



Heroes and Horses

The 41-Day Program

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Organization and Program Overview

Introduction to Organization

Heroes and Horses is a 41-day, multifaceted self-reflection course that uses horses, nature's elements, challenge, timeless wisdom practices, nutrition, digital detox, and conscious action to help combat veterans rediscover their purpose and inner strength. Our biggest highlight as an organization is the social return on investment and its direct impact on the lives of veterans, which connects to many others. Founded in 2014 by Micah Fink, a former Navy Seal, the 41-day program reaches back to traditional wisdom in its approach to recovery for American Veterans. Over the past 11 years, the program has evolved and grown in the diversity of its modalities, making it a stand-alone in the veteran non-profit space. With an estimated 50,000 non-profits specifically for veterans, Americans will spend 6 billion annually on giving, with top organizations holding hundreds of millions of dollars. It hasn't made a comparative difference. Heroes and Horses is actively working to change that.

Intended Impacts

1. **Veterans are transformed, becoming free agents of their own lives.** Veterans engage fully in experience, no longer simply consuming information and subjecting themselves to abstract theories and treatments but rather become free agents in their own lives. They move beyond the acquisition of endless information and additional diagnoses, gaining new perspectives based on powerful experiences that allow an individual to change themselves and take radical ownership over their lives.

2. **Veterans reconnect with their core.** Philosophy becomes action. Veterans are taught the love of wisdom as a backstop for a way to think and to approach life's hardest challenges. This arc is the foundation of knowing oneself; one's likes, dislikes, aversions, etc., and is taught alongside the experience that generates the opportunity to live their philosophy in action; healing wounds and restoring the individual.
3. **Veterans learn to grow beyond a story and self-limiting beliefs.** Labels create false identities and self-limiting beliefs. Veterans are supported in defining what success is to the individual outside of cultural or ideological boundaries, focusing on the uniqueness of the individual who is defining it.
4. **Veterans harmonize all their faculties in a 360-degree approach to healing.** True healing is a 360-degree approach. Veterans are taught a holistic approach, recognizing mental, physical, and spiritual alignment, and promoting healing across all aspects of human experience.
5. **Veterans develop self-mastery and sustainable growth.** Veterans cultivate the ability to sustain personal growth and transformation, mastering themselves in all dimensions: mental, physical, and emotional, establishing lifelong practices that ensure continued progress.

Evaluation Methodology

The aim of our evaluation was to see what kind and quality of impact the Heroes and Horses 41-Day program is having on veterans. To understand this, we explored two broad evaluation questions:

1. What kind and quality of impact are we having on veterans?
2. What aspects of our program are causing this impact?

Over the course of the project, we (a) developed and refined our ideas of intended impact and indicators, (b) designed and implemented a mixed methods outcome evaluation using both qualitative and quantitative means to collect and analyze data, (c) identified themes and findings, and (d) considered the implications to those findings for program improvement and innovation.

This project began by identifying and clarifying the intended impact of the Heroes and Horses 41-Day program. Once the ideas of impact had been developed, we used the Heart Triangle™ model to identify qualitative and quantitative indicators of impact on the mental, behavioral, and emotional changes in veterans. We used these indicators to design a qualitative interview protocol and a quantitative questionnaire to evaluate progress toward achieving our intended impact.

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

For the qualitative portion of the evaluation, we designed an in-depth interview protocol to gain data about the structural, qualitative changes resulting from our program.

We delimited our population to graduates of the Heroes and Horses program who had completed the full 41-day course and had returned to their home environments, in order to capture not only immediate program impact but also the integration and sustainability of changes over time. This

approach ensured that participants could reflect on both their experience at the ranch and the application of program principles in real-world conditions.

Our population size for this evaluation was 106, which included program graduates from 2022 to 2025. We used a purposeful, stratified sampling technique to select a representative sample from the population we serve. Our sample size was 21, drawn from the following strata of our population:

- Program cohorts spanning from the refined (2022–2025) program structures
- Participants with varying lengths of time since program completion (recent graduates to several years post-program)
- A range of entry conditions, including participants who entered in acute crisis, moderate distress, and those seeking growth and direction
- Diverse post-program outcomes, including those demonstrating strong integration of tools as well as those still navigating challenges

Our interviews were conducted by Jason Laramore. We convened one-on-one interviews lasting from between 45 minutes and one hour in length and collected interview data using the Otter AI transcription app, Zoom transcription, and typed notes.

We then analyzed the data inductively using a modified version of thematic analysis. The interviewer analyzed the data from individual interviews to identify initial themes. As a team, we developed common themes from all of the interviews collectively. We identified the overarching and inter-interview themes that emerged from the full scope of our data analysis to illuminate the collective insights and discoveries. We mapped these themes visually and examined the dynamics among the themes, causes and catalysts of the themes, new or surprising insights related to the themes, and relationships between the themes that were revealed in the data. We used Claude AI to then determine the most significant and meaningful discoveries and brought them forward as findings.

Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

For the quantitative portion of the evaluation, we designed a questionnaire to collect data on our quantitative indicators of impact. We administered this instrument to 195 participants, going back to 2016, and had a 30% response rate. We created two categories, or “buckets,” to compare different eras of the Heroes and Horses program. The first bucket includes graduates from the program’s founding through 2021 and reflects the steady evolution of the original program structure. The second bucket includes graduates from 2022 to 2025 and represents participants who completed the program after its major transformation, including the purchase of a permanent ranch home and the expanded integration of modalities such as breathwork, sauna, cold therapy, Anti-Inflammatory Farmacy nutritional development, refined fitness programming, meditation, and subconscious workshops. While the core of the program has remained, the utilization of the horse/human connection, the refining of our philosophy and approach to healing has continued to evolve. This sampling represents

the full evolution of the program, reflecting its progression from early iterations into its current, refined form.

The data were analyzed primarily using measures of central tendency, with an N/A option where applicable for those participants who came through prior to the implementation of some modalities. We identified key insights, patterns, and gaps within the data and incorporated these discoveries into the related findings. The most significant insights from the quantitative data are described in the following narrative.

Limitations

- Response rate was impacted by the time passed since the program and fundamental changes in the make-up of program modalities.

Letter From The Founder

In a nonprofit, the resources don't matter if the impact isn't measurable, lasting, or quantifiable. Over the past six years, multiple attempts involving many methods have been made to capture the program's impact, none of which have truly captured the essence of the profound work done here at Heroes and Horses. The M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust Project Impact has culminated in the most distilled, focused, and comprehensive report in this organization's history.

It is paramount to think about this problem beyond the superficial or ideological. We must improve. We need to analyze the full spectrum and dynamics of human transformation to better present the case for an institutional change that will save lives. This is the necessity of Project Impact's work.

Currently, all of the "treatments" are stacked against the recipient. The general interpretation and approach is that those with the largest machines, specialized degrees, the best AI, or the newest drugs know best. What follows is the outsourcing of choices. This weakens the inner directive. We are then left with a system that is supposedly on the cutting edge and propounding great discoveries but never touch the heart of the individual. It never empowers it or strengthens the dial.

In other words, it's a series of abstractions. A human explanation must come from one's own intuition. It must come ultimately from experience. Not the experimental method of science, where things are pulled apart, taken down to their lowest common denominator, and described to us. Does this tell us anything about a human's broken heart, or the deep need for forgiveness? Can it process grief?

Heroes and Horses is returning the focus to individual experience placing it on par with clinical interventions.

We have decided to simply empower human experience. This is the core essence of Heroes and Horses. We empower experience creating transformational environments where the relationship between challenge and purpose can be redefined.

Thank you for supporting this mission and for choosing to learn more by reading this report. These are real stories, not just of individuals but of the whole ecosystem of a person's life. This Project Impact report is a summation of those who have chosen to chart the unknown path of "Knowing Thyself." Healing is a miracle, and I have seen it on the individual level so profoundly that I know it's possible to see it in the world. I have a deep optimism because I see what is possible. As you dig into this report, my hope is that each person can read it introspectively, take the truth for themselves, and apply it to their lives.

-Micah Fink, *Founder and CEO*

Findings

Finding 1 | For several, this wasn't a program - it was a lifeline.

Multiple participants arrived at or near the edge; in their own words, the program interrupted trajectories that were heading somewhere irreversible.

Across the interviews, several participants describe arriving in states of acute crisis: active suicidal ideation, prior attempts, severe emotional collapse, or burnout so profound they no longer recognized themselves. These are not abstract claims but specific, unprompted testimonies of being at a point where continuation was no longer assured. One states directly, "Without the program, I wouldn't be here. I was... 100% suicidal." Another discloses, "I literally put a gun to my head, dude, and pulled the trigger." A third recounts his wife's question before he left: "Are you gonna come back?"—a question carrying multiple layers of uncertainty about his physical, emotional, or relational return.

For these men, the program was not merely beneficial but interruptive. They credit it with more than insight or skill-building; they describe it as the pivot point away from self-destruction. One explains, "The program saved my life... it's all the things that are coming afterwards, from the program, that are revealing myself to me on a daily basis." Another notes the absence of suicidal thoughts since returning: "I haven't talked or thought about suicide once since I've been home." These accounts span years post-program, with participants alive and attributing their survival to what began at the ranch.

The data shows this crisis state was not universal; just under half of participants use explicit "edge" or "saved my life" language, while others describe the program as profoundly valuable without framing it as rescue. What unites the crisis voices is their clarity about what was at stake: not just personal suffering, but permanent relational loss.

This finding carries weight precisely because it is candid about limits. The program interrupted trajectories, but the work continues. Darkness returns for some, but participants now describe climbing out rather than succumbing. One reflects directly, "I went to a pretty dark place at the end of this last year. But the difference is, instead of staying there and succumbing to it, I was able to find my

way back.” Survey data reveals across the board improvement in optimism, gratitude, well-being and meaning, but these testimonies reveal the human stakes beneath the numbers; a turning point that didn’t promise men a cure but gave them a choice.

KEY INSIGHTS

- Several arrived in acute crisis with active suicidal ideation, attempts, or emotional collapse.
- The program is credited as a specific turning point interrupting irreversible trajectories.
- Family relationships frame the stakes—what would have been permanently lost.
- Darkness persists for some, but navigation tools now enable return rather than surrender.
- The men who were in the deepest crisis at entry often show the clearest contrast in their current state.
- While not universal, the gravity within the subset creates profound program evidence.
- In survey questions related to reduced crisis risk, over 75% of program graduates routinely indicated significant positive shifts (see Figures 1 and 2).

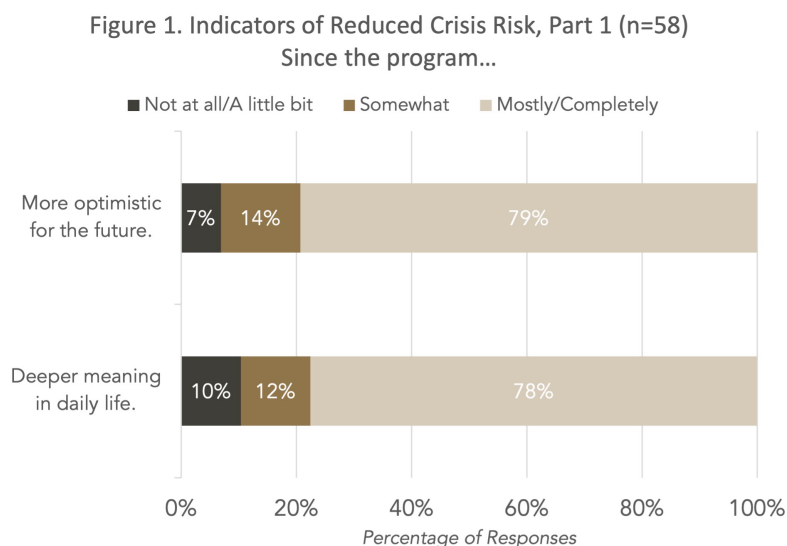
IN THEIR OWN WORDS

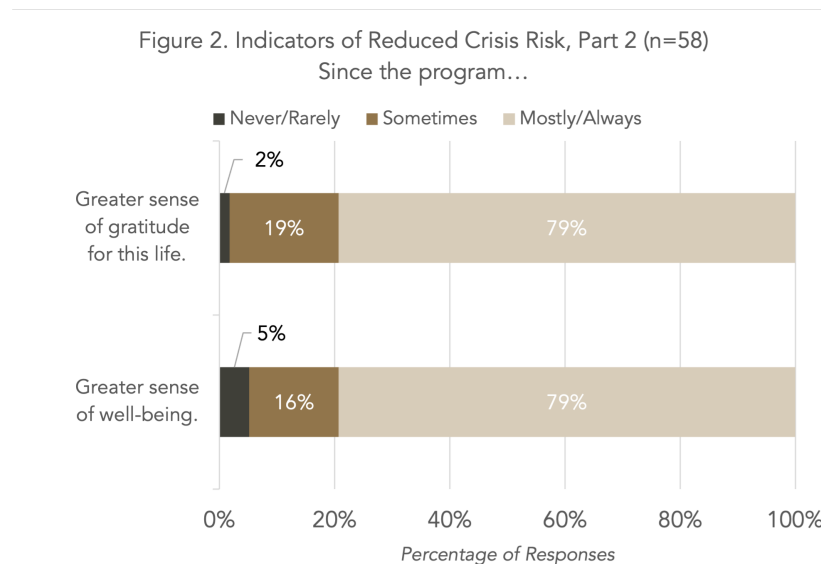
I was consumed by negative thoughts and emotions and negative thought patterns and subconscious programming to the point where it was... going to end in a way that wasn't good for anyone around me.

My mental bandwidth was so little. My brain was almost fried. I didn't even recognize the person I had become.

I felt I was disposable, so I felt the relationships were disposable. I had that mindset that people would probably be better off if I wasn't in their life.

I literally put a gun to my head, dude, and pulled the trigger. I didn't care anymore. But now... It's my driving force.





Finding 2. “Veteran” is a chapter, not the whole book.

Participants arrive anchored to a military identity but leave with a clearer sense of who they are, independent of rank, role, or service.

Across the interviews, participants consistently describe arriving to the ranch with identities anchored to a military role, rank, or function followed by a destabilizing disorientation once their military career comes to an end. This loss is often experienced as a vacuum, one routinely filled with isolation, substances, or compulsive patterns. The participants do not frame this as a single moment of disorientation, but as an extended period of not knowing who they are without the structure and identity the military provides.

Within the program, participants describe a gradual but clear shift away from identity-as-role toward identity-as-self. Who they are is no longer simply what they did. Notably, this transition is not toward adopting a new role, but toward reconnecting with a sense of self grounded in the present rather than defined by the past.

Importantly, participants do not describe simply replacing one identity with another. Several participants articulate a more durable shift toward defining themselves through character: “I care more about my character than my reputation,” “my responsibility...is to be my truest self.” One participant’s caution about becoming a “cowboy” instead of a soldier highlights an awareness of how easily identity can reattach to new external labels.

The shift towards identity as self over role is both foundational and incomplete. Participants consistently frame detaching from military identity as a prerequisite for other changes, yet many describe it as ongoing rather than resolved. Some still feel the need to fill a role, while others are

actively experimenting with what self-actualization looks like. The finding holds that tension: a movement away from identity defined externally toward a more independent sense of self, with outcomes ranging from clarity to continued exploration.

KEY INSIGHTS

- Separation from a military role produces disorientation and loss of purpose.
- Movement from identity defined by function, rank, and title toward an internal sense of self.
- Participants frame change as reconnecting with who they are, not creating someone new.
- Values and ways of being replace external roles as primary identity anchors.
- Letting go of role based military identity is foundational but incomplete, with continued tension and exploration.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

I realized people often attach themselves to identities like 'I was a Marine' or 'I'm a sniper.' When you pigeonhole yourself into one identity, you create something you can lose.

When you leave the military, you lose a big piece of your identity. It takes time to figure out what your purpose is again. The program helped me reconnect with that.

Once I made that connection that the uniform is off, it's a chapter in your book, it doesn't identify who you are... before the program, I always let my career in the military define me.

I identified before, like, oh, I was a Recon Marine. What does that mean? That means nothing, honestly. To be able to let that go and say, who are you, and start figuring out who I actually am, that's a base set of characteristics.

I'm just me.... I don't hold onto those identities anymore, because that's what was keeping me stuck.

Who am I alone in the dark? That's the question.

Finding 3 | Identity beyond the diagnosis.

Participants describe identities imposed by the very systems meant to heal them; VA ratings, clinical diagnoses, and provider prognoses absorbed as self-definition, and describe shedding those labels when lived evidence contradicts them.

Participants describe a particular kind of wound that forms after service: the wound of being named by the people meant to help. Throughout the interviews, participants recount how VA ratings, clinical diagnoses, disability percentages, and the language of providers and prognoses were absorbed not just as information, but as identity itself. These labels quietly answer the questions a transitioning veteran is asking about himself: What am I capable of? What should I expect of my future? How broken am I? When the answers arrive from a clinician or a rating letter, they carry the weight of authority, and many participants describe accepting them as revealing that they had done so.

Through conditions created in the program, these absorbed clinical narratives become visible and, often, shed. The data shows four mechanisms specific to iatrogenic labels: physical proof that contradicts the “broken” or “damaged” label in real time; extended distance from institutional language and medical settings; peer witnessing that reflects a participant’s capability back to him in ways a clinical encounter cannot; and a framing around authorship that reclaims the narrative from the institution. Within this environment, many participants describe specific moments when a diagnosis, rating, or prognosis “came off” and a different sense of self emerged.

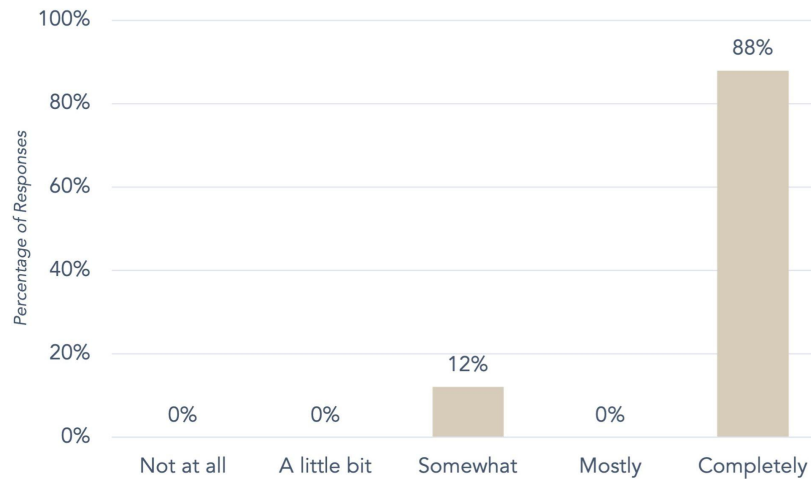
The data reveals that clinical and institutional labels are among the most clearly disrupted identities that participants arrive at the ranch carrying. Participants describe sharp before-and-after contrasts after sustained physical effort, wilderness work, and time away from appointments, paperwork, and the rating scales that had been allowed to quietly define them. Several name specific labels they had accepted about their bodies or their minds and describe the moment those labels stopped fitting.

Rather than erasing injury or dismissing care received, participants describe separating themselves from the institutional narratives they had come to inhabit. Some rework old diagnoses into information they can use, without letting them function as identity. Others remain mid-transition, holding clinical labels loosely while they test new evidence. Our survey of past participants revealed that fully 88% understand healing is multi-faceted and must include mind, body, and spirit; not a prescription (see Figure 3). The finding holds that range: from decisive shedding of a rating or prognosis to partial, still-unfolding release from institutional self-definition.

KEY INSIGHTS

- Care systems (VA ratings, diagnoses, prognoses) can become internalized as limiting self-definitions.
- Institutional language is absorbed unexamined; participants rarely recognize provider framing as an identity claim until it is challenged.
- Physical challenge and lived proof disrupt the “broken” narrative in real time.
- Distance from clinical settings and paperwork allows absorbed diagnoses to become visible as labels rather than facts.
- Clinical labels often shift decisively; participants describe specific moments when a diagnosis or rating stopped fitting.
- 88% of surveyed participants understand healing is multi-faceted and must include mind, body, and spirit (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Since the program, I better understand that healing is multi-faceted and must include the mind, body, and spirit. (n=58)



IN THEIR OWN WORDS

I had subconsciously bought into a lot of beliefs that I was broken or incapable mentally or physically. Going through the program helped me remember that I am a good man, that I am a hard worker, and that I'm not the sum of my mistakes.

I was definitely leaning into letting those providers and people, as I was separating, tell me, "Hey, this is a pretty heinous injury," or "There will be long-term effects if you don't change some things." I let that kind of turn me into a puddle of goo.... being out and being physical every day helped me really recalibrate that. You know, I'm not physically broken.

It is just that. It is stuff that quickly becomes tribal lore, societal norms, and negative beliefs. I am proof of that. I used to look around and think, well, man, I should be limping around like that dude, he is my age. It is all just stuff we tell ourselves.

There's a limitless version of me inside of me. I just needed something to poke the bear.

Finding 4 | The story is theirs to write again.

One of the most consistent themes that emerges throughout the interviews is a shift away from the belief that life is happening to the participant to the realization that circumstances happen for them.

The data shows that many participants arrive at the program blaming their current circumstances on other people, past events, or forces outside their control without taking ownership of the role that they play in creating those circumstances. This framing is challenged and the focus placed on personal responsibility for thoughts, choices, and actions. This shift is consistently articulated across interviews; often unprompted, with 90% of those surveyed stating that they now take complete ownership over their circumstances most of the time or always (see Figure 4). One participant states simply, "It's your life, it's your story... you're writing your own story."

Crucially, participants do not describe this as an easy or uplifting realization. It is repeatedly named as difficult, uncomfortable, and, at times, confronting. One participant calls it "the most difficult lesson," another calls it "huge... radical acceptance of one's own failures." Participants emphasize that this is not about controlling circumstances, but about claiming responsibility for their response to them. Participants don't gleefully step into agency; they choose responsibility even though it is uncomfortable.

Like many of our findings, this shift is also described as ongoing rather than complete. Participants frequently note that they still revert to external blame or "victim mentality" under stress but now recognize it more quickly and have a framework to return to. Several participants found themselves relapsing into old thinking patterns or behaviors, including addiction. They describe these relapses not as failures of the concept, but as part of practicing it. One participant reflects, falling back into old habits did not erase the shift; it clarified the need to reapply it. Across participant accounts, the program is framed not as a fix but as a foundation; a reference point participants can return to when they lose their footing.

Importantly, participants pair increased agency with the recognition that they cannot control others or outcomes, particularly in close relationships. One participant describes this as "letting go of trying to control outcomes," while maintaining responsibility for his own presence and actions. In this way, the shift is not toward total control, but toward grounded self-authorship; living as the driver of one's life rather than a passenger, even when the road remains unpredictable.

KEY INSIGHTS

- The program catalyzes a shift from externalizing responsibility to claiming ownership of one's life and choices.
- Participants are able to focus on controlling responses rather than circumstances or other people.
- Agency is described as uncomfortable and confronting, not a simple empowerment narrative.
- Self-authorship is an ongoing discipline, with frequent lapses and returns.
- The program provides a lasting framework participants revisit, rather than a one-time transformation.
- In survey questions related to taking ownership and responsibility, a large majority of surveyed program graduates routinely indicated significant positive shifts (see Figures 4-6).

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

I can only control what I can control. I can only control me. I can control my thoughts.

It made me realize everything I'm doing is a choice. There's no one else to blame.

It's easy to take the victim route and say, "Oh, the world's happening to me." But realizing that, really, it's your actions through life, that's been really hard to sit back and say, "Yep, that one's on me."

My dynamics within my own life aren't like I'm a victim to my own circumstances anymore, or victim to the things that I thought were holding me down. And now I'm able to break free from that mode of thinking.

...I am in charge of every aspect of my being... I have control over my destiny. And I understand inherently what choices and consequences truly are.

Figure 4. Taking Ownership. (n=58)

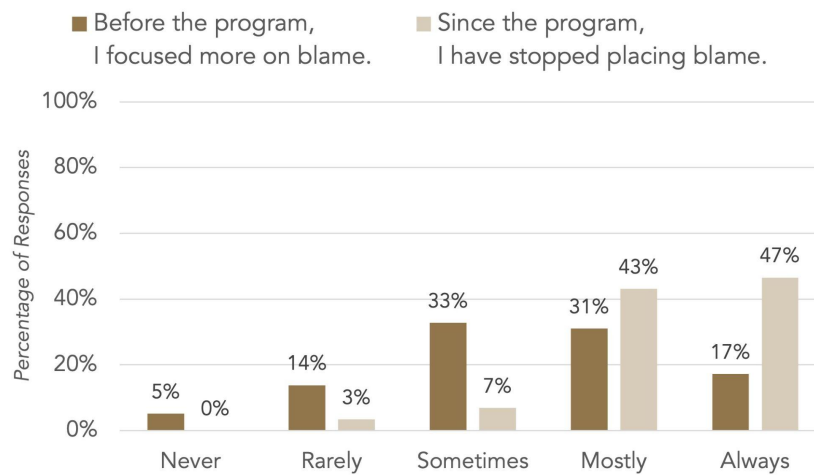


Figure 5. Since the program, I am now able to take total responsibility for all aspects of my life. (n=58)

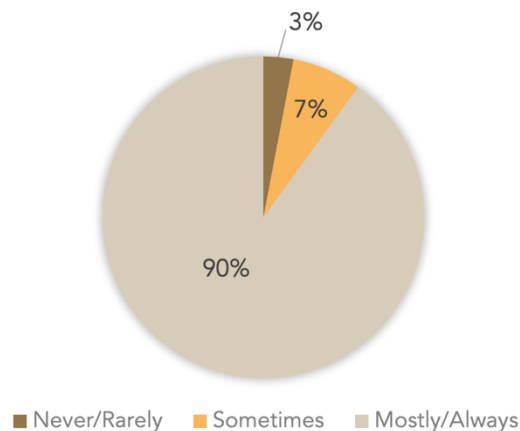
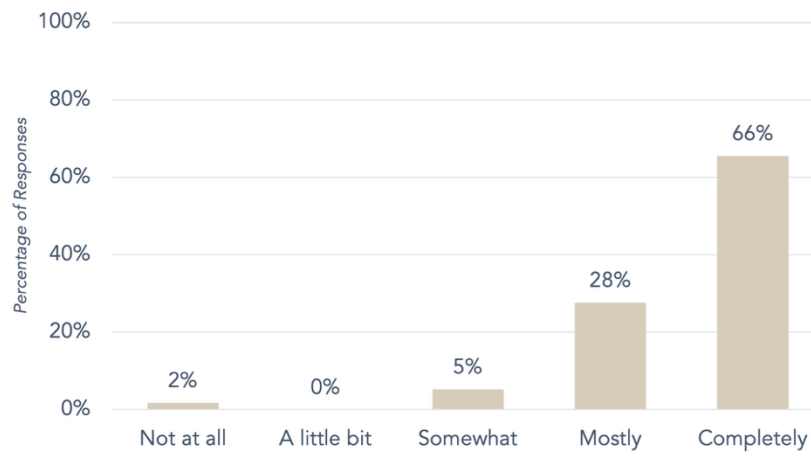


Figure 6. Since the program, I better understand that I am the storyteller of my life, that my circumstances are a result of my own choices. (n=58)



Finding 5 | Taught by what cannot lie: horses and wilderness.

Participants arrive at the ranch trained to perform, suppress, and stay in their heads; they leave changed by two teachers that cannot be bluffed or argued with: the horse, which will not accept a performance in place of presence, and the wilderness, which strips away what is unnecessary and forces a man forward when there is no other way through.

Participants describe arriving at the ranch with the same armor they carried home from service: composure, suppression, and a habit of processing everything through the mind before allowing the body or heart to engage. What stands out across the interviews is that the program's mechanism of change is not primarily classroom teaching or clinical intervention. Participants repeatedly name the horse and the mountain as the active teachers. They do not describe these elements as backdrop. They describe them as the means by which change happens.

The horse is most often described as a mirror that reveals what a participant cannot hide from. A participant cannot think his way into a horse's trust, cannot suppress his way to a calm animal, and cannot command his way forward when the animal reads what he is actually feeling. Each horse teaches a participant that he is felt before he is understood. One participant locates the change directly in the animal: "I definitely have a temper. That horse helped with that." Another describes the mechanism precisely: the horse reflects energy back, earning trust requires consistency, and there is no gap between what a man projects and what the horse receives. For participants trained across years of service to manage their presentation, to appear steady regardless of what they feel, the horse closes that gap entirely. What a man actually is in a given moment is what the horse responds to. This is not philosophy. It is an immediate, physical feedback loop that operates before the mind can intercept it.

The wilderness does different work, but in the same spirit. Where the horse teaches presence, the mountain teaches forward motion and the discipline of continuing when continuing is the only option. Participants describe the pack trip not as a scenic backdrop, but as a contained crucible: days without exits, without distraction, without the ability to defer or opt out. One participant states plainly, "Once you go into the wilderness, the only way out is through." Another describes eleven days without seeing "a car or house," the experience putting everything in perspective, leaving him thinking of his ancestors and how hard life really was. A third nearly quit during a lightning storm on the mock pack trip, pushed through, and arrived at a specific, earned insight: "My limitations were often self-imposed." The wilderness did not teach him this through instruction. It taught him through the absence of any other choice. The mountain removes exits, distractions, and soft landings, leaving participants to confront themselves in a setting that cannot be controlled or negotiated with. In this stripped-down context, what matters becomes clear, and what no longer serves falls away.

What participants carry home is not nostalgia for the ranch but a behavioral posture that continues operating long after they leave. One participant describes the horses as having taught him that anger and rage; tools that once worked in military environments, will not move the animal, and therefore do not belong in his approach to the people he loves. Another returns repeatedly to the phrase "behind a mountain's another mountain," applying it directly to the challenges waiting at home. The real mountains, he says, were there all along. The horse and the mountain become durable teachers precisely because their lessons were learned through the body first. They did not require belief or agreement. They required presence, and presence, once practiced in that country, does not fully leave.

KEY INSIGHTS

- Participants directly credit the horse and the wilderness with specific changes in temper, openness, trust, and resilience.
- The horse teaches presence and honesty by resisting performance and reflecting back the participant's state.
- The wilderness teaches forward motion by removing exits, distractions, and the ability to opt out.
- The lessons land through the body first, not through talk alone.
- The horse and the mountain remain active teachers after the program, carrying their influence back into home life and relationships.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

...You can't out-mad the horse. So, I just kind of committed to not being mad. Whereas in the past, anger and rage were actually a tool that was useful.

Dealing with horses is definitely unique. Because they teach you a lot of things that you cannot learn alone. Such as.... earning their trust, and vice versa, and them reflecting your energy back at you.

...Being out on the pack trip and stuff and feeling like this is what presence feels like. I didn't have that before, because it had been so long since I'd been present.

Behind a mountain's another mountain. All those little principles that we were taught and then felt while we were there. Knowing that the mountain behind the mountain is when you got home. You have real mountains, not just the ones we had there.

One moment that stands out was the mock pack trip when we got caught in a lightning storm. I almost quit.... But I pushed through and the trip was incredible. Moments like that taught me that my limitations were often self-imposed.

Finding 6. Hardened by war, the soul is welcomed back to the whole.

Humans are uniquely spiritual beings with souls damaged and hardened by war. The program treats human spirituality as essential to healing; acknowledged openly, prescribed to no one, restored on each participant's own terms.

Across the data set, a consistent picture emerges of what war asks and what it costs. Participants describe arriving with the soft, interior parts of themselves pushed aside, ignored, hardened, deferred, or left to go quiet over years of readiness, combat, and the requirement of staying hard in environments that do not tolerate feeling. The vocabulary used to describe this feature of humanity is not uniform, but the underlying description is shared. Some call it the soul. Some call it the spirit. Some call it the deepest parts of themselves; inner peace, inner self, the soft places. One describes it as the part of him he had not touched in years and could not, at first, even name. What participants are describing is damage to a dimension of personhood that the mental and physical framing of recovery does not reach. No amount of strength work, talk therapy, or medication had addressed it, because none of those approaches acknowledged it was there to begin with. They skate across the surface of emotion, using prescriptions to keep it smooth and steady, never breaching the depths it rises from.

The program's first and most consequential move is to acknowledge this dimension directly and refuse to leave it out of the conversation. It does not impose a belief system. It holds the spiritual as a legitimate third leg alongside the mental and physical, one that is essential to healing rather than adjacent to it. Participants across a wide range of starting points; religious, non-religious, skeptical, and undefined, describe this acknowledgment as the opening that nothing else had provided. One participant who does not identify as religious captures the posture exactly: "To be the spiritual leader without being religious." Another, working from a framework entirely his own, pauses to clarify before answering, "I'm not talking religion, but that's okay for some if it is. For me, it's not. It's like a key opening up a door. And it's pretty scary to go through. But once you start down that path, you begin to realize that it's kind of how it was always supposed to be." The acknowledgment that this dimension exists, that it has been damaged, that it cannot be bypassed, is what opens the door for soul healing to take place.

The country itself, and the creatures in it, provide the curriculum for rediscovering the soul; not instruction in spirituality but conditions under which the spiritual dimension is encountered rather than avoided. The vast Montana landscape, the weight of an ancient wilderness, the scale of a sky that renders the largest internal battle small; these are not teaching tools in the behavioral sense. They are part of an environment in which the postures a man has been holding for years lose their audience. Rank means nothing to a mountain range. Composure means nothing to the wind. The story of who he had to be in order to survive means nothing to a landscape that does not know him and does not need to. What is left, once those layers are stripped away, is a man in the presence of something older and larger than his own history. In that presence, the part of him that has calcified begins to crack.

One participant, who began with no spiritual language at all, describes afterward a permeability he had not asked for and could not quite explain: seeing a bird, registering it as a sign, finding meaning and messages in the universe. Another names a precise, silent threshold reached on the pack trip: "I am not responsible for half the shit I hold over my own heart." The wilderness did not teach him this. It made it impossible to continue not knowing it. The spiritual dimension is not taught; it is encountered in the presence of animals that will not be performed for and the scale of country that will not be argued with. Participants return home carrying this encounter with them, and the work of integrating it into the rest of a life begins there.

Integration of what is encountered looks different for every participant, and the program does not prescribe what it should look like. One describes reaching "the deepest parts of myself, my soul, so that regardless of whatever happens in life, I know I am absolutely gonna be fine." Another, already holding a faith tradition, describes his spirituality "awakening" and becoming something he could speak about without embarrassment. A third, who resists the spiritual label throughout, still arrives at the same underlying recognition from a different direction: "Your mind, your heart, spirit, it's all gonna follow." Another names inner peace as the source from which everything else draws: "It all comes from one's own inner peace, inner self... you need all three for that complete balance." These are not a single shared belief. They are a single shared recognition: the mental and physical work will not hold without this third piece being named and tended to, and each participant has to work out what to call it on their own terms. The program makes this work possible by opening the space; what fills it belongs to the individual.

As with the other findings, this is not a completed arc. Some participants arrive already spiritually grounded and describe the program deepening knowledge already held. Others arrive skeptical and describe their resistance to their own spirituality softening. What participants consistently describe is that the work does not end at the ranch and that the physical and mental aspects of healing do not hold on their own. Leaving the spiritual dimension unacknowledged is, in participants' own accounts, how they arrived hardened in the first place. Integrating it is how they continue the work of "knowing thyself" beyond the program.

KEY INSIGHTS

- Participants describe arriving with the spiritual dimension of themselves hardened, pushed aside, or silenced after years of service, combat, and the requirement to not feel.
- This damage is not uniformly named; soul, spirit, inner self, soft places, deepest self, but the underlying description is shared, and participants are clear that mental and physical work alone did not reach it.
- The program's acknowledgment of the spiritual dimension as essential, not optional, is repeatedly described as the opening that nothing else had provided.
- The program explicitly does not prescribe a belief system, and participants across a wide range of starting points; religious, non-religious, undefined, name this distinction openly and with care.
- Integration of the soul looks different for every participant, but the shared recognition is that mental and physical healing cannot hold without the third leg being named and tended to on the participant's own terms.
- Several participants describe the spiritual piece as the integrative center that aligns the other two; not a fourth category of work, but what makes the first two cohere.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

I was able to become fully grounded and really rediscover the deepest parts of myself, my soul, so that regardless of whatever happens in life, I know I am absolutely gonna be fine.

It all comes from one's own inner peace, inner self. If one is a little out of whack, you'll never fully reach your potential with the other two. You need all three for that complete balance.

I'm just more awakened, like, my spirituality is awakened. I feel more comfortable with it. I'm not embarrassed of it. I feel free to talk about it.

I rely on inner wisdom, conversations with my dad in spirit, or simply sitting with nature. It might sound strange, but listening inward has given me answers.

I'm not a spiritual person... but if you do all this physical stuff consistently, you're setting conditions for big growth. Your mind, your heart, spirit, it's all gonna follow.

Finding 7 | After years of being numb, emotions came back online.

Unfamiliar, sometimes uncomfortable, and not always welcome emotions that are shut down as a survival response come back online restoring participants' capacity not just to feel, but to be known, to love, and to be loved.

Across the data set, participants consistently describe arriving in a state of emotional shutdown; not so much clear depression as a muted, flattened way of being that often went unnamed until their time at the ranch. Many participants only recognize in retrospect that they had been operating in survival

mode, having learned to suppress feeling during and after service. This numbness is not a personality trait, but something acquired; an adaptive response that, over time, narrows the internal world.

During their time at the program, that shutdown begins to lift. Participants describe emotions “coming back online”, often suddenly and without warning. Of those surveyed, 90% report being more aware of emotions since the program (see Figure 9, Finding 8). This reactivation is not described as relief; it is frequently uncomfortable, even destabilizing. Long-suppressed grief, anger, fear, and confusion surface alongside the more positive emotions, and several participants emphasize that they were not prepared for the intensity. The change is not toward immediate emotional stability, but toward access to a wider emotional range coupled with emerging tools to experience feelings without avoiding or being overtaken by them.

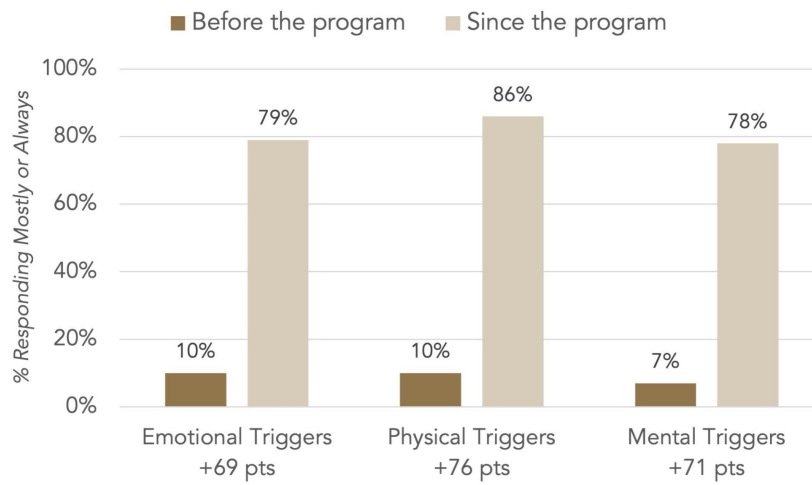
Crucially, participants describe not just feeling more but becoming reachable. Emotional reconnection includes the ability to experience care, empathy, and love, both given and received. One participant speaks to this shift directly: “I rejected people’s love for a long time... Through the program, I feel like I’ve been able to allow myself to be more loved.” Others echo this in different ways, describing a growing sense that people care, and a reduced impulse to push that care away. This marks a relational shift as much as an internal one.

As with other findings, this change represents a beginning and remains ongoing. Some participants note continued difficulty with emotional expression or connection. One describes a persistent divide, expressing care more through action than feeling, while others acknowledge that increased emotional openness can introduce new friction in close relationships. Participants are clear that this is not a completed transformation, but the lighting of a fire that requires continued tending. Feeling again is described as effortful and, at times, exhausting; but ultimately as opening the door to a fuller, more engaged inner life.

KEY INSIGHTS

- Many participants arrived having suppressed or shut off emotion as a survival strategy, both in combat and afterward.
- The program's conditions, physical challenge, peer witnessing, and removal of distractions make emotional bypassing difficult.
- Emotional reactivation causes the surfacing of grief, anger, and long-deferred processing alongside positive emotion.
- Several note this is still a process; full emotional availability has not yet been achieved.
- Participants describe gaining the ability to feel without being dysregulated by feeling with 78% of those surveyed able to allow emotions to be known without losing control.
- Over 75% of survey respondents were able to better identify their emotional, physical, and mental triggers since participating in the program (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. I am able to identify my triggers prior to reacting to a situation. (n=58)



IN THEIR OWN WORDS

The kick of emotion came back online for me, dude. Before showing up out there, I thought at some points in my life I was depressed, but I think I was just numb.

For 5 years, my body just shut off emotions because it was a survival mechanism.

Before the program I believed nobody cared and nobody wanted to hear it.

That lesson is to take the time to feel the emotion, describe it, come to terms with it, and then lay it down. That's probably been the most challenging lesson.

I allowed myself to feel again, which allowed me to experience joy and love to an ability that I hadn't seen before. It was kind of dulled.

Finding 8 | With nowhere left to hide, numbing loses its pull.

As participants come back into contact with themselves and pick up the tools to process the past, the architecture built around avoidance quietly falls away.

Across the data set, participants consistently describe arriving to the program with elaborate, self-constructed numbing mechanisms built over the years of their service and its aftermath. The survey data confirms the scale. Before the program, respondents reported using alcohol (65%), technology (74%), and pornography (34%) as an escape at least monthly (see Figure 8). Compulsive busyness and the need to stay occupied are mentioned throughout those interviewed. These are not simply bad habits but chosen techniques to manage anger, grief, sleeplessness, and the pressure of feelings that have nowhere to go. One participant names his own pattern directly: alcohol was, "the technique I adopted to tamp down all the fucking bad feeling and emotion." Another describes the enclosed

world that forms around self-medication, a world in which it is impossible to see any other way forward. In every account, the numbing is desperate escapism.

The program interrupts these systems not by substituting a modality for an addiction, but by confronting the conditions that made it necessary in the first place. At the ranch there is nowhere to drink, no phone to disappear into, no pornography, no ability to fill every hour with work. In that absence, the feelings these systems were built to manage surface. Participants describe this plainly: "There's nowhere to go... you can't hide in your phone, you can't hide in your job. There's no escape." What the program asks for in that moment is feeling the emotion, the memory, the feeling itself fully. Grief, anger, fear, shame all demand attention rather than a way to bypass them.

The modalities support this experience. Cold plunge, sauna, breathwork, and physical challenge provide enough nervous-system regulation to make the surfacing bearable, but the work is in the surfacing, not the modality. The survey captures the shift in capacity this produces. Before the program, only 10% of respondents could identify their emotional triggers before reacting most of the time or always; since the program, 79% are able to see the emotion for what it is - a passing guide pointing to a deeper experience, past or present (see Figure 7, Finding 7). 90% of participants now describe themselves as more aware of their emotions, and 77% as able to stay present in their bodies during emotional experiences (see Figure 9). These are the capacities that make processing possible. When processing emotion becomes possible, numbing them becomes unnecessary.

As participants move through experiencing their emotions fully, the underlying need for the numbing systems weakens. The behavioral data moves in step with this internal change. Alcohol used as an escape at least monthly fell from 65% to 10% across the cohort, with the share who report completely ceasing the use of alcohol as an escape rising from 14% to 57%. Technology as an escape at least monthly fell from 74% to 40%. Pornography as an escape at least monthly fell from 34% to 16%, and the share reporting they never use it as an escape rose from 45% to 67%. Marijuana and illicit-drug use, already low at intake, dropped further.

These numbers are meaningful in their own right, but the finding becomes clearer when they are read alongside the trigger-awareness numbers above: participants are not white-knuckling their way past alcohol or phones. They are describing, and reporting, a shift in what those systems were for. When there is no longer something acute to hide from, the architecture built to hide from it becomes harder to justify and easier to set down. One participant describes this as the difference between self-medication and being able to work through emotional issues. Another describes watching it happen from the other side; six months sober, in a drug court program, and moving forward in the posture of leaning into difficulty that he first encountered at the ranch.

The data is honest about what this is not. It is not a clean finish. A minority of respondents still report weekly escape-use of alcohol, technology, or pornography, and a small number report daily use. One participant fell back into drinking within weeks of leaving the program and course-corrected two months later. Others describe ongoing struggles with pornography, phone use, and with the way even

healthy practices; jiu-jitsu, training, work, can become new forms of avoidance when they are used to keep deeper material at arm's length. These accounts are not hedges on this finding; they are a clearer statement of it. What participants describe, and what the survey supports, is not the elimination of the impulse to numb, rather a growing capacity to notice the impulse, to recognize the emotion underneath it, and to stay with that feeling long enough for it to move through them.

KEY INSIGHTS

- Participants describe arriving with self-built numbing systems, alcohol most often, alongside phones, pornography, and compulsive busyness, all constructed to avoid feelings they had no way to process.
- Removal of access during the program forces contact with the underlying emotions; several participants describe only recognizing their own coping architecture once they could not use it.
- The program's modalities support the work of feeling rather than serving as substitute numbing; the work itself is the surfacing and processing of emotion.
- As the underlying feelings are faced and moved through, the pull of the numbing systems weakens, and participants describe the shift as addressing what the numbing was for rather than swapping it for something else.
- Participants name plainly that even healthy practices can become new forms of avoidance when they are used to keep difficult feelings at a distance. Growing awareness of that pattern is part of the work.
- Alcohol as an escape at least monthly dropped from 65% before the program to 10% since, and the share who never use alcohol as an escape rose from 14% to 57% (see Figure 8).
- Technology as an escape at least monthly dropped from 74% to 40% (see Figure 8).
- Pornography as an escape at least monthly dropped from 34% to 16%, with those who never use it rising from 45% to 67% (see Figure 8).
- Ability to identify emotional triggers before reacting most of the time or always rose from 10% to 79%; mental triggers from 7% to 78%; physical triggers from 10% to 86% (see Figure 7, Finding 7).
- 90% of respondents report being aware of their emotions most of the time or always 78% can stay present in their bodies during emotional experiences (see Figure 9).
- 76% of respondents report being able to recognize new patterns in their decision-making since the program (see Figure 9).

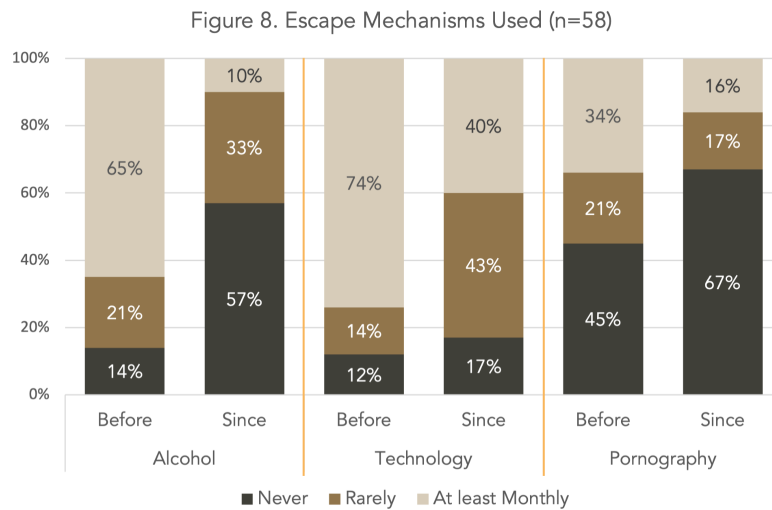


Figure 9. Coming Back in Contact With Themselves (n=58)
Since the program...



IN THEIR OWN WORDS

You can't hide in your phone; you can't hide in your job. There's no escape. And that made me confront those things.

You can work through issues without self-medication. You're able to persevere through any challenge that arises in your life.

Even healthy habits can become distractions. Things like jiu-jitsu, training, fitness — they are good, but I can overdo them. Sometimes I use those practices to avoid dealing with deeper psychological or emotional things.

I fell back into drinking leaving the ranch, and it was then in December that I was like, what the fuck am I doing?

The digital detox was actually powerful. I still use a flip phone when I have my kid so I'm present with him.

Finding 9 | The inner critic: quieted, not conquered.

Participants learn to hear their harshest internal critic as a liar; something constructed and contestable, rather than the truth about who they are, which loosened its grip but didn't necessarily silence it.

Participants arrive carrying an internal critic that speaks with unusual authority. The language is consistent across interviews: self-punishing, reflexive, often cruel, and deeply familiar. One participant named it plainly: "I realized how destructive my internal thought space was." Another describes the running commentary as "you're worthless, your voice doesn't matter, stay quiet, shut the hell up." This voice isn't heard as a mere voice; it is heard as fact. The program does not silence it but helps participants recognize it as a voice separate from the self, and therefore something that can be questioned. More than 90% of those surveyed report gaining the confidence to write their own narrative. One captures the shift precisely: "It's not that [the critic] dissipated, but it's not as loud as it used to be." Another describes the same dynamic: resentment remains "like a scar, but not a wound."

The mechanism begins with hearing the inner critic as something separate from the self. One participant named the core reframe: "I am the story I tell myself." Another tests his internal dialogue against an external standard: "If anybody on the street talked to me like that, we'd have problems. So why am I sitting here doing the same thing to myself?" Once the critic is audible as a mere voice, participants can begin to notice when it fires, what triggers it, and what it tends to say.

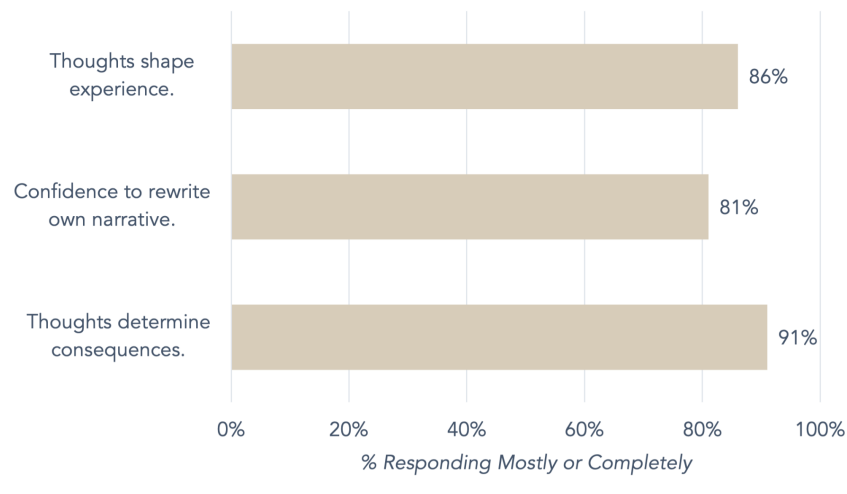
Once this inner critic is visible, participants develop somatic tools to interrupt it in real time, creating space between trigger and reaction. One participant states he feels these triggers "in my body a lot more, so I can catch them before I lose my mind." Another pinpoints the critical "90 seconds of adrenaline and cortisol," before fight-or-flight takes over, making the tactical pause essential. "Once you respond in anger it's hard to walk it back." Another uses breath in this window: "When something difficult happens I check my breathing, my heart rate, my state. That pause helps me self-regulate." One participant describes his anger remaining present but now manageable: "I still struggle... The difference is the mirror.... I can see it now." These practices: body awareness, breathwork, tactical pausing, reality-testing, demote the inner critic's automatic authority by creating an intentional gap where choice becomes possible.

The data remains candid about persistence and relapse. One participant admits that under stress "I just cave every time." Another says, "I still struggle with self-worth." The inner critic is quieted, not conquered; it returns under load, but it no longer speaks with the same authority: a realistic outcome participants themselves endorse.

KEY INSIGHTS

- The inner critic is heard as fact until it becomes audible as a voice separate from the self.
- Reality-testing the internal voice against what one would tolerate from someone else creates skepticism toward it.
- Somatic interruption tools (breath, pause, body awareness) create space between trigger and reaction.
- The inner voice persists but loses automatic authority. It is quieted, not eliminated.
- Participants describe recognizing old internal patterns in real time without being hijacked by them.
- In survey questions related to inner critic and personal narrative, over 80% of survey respondents reported significant shifts in belief and mindset (see Figure 10).

Figure 10. The narratives that kept them small started to crack.
Believe and mindset shifts since the program. (n=58)



IN THEIR OWN WORDS

That is not me. That was just something I believed. It was a societal norm and I thought it was just a natural part of aging. The fact is, I shattered all that.

“You’re worthless, your voice doesn’t matter, stay quiet, shut the hell up.” Those were those stories I was telling myself... I don’t speak to myself the same way that I used to.

We become what we repeatedly tell ourselves and repeatedly do. If we keep acting in the same patterns nothing changes.

Finding 10 | From provision to presence.

Nearly every participant describes a shift from reactive, disconnected, or transactional behavior to more present and intentional relationships at home.

Throughout the interviews, participants describe a clear shift in how they show up in their closest relationships after the program. Nearly every interviewee points to change in marriage, parenting, or family life. These changes are described in concrete behavioral terms: less reactivity, more presence, better communication, and a greater willingness to engage rather than withdraw. Survey data reinforces this pattern, with 76% of participants reporting mostly or completely improved communication in their closest relationships, and 86% reporting relationships more fully based in honesty (see Figure 11). For some, this shift is relationship-saving. One participant says the program was “a huge part” of working through marital problems, “and that’s why we’re still married today,” while another states that reconnecting with loved ones “saved my marriage and my relationships.”

The shift is most visible in the roles of husband and father. Participants describe moving from being distant, defensive, or transactional to being more attentive and emotionally available at home. One reframes time with his daughter as worth “eleven hours of driving” for “two hours with my daughter.” Another describes himself prior to the program as “a pretty hot head” and “the authoritarian dictator of the house.” Since the program, he describes “a lot of tactical patience” with his teenage daughters. The pattern is not simply improved feelings; it is a new way of inhabiting family roles.

Underneath this new way of inhabiting family roles sits a deeper shift in how participants understand what it means to provide. Several describe the pre-program version of themselves as someone focused on money, work, and acquiring the material; not necessarily on being emotionally available or relationally engaged. One names the shift explicitly: “[I was] very financially driven before Heroes and Horses,” and describes no longer being willing to sacrifice “presence for a bigger check.” Another describes his wife, pre-program, as “the person who held the house together while I was gone all the time,” and now appreciates her “in every capacity. Physical, mental, emotional, everything.” What these statements reveal is the narrow societal definition of provider that participants arrive carrying; the one who pays for the house and the car, the many things the family needs. Participants come to see that real provision is greater than any material supply. It also includes presence, appreciation, emotional availability, and the capacity to support loved ones when they do not have the strength to support themselves. In that sense, presence becomes the foundation of provision. Participants move from simply maintaining a family to truly showing up for one.

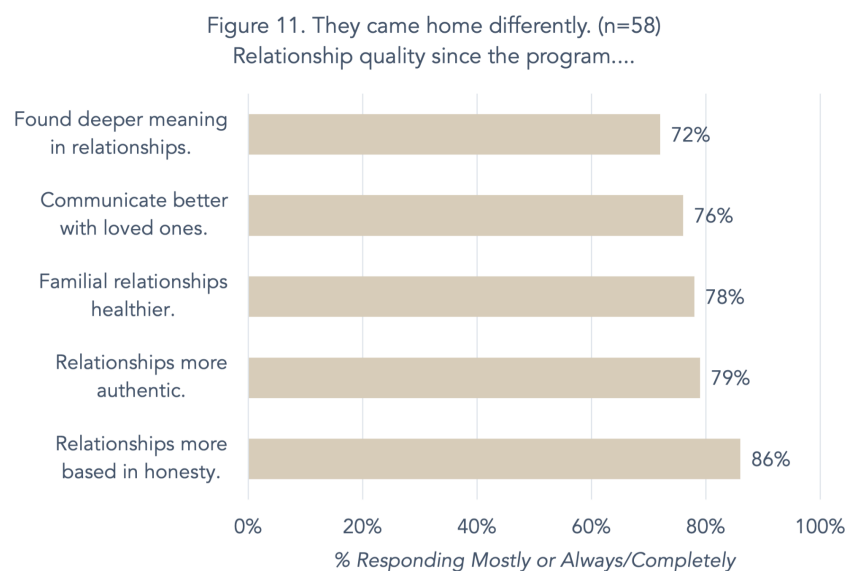
Several participants tie that shift directly to the program’s horsemanship lessons. Horses don’t care about the object in hand; they feel the emotion in the approach. One man says, “Why not approach your wife like you’d approach a horse?” while another says, “the same concept applies in my marriage.” A third explains that if his emotions are elevated, “others’ emotions rise too,” so he regulates himself first. Across these interviews, the horse functions as a training ground for relational behavior at home: participants learn to pause, soften, and respond with intention.

At the same time, the data shows that change at home is not always easy or complete. Relationships are complicated, layered, and not well measured by whether people simply stay together. One participant notes that after twenty-five years, “the new version of me can feel unfamiliar to her,” and

that “change can bring relief, but it can also bring fear in a relationship.” Another states he is still struggling to communicate well with his spouse. Another describes being “back into that respond mode instead of that proactive mode.” These accounts demonstrate that showing up differently can create friction, especially when old patterns are deeply established. The deeper issue is the participant’s internal sense of who they are and how that identity is carried into their current circumstances. In that sense, the strongest path forward may involve spouses and children in the healing process as well, creating a shared scaffolding that helps everyone move in the same direction.

KEY INSIGHTS

- Participants describe becoming more present, less reactive, and more emotionally regulated at home.
- Marriage changes are often framed as moving from transactional provision to appreciation, honesty, and calm communication.
- Parenting changes center on tactical patience, intentional time, and a deeper sense of responsibility to be present.
- Several participants link these relational shifts directly to lessons from horsemanship, especially self-regulation and approach.
- Relationship change is real but not guaranteed; it can create tension when old identities are disrupted or when maintenance breaks down.
- Over 70% of survey respondents reported significantly improved relationship qualities as a result of the program (see Figure 11).



IN THEIR OWN WORDS

I think when I went there, I was contemplating divorce... I would actually say that it was a huge part of me working through the problems that we had in our marriage, and that's why we're still married today.

The biggest one for me was the appreciation of my wife. It came on big out of there. I don't think I've ever appreciated her more than while I was there and when I returned.

Being present, man, that was huge to me. Knowing that I could be there and be involved and be a part of something, whether it's myself, somebody else, something else, that's made the difference in my life.

If I am being a provider... am I giving the best version of myself to my family... Are they getting the best me?

My responsibility in my home is to be my truest self. And to take on the responsibility for showing my children a better way.

Finding 11 | Inward purpose, outward service.

What participants want from life shifts away from external achievement and towards meaning, presence, and contribution to the people around them.

Every participant interviewed describes a fundamental reorientation of what "success" and "purpose" mean to them. Before the ranch, purpose meant external markers: career ladders, financial security, status, and material gain. One participant states it plainly: "My purpose... was to make money, provide for my family... ascend that ladder of entrepreneurship." Another names the hidden cost: "I was trading time; I was trading life for money... called that caring for my family. It's not."

After the program, purpose turns inward to character and presence, then outward to service. The cleanest articulation comes from one participant: "Purpose is not what I do, it's what happens in other people when I do what I do." Another frames it personally: "My purpose is my character and the kind of man, husband, father, and friend I want to be." Participants describe volunteering, walking peers back from dark edges, and building healthy homes. Service replacing what rank and income once measured.

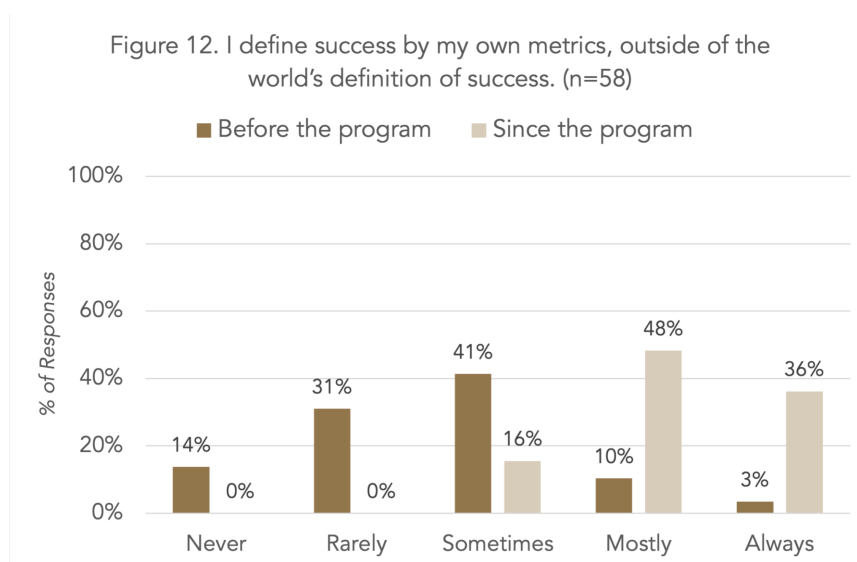
This reorientation isn't always simple. Several participants name the disorienting gap as old drives fall away: "I feel purposeless... free to my next purpose, and I don't know what it is yet." They frame this not as failure, but as necessary shedding. Across all participant interviews, the direction holds: success becomes who they are becoming, not what they can acquire.

For participants, purpose now moves both ways; character enabling contribution, contribution affirming character. "If you're looking for your purpose to benefit yourself, you're always gonna be lost." "I care more about my character than my reputation." For the men who arrived at their darkest

points, this turn toward service often burns brightest, becoming their way of helping to ensure the next man finds his way through.

KEY INSIGHTS

- The pre-program purpose was largely external: career, income, rank, material achievement.
- Post-program purpose centers on character, relationships, contribution, and presence.
- Several participants describe a period of "purposelessness" as old anchors fall away before new ones form.
- Service to others, mentorship, volunteering, and giving back become core expressions.
- Participants redefine success in terms of how they show up, not what they achieve.
- Survey data confirmed significant growth related to participants defining success by their own metrics. Only 13% of respondents reported significant use of this definition before the program. That rose to 84% since the program, a 71-point shift (see Figure 12).



IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Success used to mean tangible things to me. A degree, a big job, a title, money. Now, if I can pay my bills and I'm happy, that is success to me.

Being able to use everything in my life, both good and bad, to help others... I want to help wake people up before they have to go through everything we went through.

I kind of feel a little purposeless right now, and not in a bad way, kind of in a good way, a freeing way. I'm free to my next purpose, and I don't know what it is yet.

My purpose isn't tied to a job or timeline. It's being a better version of myself and influencing everything around me.

Before the program, I got there, and I was in business with two other partners for 8 years. Now I've shut down my company, left my two partners. I'm exploring what I actually want.

Finding 12 | The brotherhood outlasts the program.

The peer bonds that form at the ranch persist as a genuine support network, though without structured touchpoints, they tend to fade from proactive to reactive over time.

Across every interview, participants consistently describe the bonds formed at the ranch as among the program's most enduring outcomes. Every participant names specific ongoing connections: through group chats, Signal threads, and crisis calls, that remain active well past graduation. These intense bonds offer a profound sense of not being alone, often described as deeper than military unit ties or other veteran networks. One participant describes it this way: "I definitely feel like the people or the experience at H&H has made me feel part of a tribe. I've tried other veterans' organizations, and I don't really feel like I'm a part of that tribe."

These relationships show up in steadfast, enduring ways. Participants report regular check-ins, structured monthly men's meetings that have run without interruption, and group threads supporting classmates through family crises and personal struggles. The nightly ranch conversations are frequently named as the binding ritual: "Knowing that camaraderie that we had every night at the end of the day, talking and moving forward. That was big." This brotherhood becomes a reference point for the "new self" that home environments don't always reinforce.

Yet a clear pattern emerges: this vital brotherhood is fragile without intentional structure. Multiple participants describe a shift from proactive outreach to reactive crisis support. One notes, "There's definitely a disconnect after you get home... it just feels very awkward sometimes, because it's like, man, that was it." Another, two years out, observes sliding "back into that respond mode instead of that proactive mode." Several explicitly call for "the next phase of the program, to keep the community that's been built through the program together." This tension, deep bonds that endure but lose cadence, represents both a strength and an opportunity.

KEY INSIGHTS

- Participant bonds persist through group chats, crisis calls, and informal accountability.
- Brotherhood creates a unique sense of tribe beyond military or other veteran networks.
- Participants actively draw on classmates for emotional and behavioral support.
- Connection shifts from proactive to reactive without structured touchpoints.
- Staff and organization extend the network through personal aftercare.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Being able to trust and talk and confide with a complete stranger, if need be, if you give them the chance and accept them in your life... You're showing that for 41 days you could do that. Continue doing it.

The brotherhood accountability from the group chat. That team connection has been powerful.

One of the first gifts I got on the ranch was realizing there are people who think like me. That removed isolation.

I still talk to [fellow classmates] almost every single day.

It makes me feel connected. Not so lonely. My classmate called me, like, 2 days ago, just to chat.

Finding 13 | The tools travel. What works at the ranch and beyond.

The program's physical and mental practices do not remain at the ranch; modalities successfully travel into ordinary life, integrating into homes and taking root with families.

Physical fitness, cold plunge, sauna, breathwork, a morning routine, and anti-inflammatory nutrition are widely adopted during the program, continuing to live in participants' daily lives at varying rates after their return home. The data reveals which practices travel most successfully from the ranch into ordinary life, which take root with families, and which depend on continued access or setup at home.

Nearly every participant continues using at least some modalities, with several describing significant lifestyle changes built around them. Cold plunges have been installed at home. Families have adopted the program's cookbook. Children do breathwork alongside their parents. One participant maintains the full ranch morning routine almost verbatim, Nordic playlist and all. These are not temporary inspirations; they are tools that have reshaped households.

In the survey data, self-reflection and physical fitness show the highest retention across the dataset (see Figure 13); both require no instructor and reward simple, daily practice. Anti-inflammatory nutrition shows strong adoption when spouses and children participate. The modalities that travel best are the ones that can be built into a physical space at home or shared with the people a participant lives with.

The range across the cohort is real. Some participants have rebuilt their weeks around the ranch's practices; morning routine first, fitness and cold plunge non-negotiable, nutrition carried by the household. Others retain fewer modalities but still describe specific tools actively at work in their lives. Across the dataset, the common pattern is not all-or-nothing: participants are adapting the program's toolkit to fit the shape of their own lives, keeping what works in that context and continuing to use it.

KEY INSIGHTS

- Cold plunge and physical exercise are the modalities that travel most successfully from ranch to home.
- Modalities that can be built into a home or shared with family are sustained at the highest rates.
- Several participants invested financially in equipment to make the tools accessible at home.

- Family inclusion extended the reach of the modalities, bringing practices into household routine rather than keeping them separate from it.
- The modalities produce benefits at every level of adoption. Even partial retention delivers measurable change.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

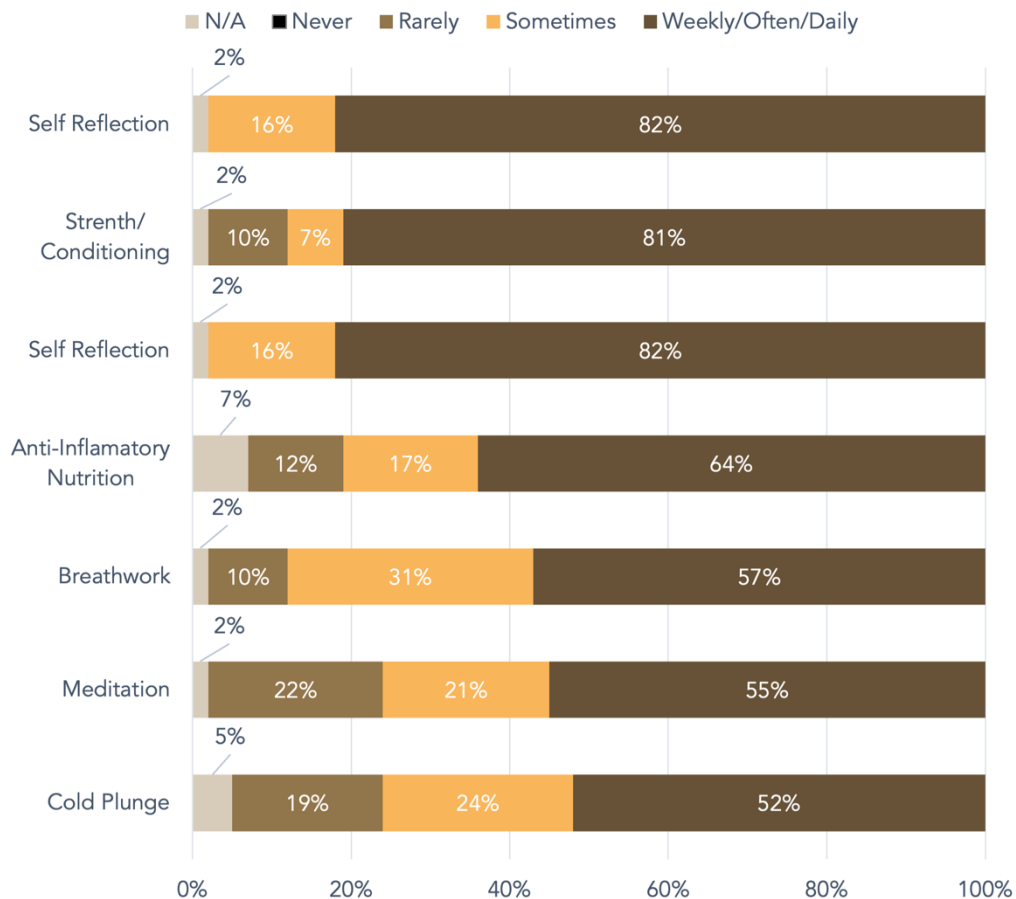
My mornings are definitely to myself, and I spend about 2 hours, just like we did in the program, sticking to the routine, almost verbatim.

I introduced breathwork to my family, and so all my kids and I and my wife do breathwork.

The one that I've been personally feeling really guilty about is journaling. I need to get better at creating a system or time to set that aside.

Going back to kids and working 55 to 60 hours a week makes it a challenge just to really prioritize taking care of myself.

Figure 13. Ongoing Modality Usage After Program (n=58)
I continue to use the following modalities in my personal journey.



Finding 14 | The ranch is a beginning. The rest is theirs to carry.

A single thread runs through all twelve findings: the ranch opens the door, but the veteran alone walks through it. What is begun there is theirs to carry, and the daily choice to keep reaching for the toolkit is a responsibility no program can shoulder on their behalf.

A current runs through all of the preceding findings. The program begins the process of rebuilding identity, unseating old narratives, revealing what the body and mind are capable of, and introduces a tested set of tools. But it cannot complete the work. One participant articulates this plainly: “It’s not like you go get fixed. It’s like hey, here’s the tools to help you. Now you have them in your toolkit. Are you going to pull them out and use them?”

The program maintains a structured schedule within a structured environment, both specifically engineered for growth and healing. A return home is a return to the unstructured chaos of day-to-day life. It is up to participants to bring the structure learned in the program to bear in their life off of the Double H Ranch. “On the ranch everything is set up for growth and accountability,” one participant observes. “In normal life you have to create that reality yourself.” This is the backdrop against which every other finding must be read. The horses can hold up the mirror. The cohort can witness the rebuild. The modalities can be taught, tested, and proven. But the act of reaching for the toolkit, day after day, belongs to the individual alone. Drift, when it happens, is not a rejection. Participants know the tools work. They describe disconnection rather than disbelief, sliding “back into that respond mode instead of that proactive mode.”

This responsibility is not a failure of the program; it is the nature of the work itself. No cohort, no app, no follow-up structure can pick up the tools on the participant’s behalf. What the program can do, and what participants across the dataset explicitly ask for, is extend the beginning further into the rest of life: additional touchpoints, continued community, and sustained access to the environment that set the work in motion.

KEY INSIGHTS

- The ranch is the beginning of the work, not its completion.
- The tools gained in the program do not self-execute; they require personal ownership to live in daily life.
- No external structure can substitute for the daily choice to pick up the work.
- Drift, when it happens, is disconnection rather than rejection — participants know the tools work.
- The thread running through every finding is the same: what was begun at the ranch must be carried by the individual.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

It has changed me. It has changed me in a lot of ways. It's given me tools. I just need to get better at accessing those tools.

On the ranch everything is set up for growth and accountability. In normal life you have to create that reality yourself.

It's not like you go get fixed. It's like hey, here's the tools to help you. Now you have them in your toolkit. Are you going to pull them out and use them?

Conclusion

Insights Into Impact

Over the past 11 years, Heroes and Horses has evolved into a highly effective and innovative reintegration program for combat veterans and their families. The data in this report represents many human lives that are multi-faceted, complex, diverse, and uniquely one-of-a-kind. The process at Heroes and Horses helps participants return to a natural algorithm. Nature loves courage. This report shows that each person can rewire their reality and use challenge to find healing, radical honesty, strength, courage, insight, self-reflection, love, and truth. By empowering direct experience and deconditioning the values of a treatment hierarchy, Heroes and Horses shows that an individual willing to commit can overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Most of all, those interviewed in the report noted one key finding. Participants realized they were the ones they had been waiting for and recognized the need to take ownership of their lives.

Throughout the report, it becomes clear that without a plan, you become part of someone else's plan. As shown in the interviews, each life counts and comes from a place of unimaginable power and light that is always waiting to rise. At the most fundamental level, there is always a choice. Heroes and Horses is clear: we do not exist to make choices for students but only to provide direct experience in which an individual can begin to understand, wield, sharpen, and accept the consequences that unfold from this paradox. Action and inaction are the same. Each lead to a consequence, but no matter what, consequence is nothing more than a teacher and soon-to-be ally on life's journey. So, at the end of the report, the interviewee becomes the challenger, or at least gains an awareness that they can be, and the knowing that this world is an open door only they can walk through. To live is to honor each waking breath and to know that each sacred moment of our life is another opportunity to begin again.

Steps Forward

Project Impact has shown us what we have long known, our program works. We see throughout the findings the healing, learning, and self-knowledge that is found during participants' time on the ranch. Through challenge, struggle, and the eye of a horse, men find their inner strength, purpose and voice. They begin the great unlearning and embark on the journey to knowing. These impacts are carried home where the seeds begin to root, grow, and blossom when tended. Project Impact has also verified what we suspected: going home and applying lessons learned and insights gained - watering these seeds - is the hardest and most important part. Change that lasts a lifetime takes just that, a

lifetime. While no program on planet earth can do for anyone what must be done for themselves, there are steps to take in order to aid the integration of the wisdom that begins its foothold at the ranch far beyond its borders. Three strategic initiatives are either underway or beginning development in order to directly address the integration gaps identified across our participant interviews.

1 | Family Programs (Active and Expanding)

Heroes and Horses launched the Resilient Heart Spouse Program (entering year 3) and the Healing Through Tradition Youth Program (entering year 2) in direct response to the need for healing across entire family units. As evidenced across the data sets, combat does not only impact the veteran, but ripples through all of those who surround him. In addition, one of the strongest indicators for continued success beyond the program is a participant's support system when he returns home. These programs help spouses and children heal as individuals first, giving space to rediscover identities beyond “veteran’s wife” or “veteran’s kid” while also giving families a shared language for sustaining change. As we look into the future, we will be developing opportunities for families to return to the ranch together, where transformational experiences can be shared by individuals as part of the family unit as a whole.

2 | The Warrior’s Beacon - The Heroes and Horses Longhouse (Groundbreaking 2026)

This Nordic-style communal longhouse on the Double H Ranch will house sauna, cold plunge, traditional dojo, fitness center, library, meditation room, commercial kitchen, conference room, dining hall, and great room. Currently restricted to operations during the warm season by largely outdoor facilities and Montana’s harsh Winters, and unpredictable Spring and Fall weather; the Warrior’s Beacon will be operational 365 days a year. This addresses participants’ repeated calls for sustained access by greatly expanding our capacity for programs on the ranch. Year-round family ranch weeks, men’s circles, and practice modalities will serve both new veterans and graduates, creating what one participant requested: “The next phase of the program, to keep the community that’s been built through the program together.”

3 | Stay The Course - The Heroes and Horses App (Development)

The Stay The Course participant app will sustain cohort brotherhood through dedicated forums and chat functions, directly countering the fade “from proactive to reactive” that many participants described. It houses core modalities: daily breathwork, music playlists, fitness routine, elemental protocols, staff touchpoints through blogs, vlogs, and virtual meets, and resources along with cohort chats, encouragement calendars, all designed to create the “structured cadence” graduates name as essential. This digital infrastructure formalizes what some participants are already creating informally.

These initiatives honor participants’ core insight: “It’s not like you go get fixed. It’s like hey, here’s the tools.... Are you going to pull them out and use them?” Personal accountability remains paramount, but structured frameworks amplify individual effort. Project Impact confirms that the 41-day program

catalyzes transformation. These three projects extend it, serving more veterans and families while ensuring graduates sustain hard-won gains through community, infrastructure, and connection that endures beyond the confines of the program.

Opportunities for Future Evaluation

The information revealed through this process is invaluable; not only in describing to our community of participants, families, and donors the profound impact that this program has on those who experience it, but also in showing us exactly where we need to improve. Moving forward, we will continue to conduct interviews and surveys annually with a full analysis and report compiled every third year. We will begin this evaluation process with our youth and spouse programs in 2027.

Appendices

Appendix A - Indicators of Impact

Impact 1: Veterans are transformed, becoming free agents of their own lives.	
What we mean: Veterans engage fully in experience, no longer simply consuming information and subjecting themselves to abstract theories and treatments but rather become free agents in their own lives. They move beyond the acquisition of endless information and additional diagnoses, gaining new perspectives based on powerful experiences that allow an individual to change themselves and take radical ownership over their lives.	
E1 (Actions/ Efforts) • Daily reflective exercises and journaling on decisions, choices, and outcomes • Goal-setting exercises with follow-up accountability checks • Participation in group discussions that challenge personal assumptions • Engaging in physically and mentally challenging tasks that require ownership of success or failure	E2 (Qualities/Ethos) • Radical honesty with oneself and others • Ownership of personal actions and consequences • Courage to confront uncomfortable truths • Persistence in the face of difficulty • Integrity in decision-making and accountability • Self-trust and self-reliance
E3 (Quantitative Indicators of Impact) Know: • Veterans learn and understand through unique experiences that they can become free agents of their own lives Do: • Taking radical ownership of the choices in their life and how they impact themselves and others. • Reframing obstacles as opportunities • Making healthy choices for their well-being and their family Feel: • They understand a shift toward a positive outlook about their ability to create their future. • Overall sense of hope and optimism about their future.	E4 (Qualitative Indicators of Impact) Believe: • They can chart their own course regardless of their external circumstances Become: • Participants move from victim to the hero of their own story. Love: • Committed to participating in creativity in their life from a place of love, not fear. • Experience love from the inside out • Passionate about going home and loving their families

Impact 2: Veterans reconnect with their core.	
What we mean: Philosophy becomes action. Veterans are taught the love of wisdom as a backstop for a way to think and to approach life’s hardest challenges. This arc is the foundation of knowing oneself; one’s likes, dislikes, aversions, etc., and is taught alongside the experience that generates the opportunity to live their philosophy in action; healing wounds and restoring the individual..	
E1 (Actions/ Efforts) • Structured philosophical arc with reflection exercises daily • Cognitive restructuring workshops to challenge fixed beliefs • Journaling to track thought patterns and triggers • Guided contemplation sessions connecting philosophy to lived experiences • Peer discussion groups to test and apply new perspectives • Assignments that require applying philosophical principles to real-world challenges	E2 (Qualities/Ethos) • Intellectual curiosity and openness to learning • Humility to recognize personal biases • Critical thinking applied to personal and external situations • Self-awareness of thought patterns and emotional reactions • Willingness to challenge old narratives about self and life • Courage to embrace discomfort in the pursuit of growth
E3 (Quantitative Indicators of Impact) Know: • Veterans learn to deconstruct themselves and become their own laboratory through a timeless approach of philosophical thought. • Veterans learn how their thoughts create experiences and generate consequences in a 41-day intellectual study, reflection, and action course Do: • Not letting the external world affect their internal world, believing there is always a way through. Feel: • A fundamental realization that they are no longer victims.	E4 (Qualitative Indicators of Impact) Believe: • They have the answers they have been looking for. • A change in perception can redefine the relationship between challenge and purpose. • Develop a mindset that there is always a way through. Become: • Become a more authentic and whole version of themselves. • Leaving behind who they were for who they are becoming Love: • They come to understand that all love stems from self-love and emanates outward into their lives, homes, families, communities, and the world.

Impact 3: Veterans learn to grow beyond a story and self-limiting beliefs.	
What we mean: Labels create false identities and self-limiting beliefs. Veterans are supported in defining what success is to the individual outside of cultural or ideological boundaries, focusing on the uniqueness of the individual who is defining it.	
E1 (Actions/ Efforts) • Participation in workshops exploring self-limiting beliefs • Journaling exercises focused on strengths, values, and personal definitions of success • Peer coaching to uncover and challenge internalized societal labels • Reflective exercises connecting past experiences to current identity • Mindfulness and stillness practices to observe habitual thought patterns	E2 (Qualities/Ethos) • Self-compassion and acceptance of personal history • Confidence in defining one's own success • Courage to reject external validation as the sole measure of value • Curiosity to explore unknown aspects of self • Openness to reconstructing identity based on personal truth • Persistence in embracing new perspectives despite discomfort
E3 (Quantitative Indicators of Impact) Know: • That limitations, self-induced or adopted, create self-limiting belief structures that generate adverse life outcomes. Do: • Identifying success on an individual basis, not in comparison to others, but uniquely to them • Participate in subconscious workshops • Journaling, self-reflection, and stillness hours aid in new awareness Feel: • A steady, internal sense of purpose and meaning, where hardship is felt as part of the path and dignity is experienced in how they carry themselves through life.	E4 (Qualitative Indicators of Impact) Believe: • To understand they are exactly where they are supposed to be. • They are not a label or diagnosis, and every life experience has led them to the moment they are currently in Become: • They embrace and rise to their destiny • No longer a bystander but a participant in becoming who they desire to be Love: • A deep sense of gratitude honoring the gift of life and all its complexities

Impact 4: Veterans harmonize all their faculties in a 360-degree approach to healing, discovering the strength of their core.	
What we mean: True healing is a 360-degree approach. Veterans are taught a holistic approach, recognizing mental, physical, and spiritual alignment, and promoting healing across all aspects of human experience.	
E1 (Actions/ Efforts) • Daily physical conditioning and nutrition adherence • Breathwork, meditation, and mindfulness exercises • Horsemanship training emphasizing awareness, presence, and balance • Team exercises require synchronization of physical, mental, and emotional faculties • Reflection on progress in integrating mind, body, and spirit alignment • Journaling and peer feedback on holistic growth	E2 (Qualities/Ethos) • Discipline and consistency in daily routines • Mindfulness and presence in all activities • Resilience through physical and mental challenge • Awareness of the interconnectedness of mind, body, and spirit • Patience with oneself during periods of struggle or imbalance • Commitment to personal wholeness and integrity
E3 (Quantitative Indicators of Impact) Know: • The human systems are synergistically woven together, and one without the other creates an imbalance. Do: • Working on breathwork, fitness, mindset and nutrition fosters wholeness and recalibration, promoting well-being and balance. • Veterans learn horsemanship, which creates balance and self-awareness. Feel: • As the mind, body, and spirit come into alignment, strength, courage, and clarity, and the ability to discipline oneself, become the new normal. • Overall sense of well-being and gratitude for life.	E4 (Qualitative Indicators of Impact) Believe: • By taking conscious action and aligning the things they can control, they can create new spheres of influence for positive change in their lives. Become: • They develop physical, mental, and spiritual strength, creating a new framework for positive change throughout their lives Love: • All love is self-love, and it begins with their choices. The mind is a slave, not a master, and can get to master the mind without the mind taking over. • Self-love is a commitment to spiritual development at their core, love is their guiding light, and it resides in the stillness, the citadel of their own heart. Love the natural state lights the way to the path of healing, growth, and purpose.

Impact 5: Veterans develop self-mastery and sustainable growth.	
What we mean: Veterans cultivate the ability to sustain personal growth and transformation, mastering themselves in all dimensions: mental, physical, and emotional, establishing lifelong practices that ensure continued progress.	
E1 (Actions/ Efforts) • Identifying a clear personal growth goal for the program • Active participation in exercises aligned with that goal • Engagement in accountability partnerships within the cohort • Documentation and reflection on progress throughout the program • Participation in structured mentorship sessions	E2 (Qualities/Ethos) • Ownership and initiative in pursuing personal goals • Willingness to accept constructive feedback • Adaptability to learn from challenges • Commitment to continual personal improvement • Integrity in following through on promises to self and others
E3 (Quantitative Indicators of Impact) Know: • Veterans can articulate their personal growth goals and strategies • Veterans identify mental, emotional, and physical triggers affecting behavior • Veterans recognize patterns in decision-making and accountability • Understanding of philosophies and techniques applied in the program Do: • Consistently apply learned practices in daily life (journaling, meditation, fitness, horsemanship) • Veterans make conscious choices that reflect ownership of their actions and consequences • Veterans problem-solve and reframe obstacles as opportunities in program exercises • Veterans show measurable improvement in physical performance, stamina, or skill execution Feel: • Veterans leave with a lived sense of confidence, trusting their ability to hold their growth and continue building on it. • Veterans report feelings of resilience and empowerment when facing challenges • Veterans experience greater emotional regulation and self-awareness • Veterans describe an overall sense of hope and optimism about the future	E4 (Qualitative Indicators of Impact) Believe: • Veterans realize that they can continue personal transformation independently • Veterans have the ability to make aligned decisions even under pressure • Veterans accept the principle that circumstances do not define their potential Become: • Veterans embody self-mastery across mental, emotional, and physical dimensions • Veterans take ownership over their actions and influence on their environment • Veterans model behaviors reflecting personal growth and resilience for others Love: • Veterans cultivate self-love and compassion as the foundation for growth • Veterans express commitment to nurturing their relationships from a place of integrity • Veterans demonstrate care for community, family, and peers in alignment with personal values

Appendix B - Qualitative Interview Protocol

IMPACT 1: Veterans are transformed, becoming free agents of their own lives.

What modalities, traditions, or routines have you continued to use since your time with us? What has gone well and what has not gone well? Are you finding ways to adjust? → **How have you found the strength to apply these modalities in your home life? What do you need to maintain this strength growth? (Do/Become)**

What have you come to recognize about your capabilities during your time here? → **How has that shifted your thinking about your ability to chart your own course regardless of your external circumstances? When do you still struggle to see yourself as capable of this? (Know/Believe)**

What came back online for you through your time here? What remains inaccessible or difficult to engage with emotionally? → **What do you care enough about to keep returning to as you move through them? (Feel/Love)**

What has given you more hope since being here? What continues to feel deflating? → **How has that shaped your determination to approach life and those around you from a place of love, not fear? (Feel/Love)**

IMPACT 2: Veterans reconnect with their core.

How have you been able to apply new modes of thinking to produce more positive outcomes at home when presented with challenges? → **In what ways have you seen a difference in the daily cadence of your life? What has been the most difficult lesson to apply, and what lesson has challenged you the most? (Do/Become)**

What discoveries have you made about yourself when applying principles you learned in the program? → **How has this shifted your perspective on where to go when seeking answers to questions that arise for you? (Know/Believe)**

What, since being here, has been giving you a renewed sense of passion, hope, and excitement about the possibilities of changing situations and circumstances? What continues to feel daunting or overwhelming? → **How are you more committed now to strengthening or spurring new growth in your relationships? (Feel/Love)**

IMPACT 3: Veterans learn to grow beyond a story and self-limiting beliefs.

What steps have you taken or practices have you put in place since the program to move toward your own vision of success? → **How has this made you less of a bystander and more of an active**

participant in becoming who you want to be? In what ways do you want to continue growing? (Do/Become)

What have you learned, through this program, about old stories and self-limiting beliefs? → **How has it changed the way you think about the dynamics of your life? (Know/Believe)**

How has releasing self-limiting beliefs encouraged you or energized you to grow into a new version of yourself? What excites you about the prospects of what's unfolding on your new path? → **How has this shaped your heart for the gift of life and all of its complexities? (Feel/Love)**

IMPACT 4: Veterans harmonize all of their faculties in a 360 approach to healing.

What ways of thinking or being did you commit to after leaving the program, and how consistently are you living them now? → **How has maintaining these practices shaped who you are becoming? (Do/Become)**

What have you come to understand about the connection between your mental, physical, and spiritual well-being? → **How has this understanding influenced the way you orient yourself toward life now? (Know/Believe)**

How does alignment in your mind, body, and spirit show up in the way you feel each day? → **How has this impacted the way you cultivate your sense of strength, clarity, or inner steadiness?" (Feel/Love)**

IMPACT 5: Veterans develop the internal discipline, awareness, and commitment required to maintain lasting change.

What intentional actions have you taken to positively influence your environment or the people around you? → **How do these actions reflect the person you are becoming? (Do/Become)**

What have you identified through the program about your own personal triggers and patterns? → **What have you come to believe about your responsibility and your influence within your home, family, or community? How has your thinking related to purpose evolved since completing the program? (Know/Believe)**

How has stepping into purpose affected the way you feel about your life, family? → **What sense of meaning, connection, or gratitude has grown since stepping back into your world? (Feel/Love)**

Forward-Focused Question

As you look ahead, what are you committed to building, becoming, or sustaining in your life over the next year?