



U.S. Army Soldiers with 162nd Infantry Regiment, 41st Infantry Brigade Combat Team prepare to flip an inflatable boat during broaching recovery training at Cullaby Lake near Warrenton, Oregon, Aug. 16, 2020. (U.S. Army photo by Maj. Leslie Reed)

The Leader's Guide to Building Resilient Soldiers

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Noncommissioned officers (NCOs) are critical in the resilience-building process and developing Soldiers who can overcome adversity, cope with stressors, and help deter behavioral health risks. Unit leaders are increasingly faced with the adverse effects of Soldier behavioral health issues because of the U.S. Army's high operation and deployment tempo. This is negatively affecting unit readiness. Building resilience in Soldiers requires consistent leader engagement and long-term innovative coping mechanisms to prevent potential behavioral health issues. This article describes the impact of behavioral health on the force and several strategies a leader can implement to increase resilience in their Soldiers.

Soldier Behavioral Health Issues

According to the Department of Defense's (DOD) 2018 Annual Suicide Report, from 2013 to 2018, the suicide rate for the U.S. Army active component increased from 18.5 to 24.8 suicides per 100,000 service members (DOD, 2019). Furthermore, Patricia Kime (2019) stated "Mental health appointments among active-duty troops accounted for roughly 16% of all military medical appointments, or 1.8 million outpatient visits" (para. 2).

These statistics show a growing decline in the behavioral health of Soldiers and a steady increase in suicides because of it. What's needed in today's Soldiers is more resilience, defined by the Department of



U.S. Army Soldiers attending a Basic Leadership Course participate in a suicide prevention course at the 7th Army Noncommissioned Officer Academy, Grafenwoehr, Germany, July 17, 2020. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Zack Stahlberg)

the Army (2014) as “the mental, physical, emotional, and behavioral ability to face and cope with adversity, adapt to change, recover, learn, and grow from setbacks” (p. 6).

Impacts of Behavioral Health Issues

At the strategic level, Soldier suicide and behavioral health concerns have created numerous legislative actions to address these issues. Congress directed several mandates in the National Defense Authorizations Act of fiscal years 2011 through 2019. These mandates have included establishing a task force to examine suicide prevention, developing a comprehensive suicide prevention policy, and establishing a DOD oversight committee for suicide prevention and resilience programs (Kamarck, 2019).

The psychological effects of behavioral health issues and/or suicide of a Soldier also affects the emotional stability of other Soldiers, friends, and family. According to the *Psychiatric Times* (2018), “If the psychopathology causing these problems goes untreated, chronicity develops that leads to significant social impairment, marital dysfunction, job instability, suicide, substance abuse, and violent behavior” (para. 3). Additionally, the psychological impacts of losing a fellow Soldier may repeat the cycle of behavioral health issues in other Soldiers due to the potential inability to cope with the loss. However, an adaptive and resilient leader can help mitigate the impacts of these behavioral health issues through various leadership approaches.

The Resilient Leader

Noncommissioned officers (NCO) have two primary responsibilities: the accomplishment of the mission and the development and welfare of their Soldiers

(Department of the Army, 2020). NCOs develop their Soldiers by teaching, coaching, and mentoring their subordinates. However, building resilience in Soldiers requires a holistic approach to Soldier development and leaders must recognize each Soldier is unique and will react to stressors differently. Unit leaders must possess self-awareness and the ability to incorporate servant leader principles into their leadership style to improve resilience in all Soldiers (Department of the Army, 2016a).

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership focuses on modeling ethical behavior and demonstrating a genuine concern for subordinates. Ultimately, this leadership style enables a leader to identify and understand how stressors affect each Soldier individually. The servant leadership style does not require leaders to coddle Soldiers, but instead relies on the fundamental principles of active listening, empathy, healing, awareness, and commitment to the growth of people (Griffing, 2019). These principles allow a leader to influence at-risk Soldiers by interpreting verbal and nonverbal cues, empathizing with Soldier’s emotional challenges, and seeking opportunities to heal them from overwhelming setbacks. Furthermore, understanding a Soldier’s mental and emotional capabilities allows the leader to gauge how much pressure to place on a Soldier before it becomes too overwhelming and negative behaviors emerge (Lampkin, 2019).

Self-Awareness

Recognizing each Soldier possesses varying degrees of resilience and reacts to stressors differently may require a leader to adapt their leadership approach by maintaining self-awareness. Leaders lacking self-awareness may cause counterproductive behaviors during stressful situations and add to stressors affecting their subordinates. According to the Department of the Army (2019), all leaders are susceptible to displaying counterproductive leadership behaviors in times of stress. This may result in decreased physical and psychological well-being, depression, and burnout. Furthermore, self-awareness is critical when attempting to provide emotional support to Soldiers with low resilience. An aggressive leadership approach with an overwhelmed Soldier may prove ineffective.

Through self-awareness, a leader can identify personal resilience shortcomings and improve through self-development. The Department of the Army (2019) stated, “In no other profession is the cost of being unprepared to lead so unforgiving in terms of mission failure and loss of life” (p. 6-2). Self-aware leaders demonstrate humility and actively seek opportunities to acquire

knowledge and experience in leadership. Through self-development and openness to feedback, a leader will increase their confidence and resilience to handle unseen stressors.

Formal Training Methods for Building Resilience

The U.S. Army has many formal resilience training programs to assist leaders with building resilience in Soldiers. Unit leaders can utilize current resilience training programs such as the Global Assessment Tool (GAT) and the Master Resilience Training (MRT) Course. However, the main challenge with these programs is not the quality of training but rather the frequency of presenting them to Soldiers. According to the Department of the Army (2014), “Soldiers will not embrace training that is merely theoretical and classroom-based; they require relevant and practical training they see as empowering, improving their strength, and enhancing their personal health and performance” (p. 18). These formal training programs must support the leader’s plan of action to develop resilience in their Soldiers and not serve as the primary solution to Soldier development.

Global Assessment Tool

The GAT is an option for Soldiers who are uncomfortable with communicating stressors with unit leaders. The GAT is a secure web-based program combining comprehensive health and fitness metrics with survey-based questions motivating the user towards behavioral change (Department of the Army, 2014). It also serves as a useful tool to develop a Soldier’s self-awareness and provides opportunities to conduct self-development. However, this must not be the sole solution for building resilience in Soldiers since the GAT removes leaders from the development process. Unit leaders must utilize the GAT as a means to enhance leadership involvement by developing their Soldiers through effective communication.

Master Resilience Training Course

The MRT course is a 10-day course focusing on learning resilience competencies and skills (Department of the Army, 2014). From a leadership perspective, MRT-qualified leaders can use resilience competencies and skills and incorporate them into their leadership approach. Applying these skills with the servant leadership approach enhances a leader’s ability to build

resilience in their Soldiers. This allows leaders to utilize the techniques commonly instructed within a classroom environment to Soldiers at any time. Informal Training Methods for Building Resilience

Incorporating resilience techniques into the daily life of a Soldier will rapidly accelerate the process of building resilience in Soldiers. According to the Department of the Army (2014), “Incorporating Resilience and Performance skills into scheduled and unscheduled unit activities and tailored to unit needs is the process by which Soldiers learn how to think about and apply the training to themselves and others” (p. 18). To achieve a lasting effect in building Soldier resilience, unit leaders must develop innovative methods to increase resilience-building opportunities for their Soldiers. Leaders can incorporate these activities during realistic training exercises, after action reviews, and leader-led after action debriefs.

Realistic Training

Realistic training is the top method for developing resilience within a Soldier. “Realistic training developed around critical warrior tasks and battle drills is a primary source for the resilience and confidence to succeed along with the ability to demonstrate grit in tough situations” (Department of the Army, 2019, p. 8-7). The stressors of realistic training such as environmental conditions, operational stress, enemy actions, and simulated casualties place the Soldier’s mind in the worst scenario they will face in combat. Through numerous repetitions of operating in a simulated combat environment, a Soldier slowly builds the resilience to overcome associated stressors. “Ultimately, this type of training saves lives in actual operations because units



U.S. Army Soldiers with the 2d Cavalry Regiment arrive as part of the advanced echelon team for Noble Partner 20 in Tbilisi, Georgia, Aug. 29, 2020. (U.S. Army photo by LaShic Patterson)

are already familiar with the stress and demands of the training environment” (Department of the Army, 2016b, p. A-4).

Resilience-Based After Action Review

The current after action review (AAR) method capitalizes on learning from mistakes conducted during realistic training and focuses on improving the performance of individual and collective tasks. However, there are a lack of resilience-building techniques during the AAR that address Soldier stressors. Leaders can incorporate resilience-based questions that prepare the Soldier’s mind for combat stress.

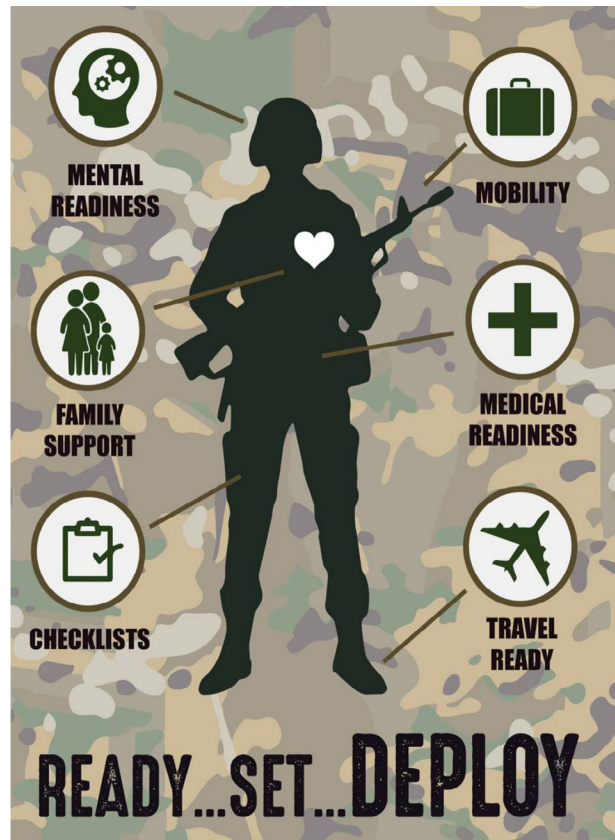
According to the Department of the Army (2016b), “The AAR is a guided analysis of an organization’s performance, conducted at appropriate times during and at the conclusion of a training event or operation with the objective of improving future performance” (p. D-1). The AAR enables Soldiers to access what happened through self-discovery, allowing them to develop a plan for improving performance. These AARs provide candid insight into a Soldier’s strengths and weaknesses from various perspectives and feedback.

The following are two examples demonstrating resilience-based questions during an AAR: How would you genuinely react if your battle buddy died next to you and you had to continue to engage the enemy? How would you cope with the loss of a friend in combat while keeping focused on completing the mission? Incorporating resilience-based questions at the end of an AAR does not negate the primary focus of the AAR, which is an assessment of the performance measures related to a mission essential task, but instead widens the scope of the AAR to improve resilience in Soldiers.

Leader-Led After Action Debrief

The facilitation of a leader-led after action debriefing focuses on the emotional impact of a potentially traumatic event. According to the Department of the Army (2016a), “A potentially traumatic event is an event that causes an individual or group to experience intense feelings of terror, horror, and hopelessness” (p. 7-3). This opportunity to strengthen resilience within a Soldier is essential to Soldier development since it allows the leader to mitigate any behavioral health risks immediately. However, an unprepared leader must use caution when facilitating this type of debriefing to prevent additional stressors that could negatively affect Soldiers and can lead to a behavioral health issue.

Leaders who pursue this should be MRT-qualified and understand the servant leadership style.



Frequent deployments can be stressful. Knowing what to expect can help prepare Soldiers and their families. (Graphic by U.S. Army Resilience Directorate)

Conclusion

The U.S. Army’s operational tempo over the last 19 years has taken a significant toll on its force and families causing stressors that may be effecting the mental health of Soldiers. Soldier suicide rates continue to rise each year with no definite solution in sight.

The role of leaders in the resilience-building process is critical to developing Soldiers who can overcome adversity. Unit leaders who demonstrate genuine concern and proactively train resilience in their Soldiers will mitigate behavioral health issues and possible loss of life. Ultimately, combating behavioral health issues of Soldiers requires adaptive servant leaders who can provide innovative resilience-building techniques to their Soldiers. ■

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