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Health & Fitness

Part 3: Spiritual and Mental Fitness

Photo by Laura Kreider

Soldiers of the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team bow their heads during the invocation at a colors casing ceremony last November at Vicenza, Italy. Spiritual fitness is one of the elements needed to build Soldiers' overall well-being.

Being "Army Strong" is much more than just being physically fit. Lessons learned during the last decade have prompted the Army to refocus on the mental and spiritual attributes of Soldiers' well-being, in addition to their physical and material needs. While the latter center on one's medical condition, diet, shelter and finances — concrete requirements that are easy to measure and provide for — mental and spiritual fitness are frequently dismissed as too intangible or unimportant to impact Soldier readiness.

But, as the Warrior Leader Course lesson on health and fitness explains, good spiritual and mental health is not optional for Soldiers. Rather, deficiencies in these areas often result in poor physical health, unsafe behaviors and mission ineffectiveness. It is the responsibility of junior NCOs to gauge their Soldiers' spiritual and mental fitness; what is gleaned from these lessons will ensure both leaders and their Soldiers are resilient and ready for any challenge.

SPIRITUAL FITNESS: Spiritual fitness encompasses more than just being religious; it involves anything that buoys the spirit. This can include individuals' search for meaning, purpose and truth in their lives, as well as the beliefs and values that guide daily living.

"We all have a need for intimacy or for love. We all have a need for purpose and destiny," Chaplain (Maj. Gen.) Douglas Carver, Army chief of chaplains, told a forum of Family Readiness Group leaders in Washington last October. "That's what spiritual resiliency is all about."

People express their spiritual beliefs in many ways: through relationships, religion, music, art, community service, enjoying nature and consciously living their values. Proper focus on this dimension of overall fitness ensures one has healthy personal values that harmonize well with the shared values of the Army.

MENTAL FITNESS: As the Roman poet Juvenal once said, people should desire "a sound mind in a sound body." The two are so closely linked that good mental health can sometimes speed recovery from and even prevent medical illnesses, research has shown.

Attitudes, beliefs and emotional states — from love to compassion, from fear to anger — can trigger chain reactions that affect blood chemistry, heart rate and the activity of the digestive and immune systems. Thus, learning how to handle their own and their Soldiers' emotions, worries and moods is an important skill for junior leaders to know and practice.

While everyday stressors are relatively easy to mitigate with the right tools and techniques, persistent anxiety may require other resources. Soldiers with post-traumatic stress disorder, for example, require professionals like those in the Army Wounded Warrior Program to assist their healing; they should not be perceived as weak or poor Soldiers.

Other times, Soldiers resort to abusing drugs or alcohol, which puts them, their families and fellow Soldiers at risk. In these cases, leaders' familiarity with the Army Substance Abuse Program may save a life. Indeed, ASAP's deterrence and education programs should be used to prevent problems before they start.

MANAGING STRESS

Stress is defined as a feeling of emotional or physical tension. Emotional stress can come from any situation or thought that makes you feel frustrated, angry or anxious. But, what is stressful for one person isn't necessarily the same for another. Based on the Army's "Hooah 4 Health" website (http://www.hooah4health.com)*, here are some tips on how to manage the stress and stressors you or your Soldiers may encounter:*

Considerations:

- ✓ **Some stress is normal:** Part of everyday life, stress is actually good in small quantities, motivating you and helping you to be more productive.
- ✓ **But, too much stress is harmful:** It can set you up for poor health; illnesses like infection, heart disease or depression; anxiety; or unhealthy behaviors like overeating and abusing alcohol or drugs.
- ✓ **Anxiety often presents physical symptoms:** For example: twitching or trembling, muscle tension, headaches, dizziness, diarrhea, irritability, sleeping difficulties or sexual problems.

What to do:

- ✓ **Find and address the source:** This is the most effective step but isn't always possible.
- ✓ **Take an inventory:** List the things you think might be "stressing you out." What do you worry about most? Does anything in particular make you sad or depressed? Keep a journal of the experiences and thoughts that seem to be related to your anxiety.
- ✓ **Find someone to listen:** Often, just talking with a friend, loved one or member of the clergy is all that is needed to relieve anxiety.
- ✓ **Find healthy ways to cope:** Eat a well-balanced diet, get enough sleep, exercise regularly, limit caffeine and alcohol, don't use recreational drugs, learn and practice relaxation techniques like yoga or meditation, take breaks from work, balance fun activities with your responsibilities, and spend time with people you enjoy.
- ✓ **Know when to seek help:** Chaplains, social workers, psychologists, doctors and other mental health professionals may be needed for therapy or medication. The key is recognizing that seeking help is a smart thing to do and not a sign of weakness. Sometimes, it takes a strong person to ask for help, or recognize possible signs and symptoms of a larger problem in a Soldier in his or her care.

Supporting wellness: Two programs that assist Soldiers

ARMY WOUNDED WARRIOR PROGRAM

AW2 assists and advocates on behalf of **severely wounded, injured and ill Soldiers and their families**, "wherever they are, for as long as it takes." An AW2 advocate is assigned to **personally assist** Soldiers and connect them with various benefits and services to help them **recover physically, prepare financially and build their skills** for a rewarding career.

https://www.aw2.army.mil

ARMY SUBSTANCE ABUSE PROGRAM

ASAP is a command program that emphasizes readiness and personal responsibility in the Army's effort to **eliminate alcohol and drug abuse**. Major elements of the program include **deterrence, detection, prevention education, intervention and rehabilitation** when necessary.

http://acsap.army.mil/

Top: Sgt. Maj. Brent Jurgersen, former sergeant major of the Army Wounded Warrior Program, exercises in 2007. Jurgersen's leg was amputated after being injured during a 2004 attack in Iraq.
Photo by Virginia Reza

Bottom: Sgt. 1st Class Len Taylor tries to keep his eyes on a moving pen as part of a field sobriety test. Taylor volunteered to drink alcohol so that Fort Jackson, S.C., police officers taking a training course could practice making alcohol-related traffic stops.
Photo by Steeve Reeves