

AFTERMATH ASSOCIATION



CAMP AFTERMATH

Concept Paper

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CAMP AFTERMATH

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Table of Contents

Overview	2
Vision	3
Mission	5
Modus Operandi	6
Structure and Management	8
Finances	8

Contact

Aftermath Association

Telephone: 613-800-9161

Email: info@aftermathassociation.org

Ottawa, Canada



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Overview

It is an accepted fact that the number of Canadians with mental health issues, particularly post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), has risen considerably during the past decade. Although not limited to veterans, the majority of sufferers are ex-military personnel and first responders for whom memories of past experiences have become a harrowing, yet routine part of their daily lives. Different levels of the Canadian government, as well as a number of non-government organisations, have attempted to address the problem by designing and implementing programmes aimed at helping and supporting sufferers. Emerging studies on these initiatives –commendable as they may be– do not appear adequate in producing the desired results.

A characteristic feature of mental health problems, in contradistinction to corporeal health problems, is that the signs are mostly “invisible” and symptoms only come to light during social interaction. For this reason, suffering for those affected comes not only from the torment of past experiences and the consequent dysfunction in their personal, professional and social lives but also from a general lack of understanding and empathy from members of the affected individual’s community. They often feel negatively affected or even threatened by the manifestations of the sufferer’s mental ailment. The anguish that results from this “multiple suffering”, exacerbated by the stigma that is attached to mental health issues, sets in motion a vicious circle that traps the sufferer in a downward spiral. This deterioration gradually overwhelms the individual, blocking out positive memories, experiences, feelings, and replaces them with what can be called the “spiritual anguish” of loneliness, helplessness, hopelessness, and a sense of drifting and despair.

Existing programmes and services for such sufferers are mostly structured on a dichotomy of “givers” and “receivers”. On the one side are the well-intentioned givers who contribute to the relief of torment and healing psychic wounding. These are often the functionaries of government or non-government entities who disburse allocated resources and deliver relief and therapeutic services to sufferers. On the other hand are the “receivers”, the agonised souls for whom post-traumatic stress syndrome, depression, panic attacks, etc. are familiar but dreaded spectres that haunt them daily. In the majority of cases, the “givers” carry out their tasks, deliver the prescribed, time-defined services or disburse the allocated funds, and then leave the “receivers” to their own devices. This modus operandi is of doubtful efficacy, given that in the majority of cases the delivered services, and benefits, are transient, and the disbursed funds are more often than not misspent on substances that offer temporary relief. Thus, the end result can be very counter-productive. On the other hand, this dichotomy usually puts the “receivers” in a passive position and breeds a form of dependency, compromising their self-esteem and further entangling and trapping them in vicious circles. Gradually, as they progress along this path, sufferers of mental health issues tend to lose the positive anchors which moor them to a sense of empowerment, direction, optimism and hope for a bright future.



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Vision

Vision Statement:

To eliminate mental and spiritual anguish by healing through giving and responding to human need with human care.

Up to now, there has been limited thinking about possibilities to break-down this dichotomy and focus on the means and conditions that would allow such individuals to be major and active agents in their own therapy and rehabilitation regimens. It is this realisation which served as the impetus for the Aftermath concept. Conceived and championed by Farid Yaghini, a former member of the Canadian Armed Forces, and aimed primarily –but not exclusively– at Canadian veterans suffering from PTSD, it seeks to help sufferers by helping them to help themselves. It brings the “givers” (wide spectrum of health care professionals) and “receivers” (sufferers and patients) together in the joint effort.

Farid served two tours in Afghanistan, supporting various Canadian and U.S combat units. His multiple traumatic experiences during active service gave him sporadic cases of anxiety attacks, which, like all other veterans with the same condition, affected his personal and professional life. But Farid was able to overcome his condition by focusing on the “positive anchors” of his experiences in Afghanistan, particularly on one –the sense of accomplishment that came from being instrumental in giving throw-away Canadian Army office supplies to a girls’ school in rural Kandahar and witnessing the sheer joy and gratitude of the students who couldn’t even dream of the luxury of what they had been given. Farid took as much –perhaps more– joy in giving as the incredulous students had in receiving the “godsend”. Such episodes of philanthropy, in which Farid found himself involved during his two tours of duty, provided niches of unexpected solace. The recollection of such experiences served as an antidote to the flashbacks, nightmares and anxiety attacks that came to him in situations that evoked the memory of his agonising and terror-stricken moments. With time, Farid learned that these were what psychologists called the “positive anchors” that kept him in touch with reality and helped save him from the vicious downward spiral most other veterans with PTSD are sucked into. Through years of ensuing interfacing with mental health experts, Farid learned that PTSD was the consequence of events so traumatic that one kept replaying them over and over in one’s mind. Yet, if those traumatic events were to be replaced by extremely positive events, such as acts of philanthropy, the mind would equally replay those events, and with time replace traumatic negative events with gratifying positive events. Farid discovered that such positive anchors can be cultivated and used to counter the crushing effects of helplessness and hopelessness in people with mental issues. Herein lies Aftermath’s golden objective: to replace negative traumatic events with positive gratifying ones in the sufferers’ minds, and let their minds anchor to the latter. This objective gave rise to the idea of a camp which would simulate a community of “givers” and “receivers”, of the cooperation and cohabitation of people who suffer from PTSD and those who wish to help and know how to help.



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The whole concept revolves around giving and receiving care and support through living and working together for definite periods of time -long enough for the seeds of mutual care and understanding to take root and bear fruit in the form of healed psyches- which, apart from exerting a therapeutic effect on PTSD sufferers, would similarly affect caregivers by giving them a sense of empathy, inner gratification and spiritual accomplishment.

This initiative is conceptualised to approach mental and spiritual anguish from all angles and therapy types. It will aim to embrace the diversity of mental/spiritual distresses by offering them a variety of non-medicinal holistic therapies. He or she, i.e. the subject or the "receiver", can learn to how to embrace personal anguish which can empower them to seek out positive alternatives including the desire to give to others. Aftermath will be a platform and a community of people supporting each other in finding a renewed sense of purpose and personal meaning by participating in a cause which is greater than themselves. As veteran participants embrace their struggles and begin to move towards physical and spiritual health, they can begin to discover peace of mind through selfless acts and a sense of spiritual gratification.

The vision is to set up a sanctuary (to be called Camp Aftermath) to provide a setting conducive to a holistic, community-based, spiritual-cum-therapeutic approach to address the psychological issues that primarily affect military veterans and first responders suffering from PTSD and other similar conditions. To be situated in the valley of San Isidro, Costa Rica, the location of Camp Aftermath will be chosen for its natural beauty, serene countryside environment, amenability to idyllic pastimes, ease of accessibility and proximity of supporting facilities. Camp Aftermath will host a community of men and women who suffer from mental and spiritual anguish due to their service to Canada, together with those who have the skills and the volition to help.

In Camp Aftermath, apart from other healing pursuits, healing oneself through helping others shall be achieved by working jointly with charity organizations such as:

- Habitat For Humanity - Camp Aftermath participants would aid in the construction of housing for low-income people; being part of such projects would provide Camp Aftermath participants with the platform to set positive anchors while at the same time helping the less fortunate have a roof over their heads.
- Costa Rican Humanitarian Foundation (CRHF) - Camp Aftermath participants would be become involved in a wide range of social projects ranging from counseling abused women and children to helping indigenous groups protect their cultural heritage.
- Culture, Education, and Psychology for Infants and Adolescents (CEPIA) - Camp Aftermath participants would become involved in promoting culture, health, sports and education for children, teenagers and families from poor backgrounds in local Costa Rican communities.



CAMP AFTERMATH

AFTERMATH ASSOCIATION

- The Cloud Forest School (el Centro de Educación Creativa) - Camp Aftermath participants would provide linguistic support to bilingual students who aspire to become botanists, farmers, lawyers, veterinarians, biologists and environmental justice warriors. Participants would be volunteering in one the most beautiful and pristine regions of Costa Rica, experiencing firsthand the beauty of nature and aiding in preserving it for future generations. Being surrounded by such untouched beauty will definitely have a positive effect on Camp Aftermath participants and aid in anchoring them to positive thoughts.

All such activities will provide Camp Aftermath participants with the platform to engage in meaningful philanthropy. In this metamorphosis, the participants will be supported both by an array of qualified staff and fellow members of their team. Therapy approaches combined with relaxing community activities in an atmosphere of spiritual serenity will allow the subjects to embrace the positive anchors to which they have been exposed, thus further aiding them in attaining peace with themselves and the real world.

Mission

Mission statement

To set up a community of givers and receivers striving for the holistic healing of mind and spirit through jointly searching for positive anchors.

There are currently hundreds of non-profit PTSD foundations in North America, each unique in its capability and approach towards treating PTSD. In the pursuance of this goal, Camp Aftermath does not aspire to reinvent the wheel, but rather to improve on the previous methodology by bringing multiple treatment approaches under one roof while adding the vital component of philanthropy. The common theme arising from feedback from dozens of Canadian Forces members suffering from PTSD is that all current forms of treatment and support provide temporary relief from mental anguish but do not provide full recovery and independence. This further discourages those who previously stood proudly for themselves and others. Respondents have given highly favourable feedback regarding Camp Aftermath's proposed methodology of imparting the tools to replicate at home and amongst their family members and loved ones the skills they will have acquired at the Camp. They have expressed hope that this initiative could help provide lasting relief from their mental anguish or keep them from returning to previous recourses for escape. Moreover, the hope of regaining their independence is deepened by the idea that philanthropy will once again empower them to stand for others as part of something bigger than themselves. All those attending Camp Aftermath will be instilled with the knowledge that the relief they find at the Camp can be achieved when they return home. Giving is one of man's most basic instincts and can be conducted anywhere and at any time.



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Modus Operandi

In order to guarantee a powerful learning and life experience for each participant, Camp Aftermath will require a minimum of 21 days' stay in order to have a lasting positive impact. The majority of this time will be spent challenging negative anchors and replacing them with positive ones built on the foundation of philanthropy. Camp Aftermath will provide a small and personalised learning and healing environment with preferably no more than 10-15 participants per rotation. The participants will be sub-divided into smaller groups based on the types of therapeutic activities in which they would like to engage. As mentioned above, volunteers from the Camp will often be deployed to participate in charitable acts sponsored by collaborating charitable organizations. Smaller learning communities will allow participants to become more closely connected with professional staff in various types of therapy and charity work. Although participation in activities will be a mandatory component, participants will be matched with activities that best suits their interests and goals. Each participant will have a personalised learning and activity plan mutually agreed with Camp Aftermath staff. This will ensure that participants do not fall through any cracks and that all Camp time is used optimally. A significant part of the learning experience will be accomplished through interdisciplinary projects that will bring real-world applications into the classroom. Community and individual exercises, including physical fitness, yoga, meditation, breathing techniques, energizing diets, fishing, farming/gardening, care of abused or abandoned animals and similar activities are envisioned to be part of the programme.

We will cultivate a striving for one's best among participants at Camp Aftermath. Each participant will be expected to strive to take away as much insight and knowledge as he or she can during their stays. All progress will be documented and will be continuously relayed to all participants. This will create an environment where all participants will be able to push not just for their own healing but also for the healing of their companions on the journey.

Participants wishing to attend Camp Aftermath will be screened by professional mental health personnel for suitability to participate. All treatment methods practiced at the camp, as well as the day-to-day routine, diet and various group and individual activities will be discussed. Only after the candidate is ready and willing to embrace the holistic type of healing offered at Camp Aftermath will his or her attendance be facilitated.

Camp Aftermath staff will include a highly qualified team of camp principals and counselors, composed mainly of qualified therapists and trained mental health professionals as instructional leaders and resource managers. Counselors will deliver rigorous instruction and attend to the diverse needs of individual participants. They will ensure that participants get what they need to achieve their individual goals. The meaningful and active engagement of participants' family members in the individual's holistic therapy regimen will be encouraged, both while in the programme at Camp Aftermath and later when they return to everyday life back home.



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Participants' families will be treated as partners in the Camp Aftermath undertaking and will be welcome, if they wish, to visit the camp. If they cannot or do not wish to visit, they will have constant contact with their loved ones and opportunities to discuss therapies and experiences with staff and with their family member. Such interaction will be encouraged, as it will allow family members to understand the gradual change in their loved one, as the person returning from Camp Aftermath will not necessarily be the same person that left. The aim is for graduates of Camp Aftermath to be different in positive ways upon return home.

Camp Aftermath will maintain contact with graduate participants through both virtual and follow-up physical communities which will provide a venue for discussion and mutual support for all participants who have attended. Graduates will be able to discuss their ongoing development since attending Camp Aftermath. Such communities will also be a place to seek solace when a previous attendee finds himself/herself in a dark place and needs the support of the community. This feedback stream will enable Camp Aftermath to constantly improve its curriculum to better serve those attending. Former participants will know that their feedback will be helping others suffering from mental anguish. This act of giving back to the Camp will further reinforce the positive anchors they gained at Camp Aftermath and the idea that they are part of something bigger than themselves –that they forever belong to a community of healers.

Camp Aftermath does not claim to provide a cure, but rather to be a place where sufferers of mental and psychological anguish can learn to embrace the power of their own minds and the act of giving to others. Aftermath Association members will continue to support and follow up on participants once they return home. By that time, they will be expected to be physically and mentally ready and willing to continue to engage in philanthropy, through which they will continue to receive the same positive feedback and anchors they received during their time at the camp. This will empower them and give them a sense of independence from unending involvement in various treatment plans. Thus, the healing process will continue once life returns to normal. Within three months of returning home from their Camp Aftermath experience, participants are expected to realise their social, professional, psychological and emotional re-empowerment. There will be fewer visits to medical centres and social workers, and participants will once again blend in seamlessly with the community which they once served.

Continued engagement in philanthropy, return to society as normal, productive members, and gradual discontinuation of visits to medical centres will be the three indicators of success for the participants and the providers of Camp Aftermath services. The success of the Camp Aftermath endeavour will be quantified by these indicators, not by the amount of money spent or the number of people cycled through rotations.



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Structure and Management

The idea of Camp Aftermath was conceptualised by Farid Yaghini who successfully galvanised a group of close friends with his vision, and he set out to pursue it. Soon his energy radiated to others. Spurred by the idea of setting up a sanctuary in Costa Rica mainly for Canadian veterans suffering from PTSD, and inspired by the ensuing possibility of similar future charitable ventures in other spheres, it was decided to found an Aftermath Association to organise and direct the establishment and functioning of Camp Aftermath as its first enterprise.

The Aftermath Association, as the constituent and directing body of Camp Aftermath and other similar future projects, is an association of volunteers from all walks of life who believe in the vision of eliminating mental and spiritual anguish by healing through giving and responding to human need with human care. The Association has been registered with the relevant provincial and federal authorities of the Government of Canada as an independent, non-profit organisation dedicated to charitable work. The Association has a Board of Directors who guide, oversee and are ultimately responsible for Camp Aftermath and any similar future initiatives. The Association has its own Constitution and by-laws which define and govern its mandate and undertakings, as well as the duties and responsibilities of its members and associates.

Camp Aftermath will be supervised and directed by a Steering Committee appointed by the Board of Directors of the Aftermath Association. It will also have a consultative Mental Health Professionals' Committee which will screen all beneficiary candidates, as well as an Activities and Curriculum Committee which will draw up, monitor, and supervise participants' activity schedules. Furthermore, Camp Aftermath will have legal advisors within the framework of Aftermath Association, in addition to Canadian and local Costa Rican professional, administrative, maintenance and support staff.

Finances

As a charitable, not-for-profit undertaking, all activities initiated by the Aftermath Association will be funded through charitable donations, grants, and crowdsourcing. First estimates are that, through crowdsourcing, Camp Aftermath will have to raise \$200,000 before launching. Upon launching, \$300,000 will be expected to be raised through friends and associates of the donors who provided the initial set-up funds. The remaining \$500,000 is expected to come from the general public after fundraising and awareness campaigns conducted through various social media outlets. Of the raised amount, approximately \$600 000 is projected to be required to purchase/lease and develop the conceived sanctuary at San Isidro, Costa Rica. The remainder of the funds shall finance Camp Aftermath staff salaries and expenditures.

For updates, further information and to contact us, please visit <http://campaftermath.org/>