



Sergeants Major Academy Students Now Learning To Be Resilience Trainers

By David Crozier

U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy

FORT BLISS, Texas — Students at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy recently began taking a 10-day course that will qualify them as master resilience trainers.

Students of Class 64 of the Sergeants Major Course were the first to take the extended master resilience trainer, or MRT, training this year. They will graduate with the additional skill identifier of 8R and be level-1 MRTs.

The expectation is not for the senior non-commissioned officers to graduate and actually teach resilience training, said Mike Hayes, senior instructor in the Department of Command Leadership at the academy. He said the goal is for them to use the knowledge to ensure the program is working out in the field.

“Now you know what right looks like, you know what the program consists of,” Hayes told the students.

“You know what the skills are and you know what the requirements are. So when you get to your unit as an S3 sergeant major and your commander says ‘what is the status of my MRT program?’ You can go down and see how they are doing it [with the knowledge of how it is supposed to be done],” Hayes said.

Resiliency training actually began about three years ago at the Sergeants Major Academy, when one of the cadre attended the MRT course taught at the University of Pennsylvania and came back to develop a program of instruction for students attending the Sergeants Major Course.

Then last year, leaders of the Army's Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness program came to the academy and briefed the Sergeants Major Course students. From there, an agreement was reached where instructors from the Fort Bliss CSF2 Training Center would take on the duties of qualifying the sergeants major as MRTs.

"It enhanced the quality of training and all the sergeants major will be level-ones upon graduation," said Hayes. "The intent behind it was to get a lot more senior level, senior NCO, involvement in the program. Some units had programs in place, but they weren't really going after things. So leadership felt that if they had more believers at the senior level, more would get involved and then the programs would get better."

As the Sergeant Major Course is broken down into five departments and five semesters, MRT is taught at the beginning of each semester as each group rotates into the Command Leadership phase of the course, Hayes explained. The MRT program consists of lectures in the auditorium and small group instruction and interaction in the classroom.

"The real work is when they go to the small group room with an assistant primary instructor and some facilitators and we ask them to actually use the skill or theory they just learned," said Dr. Erin Towner, Master Resilience Trainer/Performance Expert and primary instructor for the course. "Here is this skill, now walk through it; this is how your MRT is trained to do it; try it for yourself"

"The overarching goal of teaching sergeants major students the program is to give them a deeper understanding of what an MRT is," said Sgt. 1st Class David Parish, a level-4 MRT instructor. "Also, to show them how they can use their MRT as a force multiplier; how they can use their MRT more effectively in their units; and what their MRT's left and right limits actually are."

Parish said the latter part is significant because MRTs in the field have been asked to do things that actually aren't in an MRT's realm or scope. He added that Soldiers have reported being asked to act as a triage for their unit — to decide whether or not an individual needs treatment for a mental health issue.

"We are not training in a two-week period to be clinical psychologists. We are not giving anyone a PhD in clinical psychology," he said. "So leaders need to understand things like you still have those outside resources that you need to reach for [that are outside an MRT's scope]."

MRT is intended to give Soldiers skills to cope with things before they happen, Parish said, as well as give them life skills for everyday living.

Parish, an assistant primary instructor with the 5th Armored Brigade, 1st Armored Division, said resilience skills are designed to prepare Soldiers for traumatic events that might occur in their lives.

"So before a traumatic event happens, before life just slaps you in the face, these are the skills we want you to know," Parish said.

He added that the MRT course is not trying to teach students a set of skills for after an event has already occurred.

"Say you are suffering from a disorder like PTSD," he said. "We are not teaching you these skills to treat your PTSD; we are teaching you these skills to treat your life and how you would use these skills for long-term and hopefully reduce or eliminate the PTSD before it happens."

MRT training is broken down into four modules of instruction, Towner said.

"The first module is foundations. It contains foundational components about resilience, performance enhancement and the six competencies that build resilience and performance," she said. "We also teach them the skills of energy management and goal setting."

Module two, she said, is the longest module and is focused on building mental toughness. It focuses on cognitive behavioral skills, she said.

In Module three, the students learn about strength of character.

"The students take an assessment, and they get a rank order of their strengths," Towner said. "Then we have a lot of conversations about how have you used these strengths, where has this gotten you, how do you find this in your Soldiers, and how are you going to leverage this in your Soldiers? That module is an entire day."

Module four is all about communication, she said. From there, they move on to practical application.

"They have learned all these skills, and then we give them a scenario and ask them what skills make sense to work this scenario," she said. "We ask them how should they be working with this Soldier, and the scenario gets progressively more complicated and [it forces them] to see what other assets and resources you can use on post to help this Soldier — what other assets are available."

Towner said it is all aimed at setting them up for success before "stuff" happens.

The students of Class 64 who took the course in the first semester agree.

"Up until I came here and I took the MRT course, I knew very little of it," said Master Sgt. Juan Pena, who was a brigade operations sergeant major with the 2nd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry) at Fort Drum, N.Y.

"However, the MRT course gave me ways of doing things and also how to be more positive each and every day. This is probably one of the most beneficial training exercises or training events that I have ever been involved in."

Master Sgt. Clay Usie, who was a senior military instructor at Louisiana State University and a first ser-

geant with the 75th Ranger Regiment, said that he had used and taught resiliency as soon as the Army stood up the CSF2 program on Fort Benning, Ga.

“My battalion commander became a big fan of it, and we started sending all of our senior instructors for the ranger assessment and selection program, and we started teaching resiliency training within the program,” he said. “I think it complemented what we were doing. ... We have shown an increased accession rate since we implemented MRT.”

Throughout the course, students are taught about MRT competencies of self awareness, self regulation, optimism, mental agility, strengths of character and connection. They learn about thinking traps, activating events, icebergs (personal beliefs and values), problem solving, mental games, real-time resilience and communication tools. The course also shows the students how to conduct pre-deployment and post-deployment training, as well as teach energy management and goal setting. ■



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