

From Military to Mental Health

**“Keep your head on a swivel.”
“Flip the switch.”**

These are just some of the catchphrases David Miller heard regularly during his seven years in the Marine Corps. For good reason. Traits like being highly tuned in to your environment, known as situational awareness, can promote safety and survival during combat.

But what happens when this mindset is carried into everyday life?

The question changed Miller’s trajectory as an undergraduate at UNCG.

Miller, like many veterans, says he had multiple “rough years” after being medically discharged from the Marine Corps. But in psychology laboratories at UNCG, he found a way to reclaim the part of his identity that thrived on supporting his comrade-in-arms.

“We lose a lot of our service members to suicide every day, and one of those things that drives me is trying to bring that number down – I want to be a light on people’s darkest days,” he says.

As an undergrad, Miller began working in Dr. Blair Wisco’s research lab.



“I knew I needed research experience to become a clinical psychologist,” he says. “But I thought I would hate it – the math, the statistics.”

But it wasn’t what he expected. “Listening to people just nerd out about psychology the same way I did was awesome.” Wisco’s focus on post-traumatic stress disorder resonated with Miller.

During lab discussions, Miller realized some behaviors associated with PTSD were commonplace in military training. “What if a person found these things really useful for 4 to 20 years?” he asked. How might this learned behavior then trickle into a veteran’s civilian life?

His colleagues didn’t have an answer, and, just like that: Miller was bitten by the research bug.

“Helping countless veterans through research and contributing something new to an entire body of thought – I couldn’t ask for a better opportunity.”

Miller applied to MARC U-STAR, a prestigious NIH-funded program at UNCG that supports undergraduates from diverse groups as they explore research, providing monthly stipends so students don’t have to split focus between research and work, as well as funds for conferences and presentations and mentorship.

Psychology professor and director of clinical training Kari Eddington became Miller’s mentor. In her laboratory, he explored how adaptive behaviors in the military can become maladaptive with changes in context and intensity.

“What’s novel about his work is the focus on the military training environment and how that impacts psychological processes,” says Dr. Eddington. “Often the focus is more on acute combat experiences and trauma.”

Miller says he gained confidence and well-rounded skills by working with Eddington and Wisco.



A NEW WAY TO SERVE The military-affiliated services office is a second home for many veterans during their time at UNCG. It was also a place to find participants for Miller’s undergrad research.

“The smaller, more personal and teaching-oriented laboratory setting was a game changer.”

These crucial experiences at UNCG prepared Miller for his next MARC-U-STAR program opportunity: a summer research internship in Duke’s Traumatic Stress and Health Research Lab.

Miller excelled in the role – so much so that he received and accepted a job offer to work as a project manager in the same lab after graduating. He plans to continue cultivating his research skills in this position while applying to graduate programs in clinical psychology. He feels well prepared for this next step.

“What a lot of people have only done for six months or a year when they graduate, I was able to do for three years. And the confidence from that is just incredible.”

by Rachel Damiani
learn more at psy.uncg.edu

