



Soldiers from Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne), carry a stretcher laden with sand bags during a Ruck for Life road march, Sept. 8, 2017, at Joint Base Lewis McChord, Washington. The Chaplain organized the event to acknowledge the value of life and build resiliency tools. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Adam Munoz, 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne))

# Choosing Hardship Today for an Easier Tomorrow

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**A**fter more than 20 years of war, significant global societal change, and a global pandemic, the need for resilient individuals and teams within America's Army is clear. Soldiers must develop the resiliency to withstand the hardest of times and still stand ready. Concurrently, dramatic increases in active service member and veteran suicides in the previous two decades made it clear the U.S. Army needs to build a much more resilient force.

Resilience is an individual's psychological and physiological ability to adapt positively to adversity and

change, recover, learn, and grow from a setback (Ledford et al., 2020; Department of the Army (DA), 2014). This definition requires individuals to be both physically and mentally capable of enduring hardship.

Resiliency is a component of psychological hardiness, which is the ability to remain in good mental health while performing under stress (Soccorso et al., 2019). One reason the U.S. Army focuses heavily on cultivating resiliency is because of suicide's harmful effects to families and military formations alike.

U.S. Special Operations Command (2020) said 117 members of special operations forces (SOF) committed suicide between 2007 and 2015, a higher percentage than both the conventional military and the civilian population during that timeframe. With such a high rate of suicide among even the Army's most elite forces and a need to build a more resilient force, the Army turned to research on suicide prevention and resiliency enhancing methods.

The purpose of this article is to analyze resiliency as an individual quality by examining how personal choices, attitude, stress management techniques, and relationships affect resilient individuals and teams.

## Choosing a Path

Van Camp (2020) says that to improve one's ability to persevere in the face of highly stressful events, Soldiers must become accustomed to being uncomfortable. Choosing discomfort and subjecting themselves to controlled high-stress environments recalibrates the perception of what constitutes hardship and Soldiers' ability to overcome it.

This type of conditioning is a standard practice in the U.S. military. The Army routinely conducts challenging and realistic training allowing Soldiers to challenge themselves and even fail in controlled environments. This deliberate subjection to harsh conditions, in turn, makes future hardships more manageable. Results indicate that when Soldiers become accustomed to choosing discomfort, they can increase their resiliency, which is why discomfort is beneficial and necessary to enhancing resiliency.

Many factors can cause stress. It can result from physical and psychological stimuli and is often associated with an uncertain future. However, discomfort from stress can help overcome a stressful situation when

coupled with experience.

Ilgem et al. (2020) noted more experienced medical providers recognized discomfort resulting from uncertainty as a trigger to focus their attention on critical tasks and anticipate resources they may need to resolve uncertain situations. This indicates a crucial resiliency component is the ability to embrace discomfort and stress which enables Soldiers to respond positively in future situations.

Schraefel et al. (2020) concluded similarly that the body and mind require deliberate periods of discomfort and stress followed by a recovery period to develop a more resilient response in the future. Their findings support the idea that choosing hardship in a controlled manner results in more resilient individuals.

The benefits of choosing hardship extend from the psychological to the physiological. Physical fitness is a U.S. Army hallmark. Though average Soldiers are physically fit, intermediate fitness levels vary across Army populations. Those who choose more physically demanding military occupational specialties (MOS) tend to be more physiologically resilient.

Farina et al. (2017) noted SOF members who deployed more frequently than their conventional force counterparts exercised and rested more frequently while deployed, and had lower levels of Cortisol, the primary stress hormone, when redeployed than conventional Soldiers.

These findings indicate SOF members responded better physically to periods of high stress than their counterparts. Additionally, SOF members improved their physiological response to increased physical stress from exercise followed by recovery periods. These facts demonstrate that subjecting Soldiers to stress more regularly enhances resiliency.

Similarly, increased physical fitness makes it more likely individuals will complete cognitively and physically demanding tasks.

Ledford et al. (2020) concluded the more fit Soldiers are, the more their body produces brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) and dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA), and the less it produces Cortisol. BDNF is responsible for making the brain more adaptive to environmental stressors and is linked to reduced effects of post-traumatic stress, while DHEA counters the effects of Cortisol.

These findings show that individuals who choose to challenge their fitness more intensely benefit from increased psychological and physical resilience. For Soldiers to maximize the benefit of challenging themselves, they must have the right attitude for change.

## Warrior Attitude

The attitude with which Soldiers approach adversity is critical to their ability to rise above



Former U.S. Army Sgt. Earl Granville, who lost his leg in Afghanistan and then later his twin brother to death by suicide, speaks to 75th Innovation Command Soldiers about resiliency as part of the 75th IC's Suicide Prevention Program's initiatives. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. John Carkeet IV, 75th Innovation Command)



A U.S. Army paratrooper jumps over an obstacle during a Small Unit Range Tactics Course at Fort Bragg, NC, Aug. 17, 2022. Resilience is an individual's psychological and physiological ability to adapt positively to adversity and change. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Lilliana Fraser)

it. Soldiers' ability to embody a never-quit philosophy and to remain positive in the face of hardship is paramount to their ability to manage everyday life stressors, training, and combat.

Abraham et al. (2018) found combat medics (CM) experienced higher than average stress during deployment because of their role as both combatant and caregiver. Furthermore, a CM's ability to remain resilient also depended on the ability to control their emotional responses and stay positive when faced with adversity while simultaneously acknowledging the need to deal with those emotions later, then following through to resolve their feelings. This indicates that a significant resiliency component is staying positive during adverse events and resolving negative emotions later.

Attitude directly affects how well Soldiers perform during stressful events. The predisposition of how individuals view their ability to endure hardship directly effects the outcome.

A study of Navy SEAL candidates where researchers attempted to predict which candidates would complete phase one of the selection program demonstrated this fact.

Ledford et al. (2020) found candidates who rated themselves highly on the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale were nine percent more likely to successfully complete the first phase of SEAL training. This number is significant because it demonstrates that simply believing in the ability to be successful increases the likelihood of success.

Cultivating this belief in Soldiers could benefit their careers tremendously. To manage one's attitude and personal happiness, a person must learn to better manage stress.

### **Managing the Stress**

Many stress management techniques focus on self-perception and the attitude Soldiers apply to given situations and how well they adapt to relevant stressors. Hagger et al. (2020) indicated that having poor stress perception correlates to impaired physical health, reduced cognitive function, and an inability to perform tasks.

Stress management techniques that focus on positively viewing stress can effectively counter these negative consequences and enhance Soldiers' resilience to stressors.

Hagger et al. (2020) said when people view stress as a challenge from which the opportunity to learn and grow exists, individuals could beneficially adapt to the stressor. Therefore, choosing to view a stressor as a challenge to overcome instead of a threat to avoid enhances Soldiers' ability to cope and make meaningful personal growth from an otherwise harmful situation.

The stress mindset management technique addresses how Soldiers view stress and identify stressors as either enhancing or debilitating (Hagger et al., 2020). This technique results in individuals who view stress as an enhancing force. This view of stress enhances resiliency because it removes the debilitating notion of stress and replaces it with an opportunity for growth.

Both techniques align with the U.S. Army's Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness (CSF2) program. The resilience skills in CSF2 focus on improving thinking, responses to stress, and an optimistic outlook (DA, 2014). A key area of emphasis in CFS2 is on individuals to make changes to their perceptions and attitudes regarding stress, further supporting the notion that it requires an element of personal choice for individuals to become more resilient.

Another means of managing stress is to rely on others. Close relationships provide individuals with a support system. Abraham et al. (2018) said a key characteristic exhibited by the most resilient CMs was their close personal relationship with family members and friends. This showed that a support system is an integral component of resiliency. Understanding how relationships affect resiliency in individuals and teams requires further analysis.

### **Impacts of Others on Resiliency**

Many Soldiers rely on solid and healthy relationships throughout their lives to support them when times are tough. CFS2 addresses these relationships as the social and family dimensions of strength (DA, 2014). Parents, siblings, spouses, and friends can all play a role in helping Soldiers be more resilient. From providing encouragement to sharing hardships, these individuals provide a support structure that begins well before Soldiers enter service and will often last well after their service ends.

Abraham et al. (2018) said the most resilient CMs had strong ties to their families and friends beginning in childhood, people they relied on during periods of high stress. This fact suggests supporting others is a critical element in preserving resilience and may represent a source that cultivates resilience from an early age.

Ponder et al. (2012) noted that supportive relationships such as a strong marriage could significantly reduce post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This finding suggests Soldiers who cultivate solid and healthy relationships may gain a vital element in improving resilience.

Team members also function as a support system in enhancing individual and group resiliency within the military. Camaraderies are the close social relationships and friendships forged as military members work towards accomplishing the mission (Whitworth et al., 2020).

When military members share the burdens associated with combat and support one another in achieving objectives, they cultivate camaraderie. Ledford et al. (2020) directly correlated social support from team members to improved resiliency in individual group members and the team as a whole.

This discovery indicates the degree to which team members support one another dramatically influences an individual and a team's effectiveness in adapting to high-stress situations.

Nevarez et al. (2017) found camaraderie forged through hardship generates relationships that reduce PTSD development and severity and improve recovery outcomes from physical trauma. This finding indicates that strong social relationships improve both physiological and psychological resilience.

Similarly, commitment to others can provide the needed motivation to triumph over stressful situations. Abraham et al. (2018) found Soldiers committed to leading by example and those with a strong sense of loyalty to their comrades exhibited more resiliency and willingness to endure high-stress situations.

This finding demonstrates how important choice is in resilience. In this case, increased resilience is the byproduct of Soldiers' commitment to the team. For Soldiers to be committed to leading by example, they must first choose to be the kind of leaders who set the standard for subordinates. Likewise, for Soldiers to demonstrate loyalty, they must decide to value commitment to the team. These findings reinforce the notion that other individuals provide the support and motivation needed to enhance resiliency.

### **Recommendations**

Future research should identify ways to combat factors that contribute to poor recovery after stressful events and methods to implement effective techniques to facilitate recovery in both garrison and combat operations.

The choice factor requires effective recovery as a critical component. How to implement recovery periods most effectively warrants further research.

Future research should also focus on practical techniques to teach Soldiers how to cultivate meaningful relationships with family members and teammates. Soldiers originate from diverse family and social backgrounds, and many Soldiers lack the skills needed to develop meaningful relationships proven to enhance resiliency.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this article was to analyze resiliency as an individual quality by examining how personal choices, attitude, stress management techniques, and relationships cultivate resilient individuals and teams.

The choice to be resilient is a fundamental component of resiliency. Individual decisions can function as resiliency-enhancing factors when individuals choose to subject themselves to hardship in a controlled manner followed by recovery periods.

Believing in the ability to persevere as a mindset is also a resiliency-enhancing quality that increases the likelihood of successfully enduring hardships. Stress management techniques can effectively change the way individuals view stressors and turn negative perceptions of stress into opportunities for personal growth, making individuals more resilient in the face of adversity.

Lastly, relationships are at the foundation of personal and team resiliency. Soldiers must continually cultivate those bonds since personal relationships with family and

the camaraderie forged in hardship with fellow Soldiers provide an essential support system that enhances Soldiers' and team's resilience to physical and mental hardship. ■

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