

## Military OneSource Podcast — Mental Health and Marathons

### 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:

This is Bruce Moody. Before we get started with today's episode, I want to let you know that we will be talking about suicide. And so, if you or somebody that you know is suicidal or in a state of crisis, you can contact the military crisis line 24 hours a day by dialing 988 and pressing one.

You can also start a conversation via online chat or text, and that number is 838255. We're going to put those numbers in the program notes for you. Also in the program notes is a link that you can use if you have any questions or comments about what you hear today, we'd love to hear from you. So, on with the podcast.

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. This week I'm in San Antonio, and right now I am in the home of Staff Sgt. John Fisher, and I spoke to the folks in San Antonio, Joint base San Antonio. They said, "You've got to talk to John Fisher." So here I am in your garage.

#### John Fisher:

That's right.

#### Moody:

Yeah. Welcome to the podcast.

#### Fisher:

Thank you so much for having me. I appreciate you.

**Moody:**

And also joining us is tech sergeant, a brand new tech sergeant, congratulations, Andrew Pond.

**Andrew Pond:**

It's good to have you here. Thanks for meeting us in the cave.

**Moody:**

Yeah. OK, this is the cave. So to that, and we'll get to that, we're going to explain where we are. We're in the garage, which is, I would say it's a workout place, but you have to be at a certain echelon or of commitment in order to do any of this stuff that I see laid out here. We'll get to that. Doing hard things, right? That's what we're going to be talking about.

So, specifically we're going to be talking about an ultramarathon that's coming up that you put together?

**Fisher:**

Yes.

**Moody:**

And you are competing in along with others. So, just begin, for those of us who don't have a garage like you have a garage, what is an ultramarathon?

**Fisher:**

An ultramarathon is anything that is over 26.2 miles. Traditionally, the shortest ultramarathon is a 50K or 30ish, about 31 miles.

**Moody:**

And what's yours going to be?

**Fisher:**

This is going to be, it's about 31 miles total.

**Moody:**

OK. And I want get serious for a few minutes, because there's a reason why you are doing this particular event, why you're setting these arduous goals for you. And I'm really going to hand it

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over to you and just allow you to share with us a little bit of a background on you and what brings us here today.

**Fisher:**

Yeah, thank you so much for allowing me the space to share a little bit of my story. So, my journey into defining resilience really started in August of 2022. My marriage was at an all-time low. I had battled a lot of mental health issues for a few years.

A few years before that specific time I was in a car accident, and a few months after that I forwarded out to Baghdad for 30 days on a deployment and experienced a rocket attack.

I was very close to that, close enough where it physically rattled me and shook me off the bed, but it really messed me up mentally because showed up to work the next day, no one was talking about it and I needed to talk about it.

Well, fast-forward a few years, I just started losing my compassion for people. And that was weird to me because I've always cared deeply about people. So, I knew something was wrong, I knew something was off, and I needed to do some soul-searching.

Well, I had a conversation with my wife at the time, we are now divorced, but I told her that I no longer had any desire to live, and I told her that I wanted out. It was actually in this garage where I wanted to follow through with how I wanted to end my life.

And, at the time, I was going to wait for my daughter, who was two at the time, wait until she fell asleep and I was going to get a gun, I was going to put a bullet in my head in this garage. And I told my wife at the time that, like I was saying before, I had no desire to live anymore and I didn't get a response from her, it just didn't go anywhere from there.

So, I knew that I needed to ask myself, "Am I in a healthy space right now?" And the answer was no. And I thought about what I wanted to follow through with, with my plans for suicide, and I was like, "Well, I really don't want my daughter to grow up without me as her dad anymore."

I didn't have a good relationship with my dad. He was not a present father, and I didn't want the same for my child.

So, I thought about my child, and within the same week that I had those suicidal thoughts, my friend Andy, who's sitting with us right now, called me and he asked if I wanted to run a 50-mile ultramarathon in Palo Duro, North Texas. This was two months heads up, I instantly said yes, without hesitation.

At the time, ultramarathons were ... I was familiar with ultramarathons, but I defined them as impossible. There's no way that a guy like me, an underdog like me, is going to be able to accomplish something so seemingly insurmountable.

But in my core, what I needed was hope. And I always get choked up talking about this part, just because it was an invitation that I didn't know I needed, that I accepted. And what that required on my end was not confidence, but it was courage to say yes.

So, I leaned into a moment of courage and said yes. Trained for two months leading up to that race, and I did not meet the 50-mile goal that I set, I got 35 by the end of the day, but I do remember a very pivotal moment on that trail for the first ultra because I became very familiar with an IT band and it flared up pretty hard.

**Moody:**

I'm not catching what you're saying.

**Fisher:**

My IT band, so the pain that I felt was on the outside of my knee, and I thought that my knee was going to fall off.

Later, I found out that it's actually more connected to my hip and I needed to become stronger, so that's why I bought a bunch of weights, and that's why this gym has all this equipment in here, because I knew I needed to become stronger for that future race. But I was not strong in the legs to continue that event.

But, the very significant moment that I will always remember for that first ultra was the moment I crossed the start line again to start the next lap, a 100 meters past that start, I was not going to be able to complete 50 miles, and I stopped, I turned around, I looked at the parking lot, I looked at the vehicle that I was in to get there, and I was like, "Man, I could just take that and leave, chalk it up to a lesson learned and figure it out another time."

Another part of me was saying, "I can continue with what I have. It's going to look a little different than I anticipated, but I have a choice and I can continue to define perseverance with the time that I have today."

So, the rest of that day was slow and it was not fast, but it gave me a fundamental understanding and appreciation for progress. Progress doesn't need to be fast, it just needs to be consistent.

So, that was a major lesson that I learned for that first ultra, and what I learned from that opportunity was when you volunteer for extreme momentary discomfort, there's a lesson to learn that you can apply to daily life.

So, for the last two years, I've continued to volunteer for extreme momentary discomfort in the form of ultramarathons, and just two months ago completed my first 200-miler, which at a time I thought was completely impossible, but I went back to the first ultra that I stood the line for

and was reminded of what perseverance looks like. Slow, at times, but as long as you put one foot in front of the other, it's progress.

So, through my journey of running ultras, I started to gain more compassion for people, and this was presented actually when I ran my first 100-miler. I ran my first 100-miler on that assault runner treadmill in this garage looking at that wall, that is the same spot that I intended on ending my life, and that's why I painted three words in red on that black wall.

Integrity and patience. Those are the practices that I lean into every day. Integrity is doing what I know I need to do, even if I don't want to. And it's staying true to my core values and my value and compassion, caring for people.

But, to do the things I know I need to do, it's going to require patience, because through whatever journey people are going through, whoever's listening to this could be going through a really hard time and dealing with adversity, and it's genuine, but we need patience to endure that adversity and to endure that discomfort.

So, me accepting an invitation to run 100 miles on a treadmill in my garage, I needed integrity, I needed patience. And through that process, I thought I was going to be fueled by this goal to accomplish 100 miles, but it's the middle of the night and I'm running, I actually was fueled by compassion for humanity, and that is what fueled me to check that box of running 100 miles.

I finished that 100-miler at 2:30 in the morning with no audience, fueled purely by thinking about people and just loving people. But through all of that, the internal command is endure, period.

So, that's why I have those three words painted red, integrity, patience, and endure. And I get to stand my line every day. I get to face the wall and lean into that momentary discomfort to learn lessons and continue to define perseverance through discomfort.

And so, that's my message for people is volunteer for discomfort for a purpose, and let that discomfort teach you something about yourself and take those lessons, apply them to daily life, and encourage other people through the lessons you've learned for yourself, and you get to inspire other people by being an example of defining perseverance.

Because there's a fundamental understanding that life is hard, period, and instead of avoiding discomfort, I say embrace it so that we can continue to learn those lessons to keep moving forward.

So, all these lessons that I learned, I didn't want to be selfish with them anymore, and as I was training for another 100-miler out in the trails in a remote area of Chapman Annex where Special Warfare and SERE does a lot of their training, I realized if I can learn lessons about myself in remote areas, then maybe I can extend an invitation to other hurting humans that are assigned to this base as well.

Because I think there's a lot of us that are hurt, we just don't want to talk about it. So, for me to lead by example, I share my hurt, I share my struggle, and I continue moving forward and I want to invite other people to show up for themselves, so they have an opportunity to learn something about themselves and continue moving forward through discomfort.

So, in two weeks, Lackland Air Force Base, we're going live with first-ever ultramarathon on the base, and we've got 50 people signed up so far, and this is paid for event by the FSS, Force Support Squadron, they're funding the entire event.

And I'm just so grateful because 50 people have said yes to an invitation, and I'm grateful to be in a position to help facilitate this event. I don't want to take full credit, because this is a team event.

I couldn't do it without the support of all the key players. Andy, who's joining us today, he's going to be running the aid station, so he's going to be aid station crew chief, making sure that every runner out there is supported when it comes to their nutrition and hydration and fueling them, so they can continue to chase themselves.

So, that's a little bit about me and my story and what brought me to where I'm at today, but ultimately what allows me to have the fortitude to continue moving forward is just knowing that there's no race that can check this box that validates me as a person.

I'm not validated by my accomplishments, I am fueled by compassion for people, period. So, I just care about people, I love people and I want to show it in a big way. I say it a lot, but my mission in life is love fiercely, because I have no reason not to.

### **Moody:**

When you're engaging with somebody and you want to help them set and reach a goal, how do you work with them to determine the type of goal that they should be setting? Because they may not be at the level of fitness that you are, or have ever tested themselves.

And I could just tell straight away from listening to your story, when you're reaching for goals that you've never attempted before, so you're not even aware whether it's a potential for you to do, so how do you help people find an appropriate goal for them to reach?

### **Fisher:**

Yeah, that's a great question. There's a phrase out there that people may be familiar with, it's movement is medicine. So, my recommendation and encouragement for people who are struggling and they don't know how to take that first step, it's to literally just standing up and taking a step, move. So, when we move for an extended period of time, through the act of doing something that requires endurance, for me it's running, but it could be swimming, it could be

getting on a bike, it could be walking, endorphins start to release, we start to feel a little better, start to gain a little bit of clarity.

So, with that my recommendation is, I may have said it earlier, but volunteer for discomfort. To do something that you can volunteer for for an extended amount of time, where you're pulled outside of your comfort zone and you have an opportunity to practice integrity, which again is doing what you know you need to do, even if you don't think you can, and having the patience to endure that momentary discomfort.

And it can look and sound different for every single person. If it's someone that's listening to this who's sitting on the couch and they just don't want to get up, I would encourage them to get up, go walk around the block.

If it's someone who ... Well, I think I'll just stick with that because I don't want to give too many specifics because it's going to look and sound different for everybody. Every time I run, it's uncomfortable. I don't run because I'm trying to increase my physical fitness, I'm running because it allows me opportunities to lean into integrity and patience and to endure that discomfort.

So, that's why I run. It's not because I'm good and I don't believe I'm a good runner. I would never even call myself a runner, but that's my encouragement, I hope that that means something to someone.

**Moody:**

So, Tech Sgt. Pond, again, congratulations. You're a brand new tech sergeant, and I wanted to get your thoughts on the conversation that we're having and what you see perhaps in other people as they're making progress toward a goal, or maybe even going before that, getting them from not having a goal, to setting a goal, to what happens when they start making progress toward that goal.

**Pond:**

Oh, that's a phenomenal question actually, because John and I have had this conversation numerous times. So, I was actually a part of that conversation for the 50-miler, and it was the same thing that happened to me actually, somebody else asked me at seven o'clock in the morning on a Monday if I wanted to do something like that.

I'm like, "Well, I don't know what else to say other than, 'OK, let's do this.'" And again, I had no idea what I was doing either.

But I think through the process of the training and the events, because we did a bunch of them back-to-back as a group, and we really made a bit of a culture out of it in the process of this, and so there was so much discussion about, "Hey, what gets you up? What keeps you going at the

end of the day? What do you do when you know you're getting off of work and you still have another eight miles that you need to put in for the end of the day?"

And I think it's important that everyone finds maybe a why in the beginning. What am I trying to achieve? What I found throughout the process, my why was, well, I want to train. I want to get better. I want to build this culture. I want to build something that people want to be a part of, that people are excited to be a part of.

But that did nothing for me when it came to getting close to the event, or even on the day of the event, and I found this new mantra that I really enjoy, it works really well for me, and instead of why I ask myself, "What if?" And so then I can go through a visualization process of what if I do this or conquer this insurmountable feat that I never thought possible?

And for some people that can be running a 5K, for other people that can be running 500 miles over the course of a few days, or whatever the case is.

So, regardless of whatever your level of experience is, or whatever goal it is that you're trying to pursue, I think it's important to encompass a little bit of visualization in the process of that, especially when you're going through the training.

And one of the pieces I think that gets lost a lot of times when you see these individuals, like John for example, finishing a 200-mile race in Washington, that's the culmination of a whole lot of work.

And I think that the real victory, a lot of times you see it on TV, people setting Guinness World Records, people accomplishing feats that have never been done before. That's the top of the pyramid.

But the real growth and the real progress and all of the good stuff that comes from that happened months and months and months before that accomplishment ever came to fruition.

And I think that that's the important piece that people tend to forget, is you see where you're at and you see the finish line and everyone associates the finish line with success, when in fact I think that the success happens all the way up to the second you toe the line for that race.

Once you get to that race, or that event, or whatever it is, all you have left to do is execute. So, the work that you do and the growth that you do happens in between Point A, the starting point, and Point C, you finish whatever it is that you're trying to do.

**Moody:**

Talk about the community and what the fellowship of fellow athletes, of team members, of colleagues, what do they do to help you set and meet your goals?



**Fisher:**

Yeah. I love this topic, because it just gets brought up all the time. When it comes to community, specifically within the ultra community, it's beautiful because for someone who's volunteering for that discomfort, you stand the line, you go out and you're running in remote areas until you get to that next aid station.

And by the time you get to the aid station, you're physically, mentally, emotionally, even spiritually depleted, to a degree. You get to an aid station and there's a group of individuals who are there waiting for you, encouraging you, which I believe is a basic need for every human, because fundamentally we acknowledge, whether we say it out loud or not, life is hard.

We're struggling. What we need is for people by our side to encourage us and maybe give us a pat on the back or just say, "Hey, you're doing a good job." In an ultra, you get to an aid station, you meet with those people who are telling you, "You're doing a good job, keep going."

All these things that we need to hear on a daily basis so that we can continue on our own personal journey. And then they give us other basic needs that we all need — food, water, all those other essential basic needs.

And when we are running an ultra, it is an act of humility. I believe that we are stripped of our ego, we're stripped of everything we think we know about our self-worth and we're leveled, we're brought to a place of absolute humility.

And in that place of humility, I believe that is where subconscious can become conscious, and we become more self-aware of who we are internally.

But, to answer your question about community, it's just so beautiful. It doesn't matter what you look like, what you smell like, what you believe in, it's just a bunch of people who are encouraging other people as they volunteer for the hardest things they've ever done their entire life.

The person in the very front is encouraging the person in the very back, on the trail. So, is there a level of competition? Sure. But ultimately it's encouragement. And so, that's what I believe is the most beautiful aspect to the community within the ultra realm.

**Moody:**

Within the military community, it is really neat to see how closely the concept of competition and comradery track. You look out for your buddy by giving them the hardest game that you can give, and I love that.

I think what I want to do to wrap things up is to talk to two people. The person who needs to get a hold of their wellness by setting goals, and the person who sees someone that they need to talk to. How do we talk to the person who needs to start setting goals?

And how do we talk to the person who sees somebody who's down, who really needs something in their lives? What is the first step, the first words we want to say to them?

**Pond:**

I think it just starts with a conversation, to be honest. And that's sometimes the most difficult part is having the courage to be honest with somebody. And so, I talked about the culture piece of it, that's where all of us grew a lot closer was through the ability to not only see each other where we were at the time, but also to be honest about it.

Because nowadays it's so easy to just have surface level conversations with people and get by, right? Especially with all the technology and everything like that that's out there distracting us.

So, being able to, A, be self-aware enough, and then also know people well enough to identify that something's off, but then also be willing to be courageous in that moment and talk to them about it.

And it could be a situation like something that John dealt with, or it could just be somebody that quite frankly isn't taking very good care of themselves. Because we see that a lot too, and that's having that conversation like, "Look, you've already agreed to have integrity for your own personal fitness, for your own personal affairs."

And a lot of times too, when we look around, and I know for myself specifically, when I look around at people and I see their fitness starting to slip it starts to make me wonder what else is slipping? Because this is where the discipline comes in, and it's one of those things that absolutely you have control over.

So, that opens the door for a conversation to happen. And it's important to be not necessarily judgmental, but direct. And that's if I see somebody that needs to set up a goal for themselves, and I would just say begin with whatever end state you have in mind, start that visualization process.

Start figuring out why. Start figuring out what if you accomplish something like this.

**Moody:**

And you mentioned the importance of working with people, you want to bring them to the point where they start bringing discipline into their lives, which brings me to the garage where we currently are.

When I pulled up, I drove up the street and I went, “Oh, is this the right address?” And I looked into the garage and I said, “Oh, this is most definitely the right address.”

Because this garage is fully outfitted for somebody who is going to take on incredible physical challenges. And maybe we can just wrap things up by talking about the value of doing hard things that makes you able to deal with the hard, emotional and spiritual and the challenges of life.

How does doing the hard things, developing a personal discipline, like what we have in this garage, how does it developing that personal discipline to do hard things physically set you up for confidence that you can handle the complexities of life?

**Fisher:**

When we volunteer for extreme momentary discomfort, we have an opportunity to be humbled, and in that state of humility, that’s when we have an opportunity to have a conversation with our character.

The more self-awareness we have about ourselves, the more integrity we can develop and we can gain that self-awareness that we need as we continue moving forward. But ultimately, what people need is hope.

So, when you volunteer for that discomfort, you gain that self-awareness, you realize that you are much more capable than you ever thought possible. That gives you hope, and that’s what it’s all about.

I need people to hear me when I say motivation has never been a prerequisite to accomplishing anything in life. So, if people are waiting to be motivated, it may never come. But what you need to do is make a conscious decision to be uncomfortable for a moment, because it’s going to give you opportunities to learn more about yourself, and through that process, you gain hope.

So, like Andy was talking about, the finish line to me represents a transition. It’s turning the page on the story of your life. And if you’re reading the story of your life, is it something that you want to continue reading? Is it something that you want to turn the page on? Is it something that you want to hand off to a friend, or a loved one, or to your children, people that need to continue to be inspired?

But I also want people to understand that the process, which is a continuous process of discipline and consistency, is progress. The accomplishment of running a specific race isn’t the end. It’s the transition to continue to keep going.

**Pond:**

Yeah, for sure, Bruce. The work really happens in the day-to-day, month-to-month process. And then one thing that I loved about it, and I didn't realize this at first, is you can't carry a cellphone and be scrolling through Instagram and Facebook and texting people while you're running for four hours, starting at two o'clock on a Saturday morning.

Nor are you hitting up social media while you're knocking out reps on the bench, or doing pull-ups, right? You have to be in that moment with yourself, and given enough time and enough repetition I think that's how you begin to find yourself.

And I began to cherish those moments, and those hours sometimes, where I would completely unplug from the technological side of life that seems to have taken over everything, and I was forced to not run from my problems, but run with my problems.

All right? And at that point, I was able to take this time to identify what it is that's going on with me, what it is that could be going on with any of my relationships, what it is that could be going on with my spirituality, and it gave me the time to center myself and everything was quiet and it was just me.

So, give yourself the gift of having some discipline, taking some time, and giving yourself some time. Chase that goal, and you're going to find yourself in the process, not on the day of execution, but in the process of working for whatever that goal is.

**Moody:**

Excellent. And we'll leave it there. Thank you to the both of you.

If you have any questions about or comments about what you've heard today, there's a link in the program notes, you can send us a comment. Want to remind you that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department.

Be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts, because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody, thank you for listening, take care. Bye-bye.