"The Dog Days"

By Chaplain Allen Vaughan

After the past few weeks of hot weather, I think it is safe to say that we are fully into the dog days of summer now. The "dog days" are the hottest, most humid and uncomfortable days of the year, with seemingly no relief in sight. In the Northern Hemisphere these days fall anywhere between the first week of July and the end of August.

Nearly every one would agree that this time of the year is not terribly pleasant or comfortable. But, do you know how these days got to be known as "dog days?" Some believe that the name comes from a very common sight during the summer of dogs lazily laying around, panting in the heat of the day, which is how most of us probably feel when we have to spend too much time outside.

In fact, the term "dog days" comes from the ancient observation that the star Sirius, also known as the Dog Star, rises in close proximity to the Sun. This star is the brightest star in the night sky during this time of the year, and it was believed by the Romans that Sirius, the Dog Star, was the cause of the hot, humid weather.

The ancients also believed that this was an "evil time" in which the seas boiled, food went bad, men and creatures became lazy and languid, but rage and anger could quickly surface, driving people to fevers and hysteria.

It does seem like humanity sort of loses control, or goes a little mad, during the hottest days of the year. Winter is a time of rest or dying; spring is the time for love, growth and renewal; and autumn is a time for harvest and thanksgiving. But, in the summer, emotions tend to run high, tempers are lost, and most violent crimes are committed during the hottest months of the year.

In the prologue of her children's book, "*Tuck Everlasting*," author Natalie Babbitt makes this observation: "These are strange and breathless days, the dog days, when people are led to do things they are sure to be sorry for after."

Have you ever done anything for which you were sorry? Most of us would answer truthfully, "Yes." And, once we are found out, we just as quickly say, "But, it wasn't my fault!" Or, "I had a perfectly good reason for doing what I did." We might even blame our behavior on human nature: "It's just the way I am, so I can't help it."

We can be very good at finding excuses for our bad behavior. It is easy to blame the hot weather, the alignment of the stars, a full moon, or someone else's attitude as the cause for our own misdeeds. When it comes to owning up to our personal responsibility, we have choices. However, a lot of excuses we use to justify our actions are just another way of saying, "I don't believe I had any other choice."

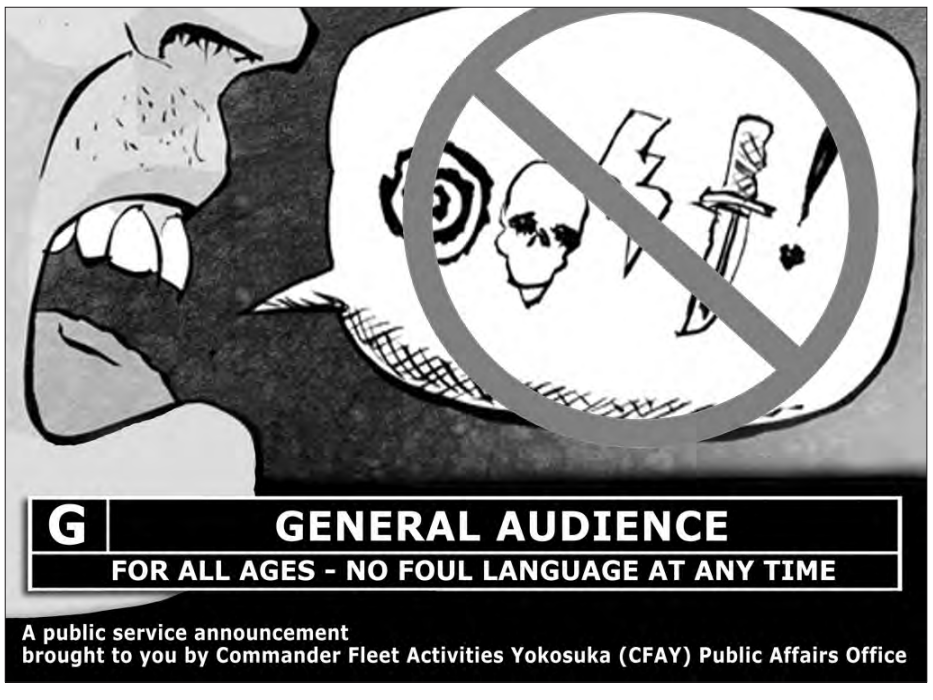
What emotions rise up in your heart that make you feel as if you have no freedom to choose any other course of action: anger, depression, lustful desires, fearfulness, or pride? What behavior of yours do you feel is most difficult to control, or is possibly out of control: eating, gambling, video gaming, substance abuse, or the internet? You may find yourself experiencing the "dog days" of what seem to be uncontrollable behaviors, or suffering from the "heat" of emotions which hold you prisoner or convince you that you have no other choices. If this is the case, then let me ask you: What do you do on a hot, sultry day in July or August in order to find relief? One solution is to step out of the heat and cool off. The same advice holds true, whether your "dog days" are caused by runaway emotions or behaviors.

- Remove yourself from the heat, by removing yourself from the temptation.
- Cool yourself down by nurturing your spiritual self through prayer, meditation, and worship.
- Confess or admit that you have made the wrong choices in the past, and acknowledge that you do have other positive choices to make.
- Seek advice and accountability from caring individuals or expert counselors in order to keep from falling back into the heat.

In his letter to the Christian Church in Rome, Paul addressed a great number of the emotions, temptations, and uncontrollable behaviors that threaten our freedom and limit our choices. But he concluded that, "In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

We do not have to be defeated by any of these. We do not have to feel that we are alone in our struggles. There need not be any "dog days" in our lives, as long as we allow God, who loves us, to rule in our hearts every day. Hold on to this truth, and you will find relief from the heat.

Peace and blessings to you!



Reducing stigma through Telehealth technology

By Marqeis Sparks, Health.mil

With technological development at the forefront of an evolving military medical community, there has been a significant increase in the demand for mobile connectivity and information sharing capabilities. Currently, there are easily accessible mobile applications (apps) in the hands of thousands of veterans, service members and their families that are being utilized as useful tools to connect to important military medical issues, particularly mental health information and resources.

"As the general public has shifted its focus to include mobile applications and mobile websites as a way to access various resources, [the Department of Defense (DoD)] became more interested in mobile solutions. My primary role is working on design and implementation of mobile products, from apps to text messaging initiatives," says Dr. Julia Hoffman, clinical psychologist, mobile apps project lead, and Veteran Affairs (VA) liaison, National Center for Telehealth and Technology (T2).

Established in 2008, the T2 program was formed by the DoD as a source for evaluating and testing available emerging software, hardware, and mobile devices to address the psychological health and traumatic brain injury (TBI) needs of the military community. T2 researchers, psychologist and engineers have worked with the VA and civilian organizations to develop, design and pilot web and mobile apps. The program also develops virtual reality therapy tools and several suicide prevention tools and resources.

T2 collaborated with the VA's National Center for PTSD to develop this app to assist veterans and active duty personnel (and civilians) who are experiencing symptoms of PTSD.

In efforts to decrease redundancies, streamline development, and ensure resources are properly leveraged between Veteran Affairs (VA) and the DoD, Hoffman serves as the lead for all mobile application development for both agencies, although she is physically located at the VA's National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (NCPTSD) in Northern California. The collaboration between the DoD and VA allows a much deeper bench of talent to work with, both clinically and technically, says Hoffman.

The most recently launched Smartphone app, PTSD Coach, was made available to users in April, and was one of the first in a series of jointly-designed projects by the VA National Center for PTSD (NCPTSD) and the DoD's T2 program. Hoffman was responsible for conceiving the idea, running the focus groups with veterans to determine feature sets, and overseeing all design, content and technical development.

She also worked to push the app through the various channels within the VA and DoD to ensure that the first collaborative effort was accurately represented and properly authorized.

The PTSD Coach app has garnered a considerable number of positive reviews from users, as well as medical professionals. The most practical uses for the app have been for users to track and learn helpful strategies to manage their PTSD symptoms on the go, utilize public and personalized sources of support, and to get accurate information regarding PTSD.

More than 11,000 users have currently downloaded the app, including users located in 38 countries outside of the United States. Feedback results have also shown that the app has increased utilization of the crisis hotline, which guides users to reach out for help if they are experiencing serious distress.

"This new tool is about helping veterans and service members when and where they need it," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. "We are encouraged so many have already downloaded this resource and hope many more will utilize this convenient tool to access VA services."

Hoffman and her team have also worked on other successful apps such as Breathe2Relax, as well as T2 Mood Tracker and the Technical Breathing Trainer, which won first and second place in the General Wellness category of the recent Apps4Army competition. These apps are presently being used for research and as an adjunct to treatment in numerous areas of the DoD.

"We have plenty of research that explains what challenges people have returning from deployments, what treatments work to manage these issues, and which parts of treatment delivery are not working. T2 allows for rapid innovation to try and combine this clinical knowledge with technical solutions in order to try and make real progress in healthcare," explained Hoffman.

Although neither agency takes full credit for developing these mobile apps, there are some apps that T2 takes the lead for, and for others, the NCPTSD does. The intention is to use resources for any given project to the highest capacity, given the benefits and constraints of each system. As a result, Hoffman works closely with subject matter experts and contracted technical development teams hired through the VA and DoD, as well as individuals from various other federal agencies.

Within the next few months, both T2 and the NCPTSD expect to release many more applications, with each agency targeting different populations of users, from service members and veterans, to healthcare providers and military families, in an effort to make more resources available and to reduce the stigma associated with psychological health.