission is to "deliver consultant led rehabilitation services to support planned and contingent operations in order to maximise the moral and physical components of fighting power". The rehabilitation centre adopts a holistic approach to recovery, following the biopsychosocial model which takes into consideration biological, psychological, and social factors when operating on injured patients. The biopsychosocial model states that all issues relating to health are products of a complex interplay of these three factors.

In October 2017, Give Us Time organised a respite break with families referred by and under the care of the DMRC. The selected families were chosen taking into account their need for a respite break and the suitability of a break at their particular stage in the recovery process.



- ISSUES THE PATIENT FACED
- · Long time away from family
- Stroke
- · Sleep struggles
- · Children struggling with dad's injury



- HOPED BENEFITS
- · Re-establish family role
- Reassure the children dad can still do things and isn't dying
- Try a range of strategies in a different, real life setting



WHAT WAS ACHIEVED

- Engaged in a wide range of activities showing his children he is all right
- Relaxed while managing the break and his symptoms

Furthermore, the selection considered those families for whom the positive impact of the respite break could be maximised.

The DMRC provided clinical feedback on the five families Give Us Time sent to Malta, courtesy Azure Resorts.

In terms of reconnection and re-bonding, Major Wareham presented one particularly relevant case. As a result of his injury, the patient struggled with his relationship with his children. They experienced difficulties coping with their dad's physical injury and with the trauma connected with the fear of their father's death. Feedback assessed the improvement of the patient's relationship with his children. Thanks to the break he was able to re-establish his family role as father and husband and most of all reassure his children that he is the same person he was, despite his injury. The break also allowed the patient to test a range of strategies -aimed at coping with the injury- in a different, real life setting whilst managing the demands coming from

his role of father and husband. All this showed the patient's children their father can still do things and engage in a vast variety of activities.

Respite breaks and mental health

Given the fact that "The rate of help seeking from military mental health specialist services increased from a rate of around 1.8% in 2007/8, to around 3.2% in 2015/16 (12) ", it is easy to understand why so much emphasis is placed on mental health prevention. "Prevention of mental health illness is concerned with non-medical initiatives aimed at mitigating the impact of stressors that will inevitably be encountered during a person's career(13)." Give Us Time's respite breaks are a non-medical opportunity for early intervention, offering respite before a stressful situation transforms into a chronic mental health condition.

Sometimes, the service person and their family just need a break away in a new neutral environment to rest, reconnect and reflect on the situation; this can often prevent the issue, affecting the person and the family unit, from having detrimental long-term effects.



When returning from operational theatres, serving personnel are given a period of 'decompression' "to re-adjust to routine military and family life in a graduated and controlled manner, particularly where they have been exposed to high levels of intensity and risk(14)." The aim of this decompression "is to allow personnel a period of rest, relaxation and reflection, within a safe and controlled environment, in order to facilitate reintegration to the Home Base(15) ". The goals of Give Us Time's respite breaks - relaxation, rest and reflection - can when combined, prevent a difficult mental state to worsen and become chronic.

"Resting, even for a short period of time, will allow an individual to physically and mentally recharge their batteries before facing the demands that will inevitably be placed on them by family and friends on their return(16)". Give Us Time enhances the impact of the MOD's decompression packages by giving the whole family the opportunity to rest with their loved ones; this contributes to a better and deeper readjustment process which then eases everyday life back at home.

Reflection also plays a vital role in the

Reflection also plays a vital role in the rehabilitation and readjustment process. From the words of our Ambassador and Invictus Games athlete, Scotty Darroch, "Having had that time away with my wife I then had a refocus on my life and that's what gave me the motivation, drive and confidence to apply for the Invictus Games 2016".

During our respite breaks, several beneficiaries suffering from PTSD, inspired by the relaxing environment, started writing poetry as a way to ease their suffering and create something positive. In particularly difficult situations the time for reflection, provided by respite breaks, is what is needed for our beneficiaries to focus on themselves, come to terms with their situation and determine whether they need to seek appropriate help.

While "The aim of [Decompression] is to achieve a positive return home for deployed personnel(17)".

The charity's aim is to achieve a positive return to the home environment for the whole family, not just the serving person or veteran.

According to Give Us Time investigations, 92.1% of those surveyed experienced positive or extremely positive change after the respite break. Furthermore, 98% feel much more optimistic about the future as a result of the break.

1,500
The number of individuals sent on respite breaks since October 2015.

A BENEFICIARY'S PERSPECTIVE

During the conference, one of the DMRC patients who was selected for the respite break to Malta presented his experience. The patient was particularly impressed by the whole trip and its impact and very grateful: "I cannot put in words how the holiday was beneficial to myself and the family. In most cases, when you see injured soldiers, there is a stereotypical mentality of just looking at the [patient] situation alone. But unfortunately people do under look [the fact that] every problem that the soldier is going through, the family is also going through the same journey. From the family seeing you going in and out of operations, theatre rooms, being in so much pain, the physiotherapy, struggling with [everyday] things. And even though they are seeing you trying to push yourself and give yourself a 100%, they can clearly see that [the pain and struggles]. And them seeing that and wanting their dad or their husband to be back to being himself again and that is not happening, them seeing the husband or the father constantly in pain, taking medication, at times even having mental health issues, they can only wish and hope that the situation is not gonna last as long. But it has a flipped effect on the family as well, because they are those closest. They say those who are closest to us when you are going through that situation they are the ones who feel the pain, share the pain with us [...]. The holiday just came at the right time and it wasn't just perfect for me, but also perfect for my family. We all did have a fantastic time. It really did boost our morale and that just increased the happiness to another level in our home".

The words of the beneficiary were echoed by the clinical feedback Give Us Time received from Headley Court which highlighted how the break in a scenic setting and disabled-friendly environment helped the patient to reduce his self-consciousness, about his leg injury, as well as allowing him to also use the resort's pool for his rehabilitation. Most of all, according to the DMRC, the break was beneficial for the family unit in providing relaxation and storing those happy memories for them to use once back at home.

A DONOR'S PERSPECTIVE: RESPITE BREAKS AND CIVIL SUPPORT

Give Us Time's respite breaks not only give military families the opportunity to rest, recover and reconnect in a safe, neutral environment, but the fact that these breaks are donated by individuals - hotels, resorts and property owners - shows the community's commitment towards military families and the sacrifices they have made. The importance of feeling that they have been rewarded by the wider community is stressed in the MOD strategy which describes its vision as aimed at achieving: "all Defence People to enjoy a state of positive physical and mental health and wellbeing, feeling connected with, and supported by, the military and wider community, enabling them to contribute to the delivery of Defence outputs, including operational capability, as part of the Whole Force(18)".

Furthermore, "fear of prejudice and judgement stops people from getting help and can destroy families and end lives(19)",



55%

Considered separation or divorce before the break.

Of these:

96%

Agreed or strongly agreed that the respite break helped keeping the family together.



which is why it is important they feel that they are accepted, supported and thanked by society, instead of feeling judged due to injuries, mental health struggles or other strains. .

The feeling that they are being given something by society is an essential element for military families and is key to promoting an atmosphere of understanding and confidence which enables families to feel they can ask for our help -or that of other service charitieswithout any judgement or stigma attached. Chris Grech, the owner of the Balkan Jewel resort in Bulgaria, has been a supporter of the charity since the early days and every year offers a one-week break at his resort to over 100 individuals. Chris emphasised the importance and positive impact of hosting military families from the host's perspective. While charitable donations are always rewarding for those committing to a cause, with the Give Us Time initiative, hosts are allowed to be part of the beneficiaries' experience and take an active part in supporting their recovery, rehabilitation or re-bonding. Chris also talked about witnessing the visible improvement of some families' general wellbeing after just one week away together. Moreover, because of the break donated, the morale of the resort's staff improves substantially as a result of supporting the families during their stay. Chris' enthusiasm and passion towards this cause and in supporting military families is one brilliant example of the commitment and hard work of all those property owners, resorts, hotels and holidays clubs

who provide accommodation to Give Us Time's beneficiaries, creating a win-win situation for the military and civil communities.

CONCLUSION

This conference sought to provide an insight into the positive impact respite breaks have on military families in need of rest and reconnection. Research and data on this subject are fragmentated and not exhaustive and more needs to be done. If we take into account Give Us Time's investigations, all figures show that respite breaks do indeed play an important role in the rehabilitation process of serving personnel and veterans, in de-stressing the individuals participating and reconnecting them as a family unit; enhancing the relationships between spouses and children. Data collected through the survey shows that 55% of those interviewed considered divorce or separation before the break and of these 96% agreed, or strongly agreed, the respite break helped in keeping the family together. 92.1% of those surveyed experienced positive or extremely positive change after the respite break, with change being relaxation, destressing and strengthening family relationships and bonds. The survey also found 98% feel much more optimistic about the future as a result of the break. These figures, along with additional case studies from our group holiday to Malta or other specific cases we analysed, indicate that respite breaks have positive and beneficial effects on military families and should be considered as a part of the

recovery process for both physical and mental wounds and in general to boost the morale of the armed forces community. As highlighted by the feedback from the DMRC, the respite break to Malta didn't aid the patients' rehabilitation but was an essential component of it.

The provision of respite breaks can prevent a difficult situation becoming a deeper crisis, resulting in lower usage of public resources such as: welfare agencies, the NHS and other charities: reducing dependency, demand, recovery rates and associated costs. While, on the other hand, if the situation is already critical, a respite break can offer the chance to lower the stress factors and allow those affected to destress and to have time in a neutral environment to focus on the path to recovery and healing, and reconnecting as a family unit. With similar effects. The family unit, considered in its broader sense, is the source of strength behind those serving and those who have served and it is vital we recognise the fundamental role that families play to support the morale of our serving personnel and veterans. We also need to recognise the impact that physical or mental injuries, separation and strains related to military life can have on family members. Give Us Time believes in the importance of focusing on military families to better support the armed forces and veterans.

POST CONFERENCE DISCUSSION

This Conference has highlighted the positive impact of respite breaks on military families. It has also stressed the lack of research in this field and the need to fund studies to provide more examples and feedback on the subject.

It is vital to explore different, non-medical ways to support the armed forces' wellbeing and the use of respite breaks does offer an efficient, effective and low-cost alternative which supports the conventional rehabilitation and reconnection paths.

The number of those struggling with mental health and deciding to come forward and seek help has gone from around 1.8% in 2007/8, to around 3.2% in 2015/16. However, if this figure showed the actual rate of everyone who needed help and not just those who came forward, the rate would be much higher, indicating that Give Us Time's work is relevant now and will be for the foreseeable future: it is acknowledged that 'at least 66,000 of those who served between 1991 and 2014 will need some form of physical and mental health support now or in years to come(20)'.

At the conference the discussion that emerged with other service charities involved in some form of respite breaks was extremely valuable. We wish to deepen the cooperation with these partners and to start a profitable dialogue to improve the services we provide and create synergy in the sector for the benefit of appropriate beneficiaries.

We also wish that the general public and the charity sector can better understand the important contribution of Give Us Time's model in supporting military families in need during their rehabilitation: rest, recovery and reconnection is an essential part of the process.

We firmly believe in the positive impact a respite break can have on a struggling family and we look forward to discussions and new collaborations aimed at bettering the services available to support the Defence Community.

92.1%

Families experienced positive or extremely positive change after the respite break.

98%

Feel much more optimistic about the future after the break.



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