

RESILIENCE

MASTERING RESILIENCY

The Trainer Course

**STORY BY
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A Soldier in a convoy headed to the next forward operating base hears an improvised explosive device detonate nearby and suddenly everyone is on high alert. The next stop is still five hours away, and by the time the unit reaches it, the Soldier is exhausted from the strain of being on edge. He tries to phone home, but after the fourth time calling without an answer, he gives up.

How Soldiers cope with stressful situations defines not only their professional lives but their personal ones as well. Instead of leaving Soldiers alone to cope with whatever mechanisms they have, the Army is looking at ways to promote personal growth despite the rigors of combat.

6 CORE COMPETENCIES

- 1 SELF-AWARENESS**
Identify thoughts, emotions, behaviors and patterns.
- 2 SELF-REGULATION**
Regulate impulses, emotions and behaviors to achieve goals.
- 3 OPTIMISM**
Hunt for what is good, remain realistic, maintain hope and have confidence in self and team.
- 4 MENTAL AGILITY**
Think flexibly and accurately take other perspectives.
- 5 STRENGTHS OF CHARACTER**
Knowledge of top strengths and how to use them to overcome challenges and meet goals
- 6 CONNECTIONS**
Strong relationships, effective communication, empathy, a willingness to ask for help and help those you lead.

Below: Staff Sgt. John Kremer of “Creek” Company, 2nd Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, pauses between missions in the Tangi Valley, Wardak province, Afghanistan.

Photo by Spc. Chase Steely

Bouncing Back

The ability to bounce back from life’s adversities will enable Soldiers to continue to serve and can positively affect their lives at home.

Sgt. 1st Class Blanca Rosado, a licensed practical nurse, teaches Master Resilience Training at Keller Army Community Hospital at West Point, N.Y.

After attending the Master Resilience Trainer Course at Fort Jackson, S.C., in April 2010, she found that Soldiers’ biggest takeaway was the abilities to help break down communication barriers, enhance communication within the unit and provide personal insight through self-discovery using MRT’s 24 characteristics.

“I’m able to utilize it every day in every department and every area,” Rosado said. “[MRT has] helped me and the unit communicate more effectively.”

The University of Pennsylvania’s Positive Psychology Department, which had conducted extensive research on emotional resiliency, brought its work to the Army in 2009.

Originally designed to help children and young adults adapt to the rigors of stress and prepare them to bounce back as adults, the course had the potential to apply to Army Soldiers, their family members and Department of the Army civilians.

The two-week course is offered by the Leader Development Division of the Training Support and Schools Directorate

at Fort Jackson (formerly Victory University); at the University of Pennsylvania; and by mobile instructor training teams that travel to units in the continental United States, Germany, Korea and Hawaii.

Sgt. Maj. Brian Washington, sergeant major of the Master Resilience course at Fort Jackson, said the course is revolutionary for the Army and its application extends beyond Army work life.

“It’s a proactive course,” Washington said. “It allows you to provide the leaders with the skills necessary to better help Soldiers and family members to deal with their issues.”

Since it started in 2009, the MRT course at Fort Jackson has graduated more than 1,200 students, including Soldiers, family members and Army civilians. The skills the MRT course teaches not only enable participants to deal with their professional issues, but their personal ones as well.

“It provides Soldiers with the skills to be able to handle situations in a manner that makes them more productive in the Army or with their families,” Washington said.

Promoting Post-Traumatic Growth

Sgt. 1st Class Jessica Ernst, a facilitator with the MRT course, said that though the course isn’t designed to combat post-traumatic stress disorder, it has the potential to have that effect.



“The course is designed to teach basic resilience skills to help Soldiers bounce back from adversity — life’s little challenges and its big challenges — to help promote post-traumatic growth versus post-traumatic stress,” Ernst said.

Units benefit from this program because it helps build resilient, stronger Soldiers who are able to bounce back from adversity and stay in the fight, Ernst said.

“They can build mentally tough, prepared units because what we have right now isn’t working. The residual effects of 11 years of war is there. We’re feeling it and it’s hurting,” Ernst said. “We need to build not just our Soldiers but noncommissioned officers, officers, leaders — sergeants major down to privates, generals down to lieutenants. We need to build everyone to be mentally tough to be able to bounce back from adversity rather than recoiling from these challenges that we’ve been facing. They aren’t just the challenges of going to war, but the challenges that we face at home.”

The effects of the Master Resilience course and associated unit training can be seen both in the deployed environment and at home. The contrast, though, is most stark in the fog of war.

Soldiers have written back to course instructors to tell how, after adopting MRT skills into their unit, they were able to change the mindset of not just one individual but whole platoons, companies, battalions and even brigades, Ernst said.

“It totally changed their units,” Ernst said. “A unit from Afghanistan was requesting material and telling us how this has changed their mental-health referral. A lot of times people have an incident and don’t know how to respond. This teaches you how you think.”

The Master Resilience course is a great tool to have in the leadership toolbox, Ernst said.

“Once you have it and you’re a senior leader, you can take it with you, and you can teach your Soldiers about it,” Ernst said. “The biggest thing about it is it empowers Soldiers. It allows Soldiers to take care of themselves. When we teach people that, we do empower them. It’s not always coming to me and saying, ‘Hey, drill sergeant, what should I think?’ or, ‘Hey, sergeant, what should I do?’ It’s you thinking for yourself.”

The skills can also be taught in any environment, which makes them effective, Ernst said.

“They’re portable,” Ernst said. “Anyone can learn them.”

Keep an Open Mind

Sgt. 1st Class Ana Hernandezsanchez, an MRT course facilitator at Fort Jackson, said it’s important to keep an open mind and acknowledge the course has potential.

Hernandezsanchez was an Advanced Individual Training platoon sergeant when her sergeant major called her in the field and asked if she could pass a PT test.

“He said ‘Good,’ and then he hung up the phone,” Hernandezsanchez said.

Later, her first sergeant told her she would be attending a Master Fitness Trainer class at the University of Pennsylvania. She first protested the assignment, saying she had a new class that was close to graduating. However after arriving at the university, she realized the course was not about physical fitness.

The November 2009 MRT class had about 160 students. Of those, 30 to 40 thought they were being assigned to learn more about PT, Hernandezsanchez said. From her own experience, Hernandezsanchez said she can understand why some Soldiers don’t open up to the course right away.

“When I went through the course in 2009, I didn’t believe in the course. I thought it was a bunch of mushy stuff,” Hernandezsanchez said. “I didn’t think it was going to work. It wasn’t until probably about three or four weeks after I left, when I decided to try one of the skills that I had learned, that it actually worked in the situation. So I thought I’d try something else in a different situation. It got to the point where I was trying different skills in different situations, and it was working. That’s when it started to make sense to me. So I tell [the students to] keep an open mind. Even if you don’t understand it or you don’t think it’s going to work, keep an open mind. Try the skills first before you decide that it doesn’t work.”

Hernandezsanchez said that when she tried using more skills, her leaders started to notice.

“I still did what I had to do, I just did it in a different way,” Hernandezsanchez said. “And they noticed that I was han-



Above: A student with 11th Air Defense Artillery Brigade learns MRT Aug. 4 at Fort Bliss, Texas.

Photo by Spc. David M. Gafford

12 MRT SKILLS

- 1 ATC (ACTIVATING EVENT, THOUGHTS & CONSEQUENCES)**
- 2 AVOIDING THINKING TRAPS**
- 3 DETECT ICEBERGS**
- 4 ENERGY MANAGEMENT**
- 5 PROBLEM SOLVING**
- 6 PUT IT IN PERSPECTIVE**
- 7 REAL-TIME RESILIENCE**
- 8 IDENTIFY STRENGTHS IN SELF AND OTHERS**
- 9 USE STRENGTHS IN CHALLENGES**
- 10 ACTIVE, CONSTRUCTIVE, RESPONDING AND PRAISE**
- 11 EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION**
- 12 HUNT THE GOOD STUFF**



Above: Soldiers from A Company, 2nd Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment, 3rd Stryker Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division, pray before a mission Feb. 24, 2010, at Camp Taji, Iraq.

Photo by Spc. Advin Illa-Medina

Opposite page: Students at the Master Resilience Trainer Course at Fort Jackson, S.C., take notes in the classroom. The class of 60 is broken into groups of 30, then into smaller groups of five or six Soldiers. Through each interaction they learn more about a particular MRT skill.

Photo by Jennifer Mattson

dling it differently, and it was working.”

Resilience is something that everyone has to make a conscious effort to work on every day, Hernandezsanchez said.

“Resilience is a process,” Hernandezsanchez said. “It’s not a destination.”

Alvin Shrum, MRT course manager at Fort Jackson, said the course is unlike any other in the Army. It requires students to open up, discuss the different parts of resilience within small groups and share life experiences that can help Soldiers become more resilient.

Since the MRT course is so new, it’s important that unit MRT trainers model and train the MRT skills.

“It’s continuous, it’s ongoing,” Shrum said. “It doesn’t mean that they can take a knee and stop training. They continue to train because personnel [transition]. You’ve got incoming and outgoing personnel, so the training is never complete.”

The training course at Fort Jackson is also continuous, with 32 courses held each year to train almost 2,000 students annually.

The goal is to eventually have one MRT per battalion, approximately 5,400 MRTs Armywide. But that’s a moving

target: As more battalions receive MRTs, the Army will add additional ones to battalions to accommodate companies, Shrum said.

“It will change the way we think, our culture, with positive outcomes,” Shrum said.

Graduates receive an 8R additional skill identifier upon completion of the course. Since the course trains the trainers, students also learn how to teach resilience training assistants to provide additional support in their units.

Perception is Reality

Dr. Randy Williams, a primary instructor for the Master Resilience Trainer Course, said the University of Pennsylvania piloted the program.

The Positive Psychology Department studied the effects of resilience on the younger generation. It incorporated its empirical research to develop a course that was then tailored for the Army.

“Psychologically, those people who are more resilient are realistic in the way they perceive their life. They’re more accurate,” Williams said. “They have much lower stress level; they typically have

more meaningful connections, relationships with a substantial social network and a supportive network. It increases, the ... motivation, engagement, quality of life — all those things. And those are not just professionally, but personally as well.”

The course was developed to teach 12 basic skills that match up with different personalities and situations. The skills allow individuals to think more flexibly about the information they’re receiving as well as to perceive facts more accurately, Williams said.

“These 12 skills do a very good job at targeting specific issues,” Williams said. “When you’re thinking accurately, you’re much better able to problem-solve. When you’re thinking flexibly, then you’re much more amenable to different perspectives and points of view. When you choose to exercise control of your thinking, it is more accurate, more flexible and more intentional.”

To help learn these skills, students at the MRT course start out in a 60-person classroom. A skill is presented to the large class. They then break into two groups of 30 students, and students review the material presented in the large classroom. They then split into tables of five or six Soldiers for small-group discussion.

“It’s a dynamic course. It’s not monologue, it’s a dialogue,” Williams said. “Participants are extremely engaged, and that is the expectation.”

While participation is the norm and most students become comfortable talking through the skills within the first couple of days, there has been some pushback from students who are skeptical that the program works, Williams said.

“Most of the pushback circles around a preconceived idea that in most cases is erroneous. [We’re not] tiptoeing through the tulips singing ‘Kumbaya’ and putting a smile on your face, pretending that life is good when in fact it’s not,” Williams said. “This course is not based on fantasy.”

Most students understand after the first week how important the course can be for their Soldiers, Williams said.

“The course is designed to help develop resiliency in individuals who may be deficient. But it’s also designed to enhance, maintain and build upon the resilience that already exists in most of our Soldiers,” Williams said.

To take the course, Soldiers must be at least staff sergeants, though exceptions are made for sergeants on drill sergeant duty.

“There are no prerequisites for coming to this course other than a real want to learn this and help Soldiers put it in place,” Williams said.

Wide Range of Application

Stan Johnson, an MRT trainer at Fort Jackson, was a sergeant major at Training and Doctrine Command headquarters when MRT was first announced by Army Chief of Staff Gen. George Casey, who wanted a program that could better assist Army leaders in dealing with adversity.

The first wave of instruction targeted platoon sergeants because they work most closely with Soldiers.

After the pilot in August 2009, Casey visited the students and asked what they didn’t like about the course or what needed to be improved. He wanted NCOs to embrace the program, Johnson said.

Casey learned Soldiers find value in their own self-awareness and in a self-aware leadership, Johnson said.

“The Soldiers were saying things like, ‘I wish I had this a long time ago,’” Johnson said. “It really demonstrated the value and the powerfulness of the skills.”

He said that at first, his job was to be skeptical of the process. But after

3 PHASES OF THE MRT COURSE

- 1 PREPARE**
Students learn the six competencies and 12 skills.
- 2 SUSTAIN**
Students learn about deployment-cycle training for units — knowing when MRT skills aren’t enough and knowing when to refer Soldiers to other resources.
- 3 ENHANCEMENT**
Students learn about goal setting and energy management.

learning more about positive psychology and the University of Pennsylvania program, and from talking with other Soldiers, Johnson said he was convinced it would work.

“These programs are not just something that the Army needs, but something we all need from the basic trainee coming in to the most senior leader,” Johnson said.

Johnson oversaw the course implementation at Fort Jackson. Johnson and his wife, Nikki, then a command sergeant major in a transportation battalion, saw the start of the train-the-trainer

program and its facilities at Fort Jackson in 2009.

Both retired from the Army and became trainers at Fort Jackson’s MRT course.

They work side-by-side and help students understand the concepts that are taught by the primary instructors.

“They think they’re learning from us, but we’re learning from them,” Stan Johnson said. “It’s always looking for a way to make this place better.”

Nikki Johnson said teaching at the Leader Development Division has been one of the most rewarding experiences she’s had with the Army.

“Next to being a first sergeant, this is the most rewarding job I’ve had,” she said.

While the facilitators learn more about the course with each cycle that goes through, the course itself is already a well-honed training tool that has undergone rigorous evaluation, Stan Johnson said.

Students should trust that the program is effective because the underlying skills it teaches really do work, Nikki Johnson said.

“What I tell the students is, ‘This cake is baked. All you have to do is slice it and serve it,’ because the skills work,” she said. “It’s all about you making a conscious effort to use them.” **J**

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