

## Military OneSource Podcast — Support and Strength After a Mental Health Crisis

### Episode transcript

#### Intro voice-over:

Welcome to the Military OneSource Podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit [militaryonesource.mil](https://militaryonesource.mil).

#### Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast, I'm Bruce Moody. Before we get started, I want to let you know that today we'll be talking very bluntly about suicide. If you or someone you know is suicidal or in a state of crisis, you can contact the Military Crisis Line. They're available 24 hours a day. You can go to your phone and press 988, and then press 1. You can engage them, the Military Crisis Line via text or chat. That number is 838-255. We're going to take the numbers and the links, and we're going to put them in the program notes. Also, if you have any questions or comments about what you hear today, you can send us your thoughts using a link also in the program notes. We always like to hear from you.

Now, if you value what you're hearing today, I encourage you to subscribe to the podcast, and we also ask that you share this podcast with friends or somebody who can benefit from it. This podcast — it's available on all the major podcast apps and YouTube. Just search for Military OneSource, and there we are. Okay, so let's get into our conversation. Our guest today is Marine Corps Sgt. Fateh Gill. Sergeant Gill, welcome to the podcast.

#### Sgt. Fahteh Gill:

Thank you for having me.

#### Bruce Moody:

Well, thank you. I just want to say on behalf of all of us here, we're just so grateful that you are with us today. For listeners, we did meet before today's recording, and we talked about the conversation of the day. You did express your willingness to share your story, which does include struggles with suicide. Again, grateful for that. So, what I'm going to do is I'm just going to step back. I'm going to let you tell your story, and then we'll talk about it. I think your story really begins before joining the Marine Corps. So, I

ask that you start then, and then really take us up to the point in time where your struggles begin to affect your career. So, with that, I'll just step back, and I'll let you talk.

**Sgt. Fahteh Gill:**

So, I joined the Marine Corps around February 2021. I decided to take a leap of faith with the Marine Corps, and I was like, I need some structure and discipline in my life, and enlisted, went through boot camp and all those things. And I would say my first seven, eight months in the Marine Corps — they were great. I was just a young dude enjoying the experiences of being away from home and stuff, but starting around October 2021, I had lost a close family member. And then three weeks later had lost another close family member, and it kind of set my world into a little bit of a spiral. I was young; I was away from family, so I was learning to deal with these losses on my own. And I started having the mental health struggles and didn't really know how to take care of myself.

So, at that point, I was still at the schoolhouse for my job, and I decided to dedicate myself to my craft and just be the best I could in that because at that moment in my life, I felt like everything was falling apart. And if I was able to control something, I was going to take advantage of that opportunity. So, I dedicated myself to my craft, kept pushing through, wasn't really dealing with the losses in a good way. And then a couple of months later, I lost another family member. And then about a month after that, lost a friend to an aircraft mishap. From there, I knew I wasn't mentally okay, but I was living off the high of just being one of the top in my class, getting my wings for my job, and then checking into a new squadron, thinking I had a fresh start.

And then about a month, a month and a half being in the squadron, I had lost a friend to suicide and that kind of broke me. I kind of shut out the world, didn't really know how to take care of myself. And I think there was a part of me that not knowing how, also didn't want to, or was afraid to take the step to take care of myself. So that ultimately led me to September 2022 where I had a suicide attempt — one of the worst days of my life. I felt like the world was crumbling around me. I knew there was people out there who would help me and try to get me through that point in my life, but there was so many things happening in my head, and I was just like, it's not that no one cares, it's just that I wasn't where I am today, where I could reach out for help and feel comfortable about it. And I honestly just didn't know what to say.

So, in that moment, in that very dark moment of my life, I made a decision that I didn't know that it was going to have the consequences that followed that day. So, after that, during my attempt, I called a friend who happened to be on duty. They took me to the hospital, and I was in a psychiatric facility for three days, and then I was transported to an outpatient program for 28 days. So, I was gone from the squadron, everything that I knew and was just taken away for a month and put into a mental health facility. Just let the reality of everything settle in and then sort of prepared me for what was coming next, but I wasn't prepared for what was coming next. I was kind of left in the dark because with what my future was going to hold, because most people in my job when

something like this happens, they usually don't get back up in the air. And so, my chain of command knew how much flying meant to me, so they were just trying to dampen the blow.

But I came out of the hospital with something to prove, because I wanted to be an asset to my squadron. I wanted to be an asset to the Marine Corps, and I didn't want to be a burden. I didn't want to just be another guy who might've had a mental health incident or whatever it may have been, and not flying and just sitting around and not really doing much. I wanted to be the best version of myself and be the best Marine I could, even with me not being able to do my primary job, which was flying at the time.

So, I came out of the hospital, and I focused on being the best I could at work, but in doing so, I didn't really use the opportunity to better myself, if that makes sense, like build a strong foundation. I had a very traumatizing event in my life, and instead of focusing on building myself back up and do all these things, I was like, "how can I help other people? How can I be the best? How can I get back in the air as quick as possible?" When I got out of the hospital, I was freshly promoted to corporal. What I did for such a junior corporal and what the expectation of me was ... I far passed it, and I had to grow up very quickly so I could be the person that they wanted in the work center.

And I excelled, and a lot of the friends and the connections I've made through my time with different officers or staff NCOs while being in has ... The impression that they get from me and the impression that I left for them is for how I was when I was a down flying Marine, because I went above and beyond from what was expected of me, and I continuously worked my butt off to get to that flying status. And about nine months after my incident, I was flying again. And I remember when the incident first happened, I was talking to certain staff NCOs in my chain of command. They had heard situations where some people — it takes two to three years for them to get back up in the plane, but I was able to do it in nine months and I kept my ground, I kept going.

And throughout in this time of being down and stuff like that, I had lost another friend to suicide. And then 12 days after that, I had lost another friend to a motorcycle accident. So, the life stressors, the traumatic events never really went away. I was just kind of back in that same mindset where I was like, "I don't really know how to deal with all these things, so I'm going to just commit myself to my craft." And it worked for a while. It got me through the day, and it felt good in the moment, but after I had been ... For the longest time, I had just committed myself to flying, getting back in the air, doing whatever I can. And then after being back in the air for a couple of months, I had another big life event happening. And that life event basically threw me on my ass where my whole world crumbled around me, and it was because I did not set myself up for success by building a good foundation.

When I say a good foundation, I mean how do I take care of myself physically? How do I take care of myself emotionally, spiritually, all these things and mentally? And this life event probably happened, it was October 2023 or November 2023, and after that, I had one bad night in September 2022 and that hospitalized me for a month. And I probably

had equally, if not as close as bad nights, but probably 12 of those at the end of 2023. And I was lost. I didn't know what to do. But the difference is this time that I made an adult decision, I finally grew up and I told myself, I was like, I've been trying to do this by myself for way too long, and I am grown enough to realize that I can't do this on my own.

So, at the beginning of 2024, I was slated to go on deployment with my squadron, and I was not ready to deploy. I was overweight, I wasn't mentally ready, there were so many things in my life that I just wasn't prepared for. And then there were other requirements that were expected of me for this deployment. And all these things needed to be done in a six-week span, and I didn't know if I could do it. And the thoughts of suicide and all those things were just like ... It just kept popping up more and more because I was so overwhelmed, but I reached out to my chain of command to two people I really trusted. And from there, the burden got taken off my shoulders a little bit.

Obviously, all the work that still needed to be done would be on me, but at that moment I was relieved because there was less weight on me, and it felt a lot more tangible. And because of my chain of command and because of how supportive my chain of command was at the time and still is, they afforded me the opportunity to prove myself. And I accomplished every single thing that was required of me so I could deploy and be an asset to the squadron. And then from there on out, it was kind of growing pains, trying different things to see if it worked for me physically or mentally, and just kind of keep pushing myself forward. And not every day was rainbows and stuff like that. Some days were really tough, but I kept just having that attitude of pushing forward and trying to be better than what I was the day before.

And then ultimately it led me to a very successful deployment, picking up a qualification that most second-terms, most people in my MOS, they don't get it until their second term, I got it in my first term as a corporal. And also, with my whole history and stuff like that, I got it at a very small amount of time compared for flight hours for this qualification. And I'm so proud of myself. And with that whole story and everything, I'm not the same kid I was. I was a 21-year-old kid when my suicide attempt happened, and it was awful. But I don't live with regrets. And that situation and that whole scenario and my whole story has shaped me into the person I am today, and I'm proud of that.

**Bruce Moody:**

You went through a period of growth that you really needed in order to survive, literally to survive, and just so grateful that you shared that with us. Talk about the difference as you look back ... so you described as needing a good foundation. Describe looking back at your efforts before you discovered that, when you were focusing on the job and just being the best you could, so that you had something to prove that you were not a burden. When you were focusing on that and not the balance of everything else? What does that look like to you now?

**Sgt. Fahteh Gill:**

If I'm speaking as a Marine, it looked like a Marine who was ... I was very knowledgeable. I was always the go-to guy and everything, but I wasn't a PT stud in our shop. I was a leader in a lot of aspects, but for me, being put into a leadership position at such a young age, expecting to lead all these other Marines and telling them to do all these things, but I wasn't holding the standard in all aspects. And now the person I am today, I try to maintain all aspects that I'm leading my Marines in physical health, mental health, all these things, but also job qualifications, pushing to progress, pushing to grow as individuals. But for me, all I was someone who was just really good at their job, but as an overall Marine, I was a pretty bad Marine in my opinion.

And looking back at it, I'm not saying that I'm disappointed in myself because it was necessary for me to grow, but it was just that ... Me not having a foundation and me not recognizing that being the best version of myself requires me to take care of myself in all aspects, like physically, mentally, emotionally, all those things, I didn't believe in that at the time. I just thought that if I'm the best at my job, then I'll be happy. But over time, I've learned that it's not the tangibles that make you happy, it's the intangibles, all the things that I can't physically hold or like a qualification that is designated to me. A qualification isn't going to provide me happiness and joy. The work that I put into the qualification, that's the important stuff, the amount of effort I'm putting in because it just further shows my character. But at the end of the day, having a piece of paper or having a designation attached to my name means nothing if at the end of the day I'm not happy.

**Bruce Moody:**

So, what is your approach now as a leader, as a leader who has obviously profound experiences, now has that view, the need for a balanced life? What is your approach to leading your fellow Marines with that understanding that you need a balanced life? And what are you seeing in Marines being able to do their job with that balance?

**Sgt. Fahteh Gill:**

The Marines that I have under me who have that balanced lifestyle are the ones that are the more successful ones. I don't want to say more successful, but you can just tell the way they are, the way they carry themselves, that they're content with where they are; they're happy with going on. And you ask them like, "Hey, what do you do in your personal time?" It's like, "Oh, I work out or I got to do this." They have hobbies. They have things that make them happy outside of the Marine Corps. So, because at the end of the day, yes, we're Marines 24/7, that we are Marines all the time, but when you're done with work and you take off your uniform, you are your individual self. So, the Marines who have a solid friend group, a solid support system, who have hobbies and all these things and find joy outside of work, those guys are the ones who are really successful.

It's the guys who fully commit themselves to this job, and they try to treat this job more as a lifestyle. But at the end of the day, this job isn't ... You can't live this job for the rest of your life. It's a job, and at the end of the day, you should commit yourself and be the best possible person you can be in this MOS. But at the end of the day, life is bigger than this MOS. And that's something that gets lost in translation specifically in my job. But the guys who know that separation, they do pretty well. But as my job as a leader, especially when newer guys are coming in, I emphasize, I'm like, "Make sure you're taking care of yourself and all these things." But at the end of the day, I think I've done a good job with just being an open avenue or a line of communication with these guys.

I try every single day to make it known that I might be tough on you guys when it comes to the standards and things like that, but I genuinely care about you, and that's what ... You being okay and you being mentally fit and physically, all these things, you being okay as a human being matters most to me over anything else. If you're not progressing as quickly as you're hoping to or as quickly as other people are hoping for you to do, but you're trying to figure out how to take care of yourself, that's what matters to me.

**Bruce Moody:**

When you are talking to Marines or maybe when you're watching Marines, what is the proper time to ask for help? Probably with the understanding that if you're in a genuine crisis, it would've been some time ago, so what is the right time to ask for help? And maybe this is for the benefit of service members who are maybe new and trying to figure out their organization. Who is the right person to go to if they have questions about getting some help?

**Sgt. Fahteh Gill:**

Even as a corporal, the time to ask for help — there's no right time. In the moment is always the right time. There's never going to be a bad time. There's not going to be a wrong time for you to ask for help. I believe as a leader, it's my job to know about these resources. And obviously for me, I've had in-depth experience with a lot of these resources. I'm more familiar than other Marines are and other NCOs and what that may be. But there's never a wrong time. As a good leader, if a Marine comes up to me at any given moment and is like, "Hey, I need to talk." I will take time out of my day at that moment to make sure that they're taken care of. And if I can't do it right in that moment, we will figure out a plan because I'll never leave anybody just to the wind if they're asking for help.

It doesn't even have to be a very serious thing. If it's just a problem that you're dealing with. For me, the way I approach it is that you should ask me immediately. I want to be in the know, I want to know how I can help you, and I need you to know that I'm always going to be here to help you. And I emphasize that with my Marines.

Then with the resources and stuff, it's everybody's responsibility to know these resources. Obviously, when you have a new check-in coming in, they're not going to

know everything and it's my job to teach them. But I believe that part of the check-in process is getting familiar with all the resources available. There's certain billets at each squadron that's responsible for sharing these things with you. And I know that kind of gets lost in translation at times. If a Marine ever approaches me, I have all the resources on my phone ready to go.

**Bruce Moody:**

How would you, and maybe this is a delicate question, but what would be your advice to a junior service member who's hanging out with a buddy and the buddy starts expressing thoughts and you realize this person really needs some help, what do you recommend that that person do with that knowledge?

**Sgt. Fahteh Gill:**

Find someone who is senior to you. It doesn't even need to be staff. Just find someone who's senior to you that you trust that you think that they will do with this information, something good. And I understand there's a stigma with bro code. You can't talk about your buddy's personal stuff with other people unless he wants to talk about it and all these things. But at the end of the day, when it comes to situations like that, I've lived through my own personal experiences. I've lost two friends to suicide. If I had known about my friends, I would have told someone immediately because at the end of the day, they might be upset with you for a little bit because you told someone about their business. But if at the end of the day they get better, that's all that matters. If your friend is here, taken care of and all that ... If your friend is taken care of and is still alive and here on this planet, that's what matters the most. Anything else can be taken care of over time.

**Bruce Moody:**

Maybe last question on the subject here because you did mention stigma. What are your thoughts about stigma in the military today?

**Sgt. Fahteh Gill:**

The stigma isn't as bad as people make it seem, but that also might be my chain of command and also the people that I had in my chain of command. There's always going to be people who have a little bit of stigma, and it's either the way they're raised or how they feel about certain things, which they're entitled to those feelings and stuff. But for me, the biggest thing was learning who I could rely on, who I can't rely on. The people that were more standoffish with me after my incident, I was like, okay, do I have anything against them? Not necessarily, but are they going to be someone I'm going to lean on through my dark times? Probably not just because they didn't really show their support once everything happened but there's other people who did. And so, the people that showed up for me, the people that constantly supported me, those are the



people I'm going to rely on. There is stigma, but the stigma's going to exist no matter what.

But I think I definitely changed people's minds about me because after my situation, people had a certain perspective on me, but through my hard work and dedication to not just my job, but over time, becoming a better person and stuff, I think it changed a lot of people's view how mental health should be treated. Because for a while, the perspective on the stigma, "Oh, that person has mental health issues, they're soft, or whatever," blah, blah, blah.

But I have proven and shown to people that I am not soft. I had a suicide attempt, but I put myself through the wringer and I hardened myself to become the best possible version of myself. And when I tell my story to people who have just met me and they know me as Sergeant Gill or the flight engineer, Sergeant Gill, whatever it may be, or the Corporal flight engineer Gill, and I tell them the story, they're like, "There's no way." And I'm like, "What do you mean?" They're like, "The person that you are today and the person you're describing is night and day." So, the stigma does exist, but I don't think it's as prevalent as some people think.

**Bruce Moody:**

So listening to you discussing this, now I have one more question for you because you're talking about stigma in a way that makes me wonder how much of it is reality, actual pushback that a person's going to get from their command, and how much of that is just this person supposing that they're going to get pushback when in fact the command really wants them to step forward? How much of it is in the mind of the person who hasn't made the effort to reach out and ask for help?

**Sgt. Fahteh Gill:**

I've been very blessed with my chain of command. I've had two commanding officers that have been some of the best human beings that I've ever met, and some of the staff NCOs, my chain of command has been phenomenal for me. There's always onesies and twosies that I just knew that that's not the person I should talk to about this. But I'm also a firm believer that no one's going to go out looking for help until they're ready to help themselves. And I was a victim of that. I lived that lifestyle for a really long time. I knew, there was part of me that knew I needed help, but I was just too stubborn or too scared or just didn't want to live through going down again, if I asked for help again or anything like that, for a solid year that I knew that I probably should be talking to behavioral health or talking to someone about this or trying to actually deal with all the things that had happened. But I chose not to because I knew that it would be more work on my end.

And then eventually, when I was probably at one of my lowest points, I finally was like, "I can't do this by myself." But that realization has to happen within oneself. I knew that I didn't want my choice of getting help to be in someone else's hands again, because



during my initial suicide attempt, I took all my choices away, but my chain of command had to act and they did what they thought was necessary. And what I would say to people who are on the fence about it and stuff like that, it is so much better for yourself, if you are the one making the decision to go look for help. Because at the end of the day, like I said, I had a very good chain of command. But I like to believe in the good in people. If you say you need help, and I don't think there's a chain of command who can stop you from getting help. I think it's you just actually having that conversation with your chain of command.

And there's also a difference for letting it get to a very extreme point like I had initially. And also, on the other side of the spectrum, you have a problem brewing up and you don't know really how to handle it and stuff. And it's a lot easier to manage before it gets to that point where I was at. So, the first time I technically reached for help was my suicide attempt. All the power was taken away from me just because that's how protocol goes. But a year later, when I reached out for help again to see what I was able to do, to see if I can make all these requirements, and I did, the ball was in my court. But the thing is, if you wait too long or you let it build up to something that's no longer manageable, that's when you no longer have control.

**Bruce Moody:**

That's a powerful perspective. Thank you for sharing that. Sergeant Gill, we're just so pleased to have you on the podcast today. I just want to open it up for any final thoughts that you want to share with us.

**Sgt. Fahteh Gill:**

To all my Marines and all service members specifically, but I can speak better for Marine Corps, behavioral health is a resource that I have utilized multiple times and it has helped me through many dark times, and it just provides a third-party perspective on what your life situation is at the time. I know for a lot of us, our friends are people we work with, so there's never really that separation between work. And so, if you're ever looking for resources, behavioral health is a good one. You have the chaplain. You're never alone. There's going to be points in your life that you might feel alone, but at the end of the day, you never are alone. There's always going to be someone who cares for you. And you might not know exactly who that is, but it's our jobs as leaders, as NCOs and just Marines because we take care of each other to make sure that every single one of our Marines is taken care of. So, you're never alone, and if you ever need anything, please reach out to anybody you trust.

**Bruce Moody:**

Excellent, and we will end it there. Sergeant Gill, again, thank you so much.

**Sgt. Fahteh Gill:**

Thank you.

**Bruce Moody:**

Really powerful interview today, and I really encourage you to share this podcast with somebody who can really benefit from hearing it. You can either share the podcast or just let people know that they can go to their favorite podcast app or YouTube, search for Military OneSource, because I want to remind you that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department, and we value you subscribing to the podcast because we do cover a wide variety of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody, thank you so much for joining us today. Take care. Bye-bye.