

Wellness Assessment at USASMA Reveals Common Problem Not Enough Sleep

By Clifford Kyle Jones, NCO Journal

January 19, 2017



Lt. Col. Devon Bradley, a licensed clinical social worker, left, speaks with a student in the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy's Class 67 during an assessment for the Executive Wellness Program. (Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones / NCO Journal)

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When representatives from the Executive Wellness Center assessed Class 67 at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy recently, they found themselves doling out the same advice to many of the sergeants-major-to-be: Get more sleep.

Lt. Col. Cyndi McLean was one of three medical professionals who reviewed students' responses to a questionnaire about healthy habits related to the three elements of the Performance Triad — activity, nutrition and sleep.

McLean is a physical therapist and said one problem area came up over and over again.

"I would love to say that it was activity," she said, but many of the students' biggest shortcoming was sleep.

"A lot of them don't realize what optimal sleep is," she said. "They don't realize healthy hygiene habits. It's something that is very fixable. I think that we all sometimes jump to more of a clinical or medical diagnosis: 'I have sleep apnea.' Well, maybe there's some room for improvement there and some things that we can do to help you in that category and not just give it a test, give it a label, give it a diagnosis. We really want to help you through that process to truly optimize your sleep."





A student in the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy's Class 67 has his body fat composition checked. (Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones / NCO Journal)

At the beginning of their school year, the more than 600 students of Class 67 took part in the first assessments of the office's new Executive Wellness Program. The program is intended to bring the Performance Triad and resilience training together to help the senior noncommissioned officers become better Soldiers and leaders.

McLean said that not getting enough sleep can be the root of many other performance problems. If Soldiers sleep better, she said, they start to see benefits in other areas, such as improved eating and activity levels and reduced anxiety.

Lt. Col. Devvon Bradley, a licensed clinical social worker who also took part in the assessments, agreed that sleep is the linchpin for performance.

"It's interesting because, in here, every time I see a sleep problem up front, it leads to the nutrition issues and then the activity at the end," he said. "There are pain issues and there are also dietary issues, almost like a direct correlate. If there are no sleep issues up front, it's less likely that there are nutrition problems and less likely that there are physical problems — pain issues — at the end.





Lt. Col. Cyndi McLean, a physical therapist, speaks with a student in the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy's Class 67 during an assessment by the Executive Wellness Program. (Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones / NCO Journal)

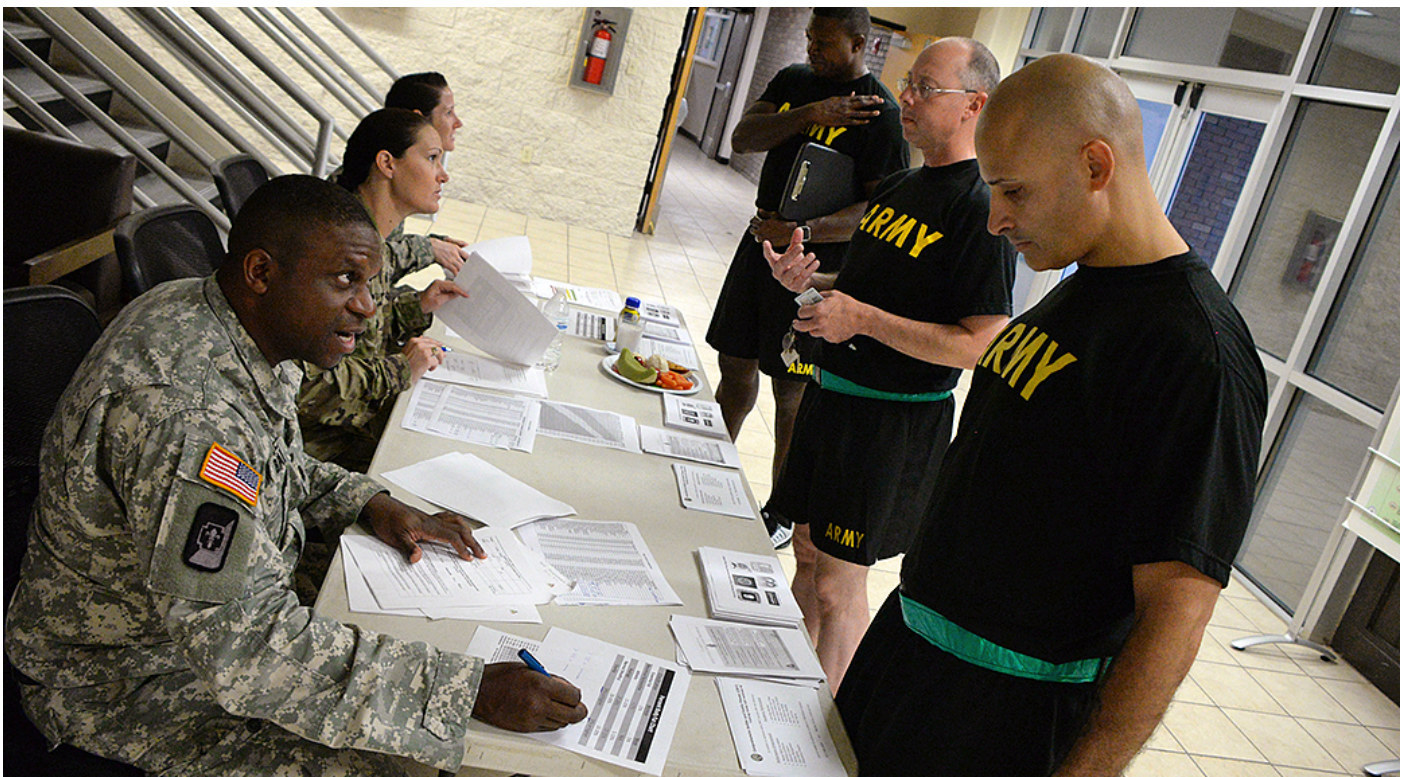
"The connection between sleep, activity and nutrition? There's no doubt in my mind about it," he continued. "It's a triad, and each one contributes to the other. If you can help one, you can help the others. It looks like sleep is in the lead, in terms of if you fix it first, you have a better chance of fixing the other stuff."

McLean said that sleep issues not only lead to problems in other areas but also noted that not sleeping well can make it harder to resolve Soldiers' other problems.

"If I see that you have a pain issue, but you're not willing to address your sleep habits, I'm not going to be able to get you as good as I possibly could," she said. "Your prognosis is going to be on the lesser side. Once those people open up (about sleep), it's amazing how much of their chronic pain, their aches, their issues like that get better as well."

As McLean, Bradley and registered dietitian Capt. Michelle Stone reviewed Class 67's questionnaires, the future sergeants major were categorized as green, amber or red in each of the three Performance Triad areas.

"What I'm seeing on people's faces is the lightbulb going on," Bradley said.



Lt. Col. Devvon Bradley, a licensed clinical social worker, left, speaks with a student in the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy's Class 67 during an assessment for the Executive Wellness Program. (Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones / NCO Journal)

Many of the NCOs didn't realize they were red in the sleep category, he said, and now they not only know they have a problem but also know where to get help.

Sgt. 1st Class Darin E. Elkins, the NCO in charge of the Executive Wellness Center, coordinated and led the assessments, and he saw the same lightbulbs turn on.

“Once you identify an area where you’re not doing well, you think, ‘Oh, I didn’t realize that. Oh, I didn’t realize that taking in two or three cups of coffee or energy drinks at 6 p.m. is impacting my sleep, which is impacting my cognitive abilities, which is impacting my output,’ ” Elkins said. “Once we’ve identified it for them and say here’s a way to better optimize these things that they’re doing, then they can start making the changes. If you always do what you’ve always done, you get the same outcomes.”

The assessments were just the beginning of the program. Throughout the school year, the students of Class 67 will be given more training on the Performance Triad and resilience, and Bradley expects their personal realizations and training will pay dividends well beyond these particular NCOs.

“They’re leaders in the Army,” Bradley said, “so when they go back out to their units, they will push the same message of science and wellness.”