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Momentum, a nonprofit started in 2010 , helps soldiers transition out of the army into civilian life.



‘Gratitude is the driver’: Momentum participants jump for joy. (photo credit:MOMENTUM)

Starting college in any country is a drama: final grades and SATs, piles of application forms and finding the funding. After all that effort, students should flow into their chosen career.

Yet 30 percent of all Israeli students change track after their first year, a statistic that costs the government huge sums and causes headaches to the students.

However, according to former IDF captain and lawyer Renee Kaly, director of the Momentum After-Army Empowerment Program, this is not surprising.

“Israeli youth go straight from school into the army where, for two to three years or more, their decisions are very framed, always checked and need to be made in seconds. Many of them do not have experience in long-term planning for personal choices.”

Until a few years ago the only preparation soldiers received before they left the army was a workshop for less than a quarter of combat soldiers, and a one-day festive type of convention for all soldiers – fun but not very practical, according to Kaly.

Enter Momentum, a nonprofit started in 2010 by a group of officers and piloted by the Paratroop Brigade, under the command of Brig.-Gen. Aharon Haliva. It had a twofold purpose: to help soldiers transition out of the army into civilian life, and to thank our soldiers for keeping us safe.

“Gratitude is the driver,” explains Kaly. “The army can be very tough, and soldiers are often exhausted at the end of their service. Sometimes they are traumatized; sometimes they feel they have wasted their time. Our workshops help them reframe their experiences to understand how well they coped, how to be proud of themselves and what a debt of gratitude the country owes to them all.”

This attitude empowers soldiers and officers. Positive psychology can help them to identify their strengths and understand how even the hardest army challenges can be harnessed as tools for the future.

“The future,” for many young adults the world over, begins when they hit 21. Often armed with a bachelor’s degree and possibly a job, they step into the next stage of adult life. For their peers in Israel, college hasn’t even begun; they spend their late teenage years preparing for war, or worse. Suddenly free, what comes next can be daunting. The thought of studying after what they’ve been through can be surrealistic and scary; they have been out of an academic framework for years.

The period between army and studies may then become a weak link. Released soldiers often head for the East or other exotic destinations to de-stress, and can end up drifting, unsure of how to enter the next stage.

Momentum workshops, given shortly before army service ends, help focus the soldiers by providing practical tools to transition.

Developed by Yotam Dagan, the former clinical psychologist of the Navy SEALs who created the SEALs transition program, the Momentum seminar program has today been adopted by the IDF's human resources division and operates according to its directives. Seminars are regularly held in some 70 IDF units, tailor-made for each particular unit.

Teams of professional facilitators handpicked from the areas of psychology, education and sociology provide career counseling to soldiers and officers who just don't know what they want to do next. The two- to three-day workshops tackle issues such as decision-making, time management, responsibility and how to be proactive in determining their next step.

Soldiers are also informed of their rights and duties after they hang up their uniforms, and how to manage their finances, cope with the National Insurance Institute and write CVs.

But Momentum provides much more than just bare facts – just ask Almog Chaviv from Ramat Gan. Coping with a stutter from age four, Chaviv finds it difficult to communicate with others and was exempt from the army.

“At home I talk normally, but I get scared in company, and it often puts people right off me,” he details.

After volunteering for two years in the IDF, Chaviv participated in a Momentum workshop which changed his life.

“Apart from getting tools for civilian life, I formed a personal connection with my adviser, who put me in touch with AMBI – the organization for stutterers in Israel. Today I get personal coaching in social, work and educational fields and I am happier in every way.”

Roi David, an officer in Golani, says that initially he did not allow his soldiers to go to Momentum workshops.

“I had other priorities,” he explains, “and I didn't believe that Momentum was all that important.”

That changed after he himself attended a three-day seminar.

“Suddenly I understood how essential it is for all soldiers to reframe the skills they acquired during their service, and to work through the knowledge and pain gained through fighting battles and losing friends. Momentum lets you deal with these issues and find a way to move forward. Today, I encourage all soldiers to attend the workshops.”

For the past five years Momentum has been a volunteer initiative, funded by the Thank Israeli Soldiers organization as well as private donors, reaching some 13,000 service men and women. This year the army, which covers the cost of food and accommodation on various bases, hopes to expand the program to reach 10,000 soldiers a year.

Maj.-Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacoheh, who chairs the Momentum board, has vast experience in training soldiers. As the past head of the military colleges, he is well-placed to liaise between Momentum and the army, and his vision is “to build a ladder to the sky.” With tens of thousands of soldiers finishing their army service each year, Hacoheh hopes that in the not too distant future the program will expand to include everyone.

With the encouragement of former president Shimon Peres, the organization seems poised to swing our soldiers smoothly into their new stage.