

Injured soldiers' Kilimanjaro climb could boost psychological recovery

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A group of soldiers recovering from serious injury as a result of their service in Afghanistan are to take part in a psychological study as they hike to the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro.

The study will assess the psychological benefits of taking on a unique physical challenge and examine how those benefits might contribute to a person's overall sense of wellbeing as they recover from physical trauma.

The research is being carried out by Dr Shaunna Burke, a lecturer in Sport and Exercise Psychology at the University. Dr Burke, an expert mountaineer who scaled Everest in 2005, will climb alongside the group and interview them at intervals during the hike and at the summit.

The research forms part of a larger expedition to [Mount Kilimanjaro](#) organised by the Royal Alexandra Hospital Foundation in Edmonton, Canada. Around 40 people, including doctors, professionals and business people will be attempting the climb alongside the soldiers to raise money for the hospital's new Orthopaedic Surgery Centre. Dr Burke, a Canadian national, was invited to join the expedition to carry out the study.

"We want to look at how the experience and achievement of climbing Mount Kilimanjaro can shape the recovery and sense of wellbeing of individuals who have gone through serious injury, or who have undergone joint replacement surgery," explains Dr Burke.

"There has been a lot of emphasis on the positive effects of regular, structured types of exercise on everybody's day-to-day physical and psychological wellbeing, but there has been little research to explore the potential benefits of less structured, more demanding physical pursuits. We want to better understand how difficult goals - activities that take people outside their comfort zone - contribute to their psychological health."

Among the soldiers taking part in the climb are Corporals Mark Fuchko, a tank driver from Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians) and Dallas White, of the 1st Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, both of whom sustained serious injuries whilst on duty in Kandahar province.

In 2008 Corporal Fuchko's tank struck an improvised explosive device and was severely injured, eventually losing both legs below the knee. He is currently studying part-time at Mount Royal University. Just three years on from his terrible injuries, he says he is looking forward to the challenge.

Corporal White was critically injured in 2010 whilst on patrol, two days before he was due to return home. A friend stepped onto a hidden trigger, setting off an artillery shell that had been buried in the dirt. The blast killed his friend and Corporal White sustained muscle loss in his left leg and damage to his left arm.

He says: "I want to participate in the Kilimanjaro Climb to do more than just confirm that I'm mobile again. I want to reclaim a quality of life that I once thought was going to be lost because of my injuries, and a chance to give something to others who face the same challenges."

Previous research carried out by Dr Burke examined the experiences of a group of breast cancer survivors as they also climbed Mount.

Kilimanjaro. The results of her study identified how some women gained a sense of personal strength from their experiences on the mountain and put the trauma of illness behind them.

"Some of my research focuses on the activity of high altitude mountaineering and identifies how scaling mountains affects people psychologically," explains Dr Burke. "The breast cancer survivors in my study felt that each step they took up the mountain was a step further away from cancer."

Dr Burke hopes her research will ultimately be useful in designing programmes for recovery and rehabilitation for patients recovering from serious physical injury or illness.

Provided by University of Leeds

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