

With Russia's invasion of Ukraine, U.S. Soldiers are living in a heightened state of readiness, uncertain how the crisis will evolve. Maintaining the mental fitness and wellbeing of these Soldiers is critical given that persistent physiological and psychological stress (ambiguity, family separation, underlying pressure, problems outside of their control, etc.) can diminish motivation, wellbeing, and psychological health.

This Quick Guide highlights strategies that can protect mental health, bolster resilience, and maintain mental readiness. Leaders can reinforce these strategies as part of their routine touchpoints.

KEY POINTS TO CONSIDER

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| PRIORITIZE HEALTHY SLEEP | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Sleep is important for physical health, emotion regulation, and cognitive functioning<input type="checkbox"/> Psychological stressors (like uncertainty and ambiguity) and environmental stressors (like noise, light, and temperature) can interfere with good sleep hygiene<input type="checkbox"/> Soldiers practice better sleep habits when their leaders emphasize the importance of sleep<input type="checkbox"/> Preparing the body for sleep by engaging in a regular bedtime routine and limiting blue light can support good sleep<input type="checkbox"/> When regular sleep isn't possible, tactical napping can help<input type="checkbox"/> To prepare for anticipated lack of sleep, bank sleep ahead of time |
| REINFORCE MENTAL SKILLS | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Individual resilience can be strengthened by practicing mental skills<input type="checkbox"/> Grounding, deep tactical breathing, self-talk, and buddy-talk can be integrated into daily life to reduce anxiety and maintain focus (see next page for details) |
| MANAGE ANGER | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Anger can be a normal response to upsetting events, but uncontrolled or problematic anger can interfere with functioning and good decision making<input type="checkbox"/> Challenging thinking can strengthen emotion regulation (see next page for details) |
| SUSTAIN COHESION | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Leaders set the tone. Choose how to leverage group emotion, which can aid (or hinder) team functioning under stress (see next page for details)<input type="checkbox"/> Emphasizing the team's purpose and values when facing uncertainty or setback is essential for boosting optimism and resilient performance |
| PAY ATTENTION | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> The more leaders practice and encourage resilience skills, the more their Soldiers will too<input type="checkbox"/> Leaders who monitor their own wellbeing are better able to sustain their unit's readiness |

Maintaining focus on resilience can get lost amidst mission-critical tasks. Leaders have an opportunity to reinforce Soldier resilience and readiness by acknowledging the underlying mental stress, deliberately integrating resilience skills into leader touchpoints, and coaching Soldiers to use these skills.

COACHING SOLDIERS DURING PERIODS OF PROLONGED STRESS

ACCEPTANCE

When something that cannot be controlled is draining attention and energy

HOW?

- Acknowledge the stress and remind Soldiers that concerns are common and understandable
- Ask “how can I change it?” to identify what can be changed and accept what cannot be changed
- Develop a short phrase (like “let it go”) that can serve as a personal reminder for acceptance

DELIBERATE BREATHING

When feeling overwhelmed or anxious

HOW?

- Take slow, deep breaths from the stomach, instead of chest and shoulders
- Count to 5 while breathing in, and count to 5 while breathing out
- Practice for 2 minutes and focus on the breath

GROUNDING

When needing to reduce overwhelming stress that interferes with focus

HOW?

- Identify 3 things that the Soldier sees, hears, and feels (physically) in their environment
- Use this technique as a quick method for reorienting to the present

SELF-TALK/BUDDY-TALK

When needing to boost confidence, motivation, or attention

HOW?

- Create a short phrase to increase confidence and stay mentally tough during times of stress
- Develop short phrases to walk through simple technical procedures

EMOTION REGULATION

When negative feelings are getting in the way of relationships and connection

HOW?

- Label emotions with specific words. For example, rather than labeling every negative feeling as “mad”, consider if the feeling is “disappointed”, “annoyed”, “impatient,” or something else. Selecting specific words can enhance emotional control
- Try “5-5-5.” Take the perspective of your future self by imagining how you will feel about small concerns 5 weeks, 5 months, and 5 years from now
- Take a tactical pause before responding to make a better choice

SETTING THE TONE

When team emotions need resetting

HOW?

- Remember that emotions and connection are contagious in groups
- Consider that contagion is fueled by words, tone, facial expressions, and body language
- Check and recalibrate yourself: Team members can read when their leaders are stressed
- You have the opportunity to reset every day

TEAM COHESION

When sustaining trust and connection

HOW?

- Remind the team of the importance of the mission
- Express gratitude for the team’s shared efforts