

Combat Stress v Combat Resilience

The Role of Leadership in Forging Warrior Strength



Special Operations Psychology - Force Multiplication for the 21st Century



The views expressed here are my own and are presented from the perspective of an Operations Psychologist. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the US Air Force or the Air Force Medical Services.

Any effort to capture with words the complexities of the human mind/body system will necessarily be simplistic. No preventive care will change the fact that some affected troops will need professional help. The views presented here are intended to help leaders enhance the resilience of their combat troops and reduce the prevalence of PTSD.

My intent is for us to further strengthen the military men and women who serve our nations interests - and for whom I have the deepest respect.

Carroll Greene, Col, USAF

Chief, Operational Psychology

Air Force Special Operations Command

DSN: 579-5649

FOCUS

- What is combat stress or PTSD? How does it develop?
- What factors increase probability of a severe stress reaction?
- What is stress “resilience”?
- Cultural trends that undermine American resilience and strength.
- What should leaders do to increase the probability of a resilient response by the unit and members?



On "Combat Stress"

"For those who have the psychological wherewithal – commonly called bravery, courage and strength – to defend their nation by engaging in combat . . . - combat stress causes a persistent change in the physiologic stress response system – and a continual negative interaction between this system, the internalized war experiences, and any attempts made to deal with these experiences. This is not weakness. This is something stronger and deeper than words can convey."

Dennis H. Grant, MD

Clinical Coordinator, PTSD Clinic

Carl T. Hayden VA Medical Center, Phoenix AZ

Some Basic Assumptions

- ANY highly stressful event will have life changing effects
- Especially early on, these effects will be disruptive to functioning
- People who are affected may not need external help, other than friends and family
- Integration of personal stress effects with positive concepts or focus will shape more positive personal outcomes
- Most people will become stronger as a result of these experiences

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Experienced by 7% - 15% of those exposed to critical event

- Event: involving serious threat of death or injury to self or others, including intense fear, helplessness or horror
- Re-experiencing: Intrusive, distressing recollections, dreams, hallucinations, "flashbacks"
- Avoidance: of thoughts, feelings, places
- Detachment: from loved ones, loss of energy, projected future despair
- Hyper-arousal: irritability, anger, sleeplessness, impaired concentration, startle response, hyper-vigilance
- Duration/Impact: lasts more than 1 month and negatively impacts functioning

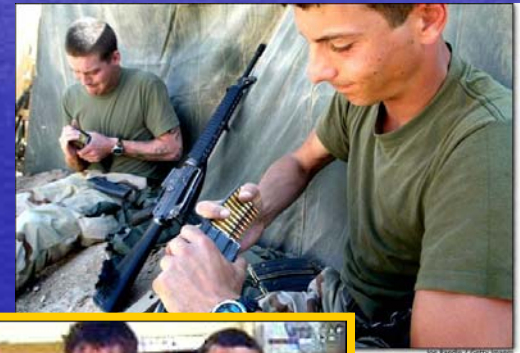


Factors Complicating Symptom Assessment

- Hospitalization and Painful Treatments
- Organizational, Duty Status and Career Complications
- Ongoing Investigation or Legal Processes
- Pre-existing Anxiety, Depression, Personality Disorder, Somatic DO and/or Substance Abuse
- Dissociation and Avoidant Coping Style
- Premature Assessment – prior to cessation of crisis situation, prior to natural healthy recovery effects

What factors increase probability of trauma and PTSD?

- Severity of incidents
- Unmanaged Strong Physiological Reactivity
- Previous Psychological or Physiological Problems
- Avoidant Coping Pattern, disengages under stress
- Unmanaged Intrusive Recollections
- Exaggerated Threat Thoughts
- Presence of Shame and/or Anger
- External Locus of Control –
Abdication of Personal Responsibility
and Influence, “Victim Mentality” –
whining, angry, blame others
- Shortage of Close Friendship
and Trust
- Alcohol / Drug Based Coping Pattern



What factors support recovery?

- Controlled re-experiencing
- Support of family and friends
- Recounting of Events – “War Stories”
- Absence of Complicating Stressors / Secondary Gain
- Objective or Positive Thoughts Regarding Threats



"Anything that doesn't kill me makes me stronger."

I am a **WARRIOR!**



Flexibility: I can adapt, innovate and conquer. I expect to face the unexpected – “No plan survives first contact with the enemy.”

The “news” media factor

Our privileged and media shaped culture - and the way it undermines resilience

- Major media consistently present a negative picture of human behavior and world events. - Bad news 24/7 - “if it bleeds – it leads!”, If it’s not perfect – somebody screwed up!, If you are suffering or have been inconvenienced – somebody did not do their job – and should be fired!
- Media messages imply that, discomfort or pain is unnecessary. If something makes us uncomfortable - there should be a pill or some quick, easy procedure to correct it.
- If there is no “quick fix” for your situation – then someone acted improperly – then, blame others for the situation – and pursue some type of compensation for your discomfort.
- **Many people no longer accept situational suffering as a “fact of life” – and a product of our own choices – it is now a sign that we have been wronged!**

Continued

Such widespread negative anti-resilience influences can erode the strength, endurance and resilience of new - and experienced - troops.

Under these conditions - anxiety, fear, selfishness, impatience, anger and consequently – poor judgment - spread insidiously!

These problems are compounded by additional deficits in perspective, wisdom and faith.

All of these factors affect our troops and their families – and – can undermine warrior resilience!

To enhance and preserve resilience - our people must be regularly taught and reminded of:

the big picture –

the positive view –

the critical elements of their success –

and the nature of their own strengths!



Resilience – Foundation Elements

Maddi and Khoshaba, 2005

- Attitudes:

Commitment – engaged in important work that demands full attention and effort, remain engaged with the team

Control – persistent in trying to influence outcomes of ongoing changes, prioritizing efforts toward things actually controllable

Challenge – optimistic in viewing change as opening new options and presenting new opportunities for success



Resilience

Maddi and Khoshaba, 2005

- Skills

Transforming Thoughts: place events in broader perspective, affecting many, depersonalizing, accepting responsibility. Placing events in a bigger picture of understanding .

Social Support: Engaging others to retain relationships – not detach. Strengthen or build relationship bridges. Resolve interpersonal work conflicts, retaining control of relationship factors and support



I am a Warrior!



- Strength - is not only about physical power. It is about faith, perseverance, persistence . . . – when others have quit and fallen to the side – I continue to push on!

I am a Warrior!



TOUGHNESS: Like leather – I am flexible and strong.

I strive to be shaped by experiences and by real leaders – while holding firm to my moral principles and the goals I am setting for my life.

Forging Warrior Resilience

Several laws of human behavior are proven and widely accepted

Law #1

- *Recognition of a behavior or quality – generally strengthens it's probability of occurrence.* To shape positive behavior – we should de-emphasize the negative and emphasize the positive.
- Exceptions? – Some negative behavior is too significant to ignore and must be punished.
- People will tend to live out the expectations they create for themselves.

Law #2

- *If we focus attention on negative behavior – in an environment where little attention is paid to positive behavior – negative behavior will increase in probability.*

Paradoxically – leaders are busy – and when they are busy – it is easy to ignore good behavior and focus attention on the negative – since the negative often demands our attention with more compelling consequences.

- Finding and focusing attention on every-day positive characteristics and behaviors requires effort - but, is a major key to leadership success – and unit/member resilience!



Law #3

- *To develop any behavior – we must focus on and recognize successive steps toward the desired behavior standard.*
- That is – we must speak positive goals and openly recognize small behaviors that are similar to the behavior we want to see.
- The leader's task is to take even small examples of the goal and hold them up to the light of observation – thereby establishing the positive standard and vision that the individual and organization will grow into.

I am a Warrior !



LEADERSHIP: I will serve this sacred trust that has been placed in me by delivering an example of judgment, discipline, courage and respect for my colleagues in arms.

Combat Stress – Positive Assumptions

*No pain – No gain!
What doesn't kill me – makes me stronger!*

- Any high stress experience in life will have permanent effects
 - Individual will decide how to define their experience
 - Combat stress effects are an affirmation of service -
 "at the point of our nation's spear"
 - Combat stress is a scar to be worn with humble pride
 - Combat stress is a scar shared with fellow warriors
 - *"Critically stressful events"* – and your response to them – test and define you as a warrior - and man or woman.
 - That self-image can strengthen you throughout your life!
 - Combat stress experience is a foundation for strength in life
 - Pain, fear, resilience and confidence are force multipliers
- Leaders can help shape warrior resilience and confidence -

To forge resilience in an insidiously negative media atmosphere - warriors need:

- **Compassion, toughness and high standards exemplified by leadership**
- **Clear positive expectations from leaders**
- **Challenges that push them beyond their comfort zone**
- **Straight talk about tough issues**
- **Personal recognition for their positive trends / actions**

- Warriors also need:

- Examples of positive thoughts about seemingly negative circumstances
- Reminders that they are part of an honorable heritage and operational family
- Positive coaching, and encouragement from seniors who've "been there and done that!"
- Mutually communicated respect for diversity and professionalism among our men and women

I am a Warrior !



CONFLICT - is normal – because - I feel strongly about my country, my mission and my people.

I make my opinions known in an effective and respectful way
AND -I know when to salute smartly and trust my leadership.

Estimating Resilience Strength

- Many occupations whose selection paths produce self-screening - result in higher than normal resilience levels among members (pilots, aircrew, SeaBees, operators, police, medical, etc'.)
- Personality make-up, aspirations, training and attitude can dramatically shape the individual's response to crisis events
- Team members sometimes share a stress forged bond which makes them the preferred "doctor" for each other

Note

- Military operational needs should dramatically shape the nature of any intervention with affected members

“Warriors”

What are the positive truths about warriors?

- Warrior members are largely a self-screened population. They tend to be: **self-motivated**, mature, adventurous, **disciplined**, confident and **focused**. They lead, prioritize, **make decisions**, stand up to and manage criticism - and **accept accountability**.
- They are drawn to military service because they:
 - want to test themselves
 - want to develop personal strengths
 - want to be part of a close knit team
 - want an integral, significant role in team success
 - want to challenge their skills and character
 - look for excitement to energize their life
 - want to feel pride in service to our nation and their unit heritage
 - are energetic and proud of their work ethic
 - recognize danger as a fact of life and strive for mastery of it
- This type of person is naturally stronger and more resilient under stress – and these qualities make them more successful in other aspects of life.



Respected Leaders Can Enhance Resilience

Leaders can parlay respect for the leader – into
“respect for those that the leader respects”.

- Identify and clarify:
 - responsibilities and products that make your people and unit important and unique
 - personal qualities that enable your strong performers to regularly contribute to the unit role
 - developing actions that show your poor performers becoming stronger -
Recognize small individual steps of progress!
- Publicize - these behaviors and qualities as examples that continue unit history and heritage

Support for Re-Deploying Troops

- DOD Screening Compliance – on return - and at 3-6 months
- Base resources briefings – Medical, Finance, Chaplain, Family Support, etc.
- Face to Face “hot wash” – review of deployment incidents and personal events – insure members are prepared to go home to family and friends
- Encouragement/sponsorship for war stories and discussion groups – focus on chronological review of events and lessons learned

Support for Re-Deploying Troops

- Clarify – for less experienced troops - what can/cannot be discussed outside of their group
- Insure supervisors get people to “tell their story”
- Refer identified troop needs to professionals as necessary
- Role of the SERE Psychologist

I am a Warrior!



HIGH SPEED – LOW DRAG: I strive to be the very best at what I do – and there is never an absence of leadership – ***I AM LEADERSHIP!***

- Aldwin, C.M., Levenson, M.R. and Spiro, A, *Vulnerability and Resilience to Combat Exposure*, Psychology and Aging, 1994, Vol 9, #1, pp 34-44.
- **Bonanno, G.A., Loss Trauma and Human Resilience: Have We Underestimated the Human Capacity to Thrive After Extremely Aversive Events?, The American Psychologist, Jan 2004, Vol 59(1), pp 20-28.**
- **Bryant, R.A. and Harvey, A.G., Acute Stress Disorder: A Handbook of Theory, Assessment and Treatment, 2002, American Psychological Association, Wash. DC.**
- Grant, D.H., *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: A Sign of Weakness or Strength?*, Federal Practitioner, March 2004, pp 53-54.
- Grant, D.H., *Managing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: A Present Centered Approach*, Federal Practitioner, March 2005, pp 39-46.
- Maddi, S.R. and Khoshaba, D.M., *Resilience At Work*, 2005, Amer. Mgmt. Assoc., www.amacombooks.org
- Ramaswamy, S. et al, *A Primary Care Perspective of PTSD*, Primary Care Companion Journal of Clinical Psychiatry, 2005, Vol 7, pp 180-187.
- Sutker, P.B. and Allain, A.N., *Psychological Assessment of Aviators Captured In WW II*, Psychological Assessment, 1995, Vol 7, #1, pp 66-68.

Resilience Posture

Forging Warrior Strength

Comments / Questions



Special Operations Psychology - Force Multiplication for the 21st Century