

What Really Happens to the Mind and Body in Combat

(And Why It Matters After)

Most people think they understand combat.

They've seen movies.
They've heard stories.

But the reality is very different.

In a recent conversation on *The Enduring Mindset Podcast*, I sat down with Lt. Col. Dave Grossman to talk about what actually happens to the mind and body in high-stress, life-threatening situations.

What he shared challenges a lot of what people think they know.

The Things No One Talks About

One of the biggest problems when it comes to understanding combat is this:

People don't ask the right questions.

Grossman pointed out that for generations, even soldiers who had been in combat never talked about key physiological responses like:

- Tunnel vision
- Auditory exclusion
- Time distortion
- Memory gaps

"We think we know all about combat... but we've completely missed what actually happens to the mind and body."

These are not rare experiences.

They are normal.

But because they are not discussed, they become misunderstood.

Your Body Is Doing Exactly What It Was Designed to Do

In a life-threatening situation, your body activates what is known as the sympathetic nervous system.

Most people call it fight or flight.

But here's the part most people miss:

That response is not a problem.

It is a tool.

Grossman explained that the same physiological reaction happens in:

- Combat
- High-level sports
- Public speaking
- Extreme activities like skydiving

The difference is not the response.

It is how you interpret it.

The Same Reaction, Different Outcomes

Two people can experience the exact same physical response:

- Elevated heart rate
- Adrenaline surge
- Loss of fine motor control

One sees it as fear.

The other sees it as readiness.

That difference matters.

Because how you process that moment determines what happens next.

Why So Many Veterans Struggle After

One of the most important points from this conversation is this:

The problem is not always the experience.

It is the lack of processing after.

For years, many veterans never talked about what actually happened.

Not because they didn't want to.

Because they were never asked the right questions.

“We're only as sick as our secrets.”

Without processing:

- Memories stay fragmented
 - Experiences stay internal
 - Meaning is never fully formed
-

The Power of Talking It Through

Grossman emphasized the importance of debriefing.

Not surface-level conversation.

Real conversation.

The kind where you:

- Tell the full story
- Fill in memory gaps
- Process what actually happened

That is how people move from being controlled by the memory...

to owning it.

Combat Doesn't End When You Leave It

One of the most important takeaways is this:

The battlefield changes.

When the uniform comes off, the external fight may be over.

But the internal one often begins.

That includes:

- Identity
- Purpose
- Processing past experiences

And if you don't address it, it follows you.

The Truth About PTSD and Growth

There is a narrative that says:

If you experience trauma, you are broken.

Grossman pushed back on that.

Most people are not broken.

Most people grow.

They develop:

- Resilience
- Perspective
- Strength

The key is how the experience is processed.

What This Means for You

Whether you are a veteran or not, this applies:

1. Understand your body

Your response to stress is not weakness. It is design.

2. Talk about what matters

Surface-level conversations do not solve deep problems.

3. Process your experiences

Unprocessed experiences do not go away.

4. Stop assuming you understand

There is more happening beneath the surface than you think.

Final Thought

Most people think the hardest part of combat is the moment itself.

In reality, the harder part is often what comes after.

Not because people are weak.

But because they were never taught how to process what they experienced.



Listen to the full episode:

<https://open.spotify.com/show/7fQ5oHlOZe94Jcjj6ytL2h?si=0c4c82fc29c6465f>

If you're a veteran or leader trying to figure out your next move, I share conversations and insights like this every week through The Enduring Mindset Podcast.

Related conversations:

- *Character Doesn't Show Up in Crisis... It's Revealed*
- *Who Are You When You Can't Go Back?*
- *How Veterans Rebuild Their Lives After Hitting Rock Bottom*