

## Stress and Psychological Support

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### **ABSTRACT**

*NATO HFM-081/RTG-020 studies Stress and Psychological Support in Modern Military Operations. Stress management and psychological support of military units and personnel are recognized as important tools for unit effectiveness and sustainability. Even support of military personnel after deployments has been recognized to have an effect on combat readiness since participation of military personnel in operational deployments is a common and recurrent practice. Furthermore, the Armed Forces recognize the need for good employership for their personnel.*

*In HFM-081 the state-of-the-art within NATO and PfP members on this topic has been collected and both “best practices” as well as directions for future developments are pointed out. This study contains therefore the results of collecting methods and evaluations on stress and psychological support within the participating member states. The main topics that were covered are assessment of risks for psychological stress, psychological preparation of military personnel, readiness assessment of personnel before deployment, psychological support of military personnel during and after deployment, psychological support of families before, during and after deployment, organization of psychological support in terms of structures, and finally, procedures and the role of professionals. Intense discussions and comparison of various approaches have led to an intermediate report which will lay the ground for a NATO report on stress and psychological support. The contents of this intermediate report will be presented. At this moment HFM-081 is preparing a study among military commanders in order to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of new approaches.*

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Since 2003 NATO Research Taskgroup 020 is working under the name HFM-081 on the concept of Stress and Psychological Support in Modern Military Operations. The aim of RTG-021 is to provide military leaders with information and practical guidelines on stress and psychological support to enhance effectiveness in modern military operations. Because military leaders at all levels play a key role in sustaining the mental readiness of service members under their command and maintaining morale on the

Cuvelier, Y.; van den Berg, C. (2005) Stress and Psychological Support. In *Strategies to Maintain Combat Readiness during Extended Deployments – A Human Systems Approach* (pp. 8-1 – 8-8). Meeting Proceedings RTO-MP-HFM-124, Paper 8. Neuilly-sur-Seine, France: RTO. Available from: <http://www.rto.nato.int/abstracts.asp>.

homefront, they are the special focus of interest of this RTG. The aim of this document is to provide military leaders with information and practical guidelines on stress and psychological support in modern military operations.

There can be little doubt that deployments have implications for military personnel, their families and military formations. Past experience also suggests that military leaders can make a significant difference in mediating the relationship between psychological support professionals and military personnel and their families. Our review of supporting literature shows many gaps in the available research. In many instances there is a lack of hard evidence to support some of the choices that have been made for psychological support in modern military operations. Despite the lack of empirically derived evidence, military leaders still expect reliable and informed advice from specialists. The team members of this task group have therefore decided to review the existing research in the area and to commit themselves to make recommendations based upon what they consider to be recommended practice.

The taskgroup that works on this assignment consists of over 30 multi-disciplinary professionals representing 19 different NATO- and PfP-countries. Group members include military and civilian defence professionals (mostly psychologists, psychiatrists and sociologists) who work closely together in different subgroups and exchange their views twice yearly in meetings hosted by one of the member nations. This international and multidisciplinary collaboration has resulted in valuable exchanges of information, experiences and recommendations. The group is also continuously seeking opportunities to share ideas and exchange information with other groups working in similar domains of expertise.

This task group is expanding the work of earlier NATO groups, which date back to the 1980's. Whereas previously these groups mainly concentrated their efforts on mental health, there is currently a clear shift of focus towards psychological support in the context of operational readiness.

The topics that are covered so far by this Task Group in the context of modern military operations include the assessment of the risks for psychological stress, the psychological preparation of military personnel, the readiness assessment of personnel before deployment, the psychological support of military personnel during and after deployment, the psychological support of families before, during and after deployment, and the organisation of psychological support in terms of structures, procedures, role of professionals. Furthermore a forum was organized for psychologists working with Special Operations Forces (SOF) in the War Against Terror (WAT). The objective of this forum was for these professionals to exchange ideas, experiences and to evaluate the need for future cooperation. The work of RTG-020 should eventually lead to an inventory of national concepts on stress and psychological support, the publication of a handbook (end of 2006) for military leaders with information and practical guidelines on stress and psychological support to enhance effectiveness in modern military operations that includes a decision support tool and a symposium on Stress & Psychological Support in Modern Military Operations in Spring 2006 followed by a lecture series.

## **2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT**

There can be little doubt that deployments have implications for military personnel, their families and military formations. Past experience also suggests that military leaders can make a significant difference in mediating the relationship between psychological support professionals and military personnel and their families. Our review of supporting literature shows many gaps in the available research. In many instances there is a lack of hard evidence to support some of the choices that have been made for psychological support in modern military operations. Despite the lack of empirically derived evidence, military leaders still expect reliable and informed advice from specialists. The team members of this task group have therefore decided to review the existing research in the area and to commit themselves to make recommendations based upon what they consider to be recommended practice.

The following section contains the first draft of a number of recommendations pertaining to psychological support BEFORE, DURING and AFTER deployments. These recommendations (which are not all research-based) are considered by group members to represent current best practice, although, it should be noted, that there may be a need for some subsequent “fine-tuning”.

Whilst most member nations have already committed resources and established procedures along the lines recommended in this report, they remain national initiatives and there are no overarching NATO-derived guidelines. Therefore the general consensus within the task group is that there is need for a set of NATO standardized guidelines relating to Stress and Psychological Support in Modern Military Operations.

## **2.1 Base line**

Participating in operational deployments is a common and recurrent practice for military personnel. This fact should be reflected in the organization, procedures and tools of psychological support.

Deployments, whether they are intermittent or on a regular basis, can have a long lasting or even permanent effect on the psychological well being of personnel and their families.

Deployment affects the home front as well as those personnel who are being deployed.

The effects of traumatic events and other factors associated with deployments can emerge or remain long after deployment.

Psychological support rests on a combination of individual accountability and the responsibility of the military organization to provide support.

Psychological support is not only about individual mental health. Psychological support takes into account, and provides tools for, both individual and unit mission fitness.

## **2.2 Recommendations for psychological support BEFORE a deployment for modern military operations**

### **2.2.1. Every service member has an individual readiness accountability**

Modern military operations require that military personnel are fit for duty at all times. Hence it is recommended that all military personnel are accountable for taking all necessary steps to maintain their psychological fitness as an essential component of mission fitness. Obviously this is an attitude that cannot be fully externally controlled. It should therefore be part of what is sometimes referred to as the psychological contract between the individual service member and the armed forces. This contract consists of all the unwritten mutual expectations between the armed forces and their military personnel. Current military selection procedures of military personnel at the start of their career, do not guarantee psychological protection against the multiple, adverse and often unpredictable events that occur as part of operational duties including combat operations and that can potentially affect anybody.

### **2.2.2 Armed forces should consider assessment of individual mission fitness**

Armed forces should provide their personnel with the opportunity to report problems in the area of mission fitness. It is recommended that instruments and tools to assess individual mission fitness be implemented in addition to individual accountability. Instruments, tools and procedures will differ according to the ways in which different nations deploy their forces on operations. (e.g. the use by nations of assessments to select volunteers for deployments) If any assessment is performed, it should aim at distinguishing between temporary and chronic problems, thus avoiding stigmatizing of personnel.

Remaining issues and considerations: When personnel are deployed regardless of their psychological fitness, an assessment could nevertheless provide useful information such as identifying those who may need some kind of extra attention during deployment. This depends, of course, on the type of mission and on the provisions made for coaching and treatment in the field. Possibilities of including information from the home front should be considered. Maybe only after a soldier has admitted being not fully fit. Is there a need for therapy in the field or should there be only counseling?

### **2.2.3. Armed forces should consider assessment of unit mission fitness**

Research has proven that mission fitness is not just an individual quality. It is recommended that units should be assessed for mission fitness. Differences between individual and unit mission fitness involve other factors including training, leadership, morale, etc ... This distinction is particularly relevant because assessment of unit mission fitness requires different instruments and techniques to that of individual mission fitness–assessment.

### **2.2.4. Armed forces should organize psychological support**

Anyone who deals with the psychological aspects of mission fitness can be defined as a psychological support professional. Thus psychologists, psychiatric nurses, medical doctors, psychiatrists, chaplains, social workers, sociologists etc ... may all be described as psychological support professionals. They provide informed advice to military leaders who are just not only responsible for the success of the mission but also the well being of the personnel under their command. It will be important to define the necessary competencies of psychological support professionals. Psychological support should not be limited to the subject of individual mental health. Military psychologists involved in mental readiness should have a combination of clinical and occupational skills to be able to advise military leaders regarding morale and other problems on the unit level. These skills should be made explicit, and headed under the title of military psychology. We recommend defining rules and making agreements that will ensure good cooperation between military leaders and psychological support professionals. These should cover responsibilities in the domains of psycho-education, training, advisory roles towards the commander and home front support. Remaining issues and considerations:- How to establish effective contact between psychological support professionals and military leaders?- How to integrate psychological support professionals in the command structure? Advantages of external versus embedded support?

### **2.2.5. Armed forces should cover issues of psychological support in education and training.**

Consensus can and should be reached on necessary topics of psycho-education in military education at all levels and in pre-deployment training on psychological support. What can an individual or unit expect on a deployment, how do individuals cope, how do they support each other or get outside help? Objectives are to strengthen coping tools at an individual or unit level, to strengthen resilience and to facilitate the work of psychological support professionals whenever there would be a need for psychological intervention.

### **2.2.6. Armed forces should organize home front support well in advance of deployment**

Deployments of military personnel have implications for the family as well. A deployment can have as much or even more impact on the home front than on the deployed personnel. Coping capabilities of military families are important in support of the deployment. Therefore home front support means providing information and advice, education, means of communication and keeping in touch, and offering psychological or social support. Home front support should be organized well in advance of deployment. It is clearly linked to operational readiness, as the following quotation illustrates: "You can train your men as much as you want, but what do you think will happen if there is a war and these boys run around with the thought that nobody cares for their family? No way will they fight as effectively, of course that I can assure you."(Norman H. SCHWARZKOPF 'It doesn't take a hero' 1992)

Remaining issues and considerations:- Volunteers have been proven to be very useful in home front support.

### **2.3 Recommendations for psychological support DURING a deployment for modern military operations**

#### **2.3.1. Armed forces should consider monitoring at personnel level**

Continuous monitoring at personnel level should be undertaken to detect any adverse reactions individual servicemen and women might experience as a consequence of the deployment, which could lead to a decrement in performance. Monitoring should be carried out continuously, both formally and informally by colleagues, superiors and professional support professionals. Tools should be available at all times, whenever the situation requires monitoring of consequences of duration of the deployment, intensity of conflict, impact of casualties or major incidents, ...Augmentees continue to be an issue of pre-occupation.

Remaining issues and considerations:- Monitoring could, depending on organizational culture, be a double-edged sword that could have adverse results on morale, or trustworthiness of psychological support.

#### **2.3.2. Armed forces should consider monitoring at unit level**

Monitoring at unit level should be undertaken to detect any adverse reactions that units might experience as a consequence of the deployment, which could lead to a decrement in performance. Appropriate tools with which to carry out such monitoring should be available to military leaders at all times.

#### **2.3.3. Incident handling is provided initially at peer level and progresses through the next levels of support as required.**

Immediate post incident support should be conducted according to the BICEPS-principles of Brevity, Immediacy, Centrality, Expectancy, Proximity and Simplicity. (SOKOL, 1986) There are three levels of support available in incident handling. Firstly, peer support is informal and on the spot. Secondly, there is a requirement for some individuals in every unit to have received specific training in incident handling. These individuals can act as individual and unit level stress risk assessors, advise their military leaders and can conduct basic interventions. They know when to advice to bring in more specialized support from psychological support professionals. These third level specialists can be embedded within the formation or may come from outside. Psychological support is their core business.

Remaining issues and considerations:- How to conduct proper assessment of who needs assistance in case of a critical incident.- What are advantages and disadvantages of embedded versus specialist support coming from outside. - What are the necessary competencies at the three levels of support?

#### **2.3.4. Competencies for psychological support must be made explicit.**

Psychological support towards individuals and units is aimed at maintaining, improving or restoring individual and unit mission fitness based on clinical and occupational skills. Competencies for giving advice, conducting education, delivering treatment, carrying out assessments and interventions, and referring on, must be identified and made explicit.

Remaining issues and considerations:- Psychological support professionals may experience conflicting roles between supporting individual servicemen and women and supporting the unit.



### **2.3.5. Armed forces must operate home front support throughout the deployment.**

There is a need for home front support throughout the deployment. Ongoing support to family and partners refers to a range of support provided to families and is not specific to one deployment. This takes into account the fact that deployment is a common and recurring occupational event for military personnel. Communication between the area of operations and the home front is very important. Provision of information to the home front must be tailored to a non-military audience.

Remaining issues and considerations:- The role of the military leader?- How to incorporate an assertive/proactive outreach into home front support?- Dual service couples remain an issue.- Pre-return family integration for both service personnel and the home front.

## **2.4. Recommendations for psychological support AFTER a deployment for modern military operations**

### **2.4.1. Armed Forces should provide ways to assess individual well being post deployment**

Whilst the individual service person is accountable for their own fitness, the organization should provide a mechanism for reporting problems/concerns which offers a certain degree of confidentiality and does not stigmatize against the individual. Once an individual has initiated the reporting process, the organization must respond in an adequate and timely fashion. If the individual is not satisfied with the response then they should have recourse to an alternative course of action. Cautionary comments regarding mission fitness assessment also apply to post-deployment well being assessment. The latter refers to a means of checking the physical and mental status of service personnel and ensures that personnel are made aware of support available.

### **2.4.2. Armed forces should link the requirement for post-deployment psychological group support to the expected impact of the deployment**

Post-deployment psychological group support is a way of facilitating a group discussion and providing psychological education to group members, although it should be noted that post-deployment psychological group support is not always necessary. However, such support can be used if the impact of the deployment is considered to have negatively influenced the effectiveness of the group.

Remaining issues and considerations:- Should post-deployment psychological group support always be considered if a unit commander believes a mission may have resulted in psychological injury?

### **2.4.3. Armed forces should provide a structured homecoming & reintegration program for service personnel and their families/partners with further support and information tailored to the nature of the operational demands.**

Home front support is a continuing concern, which begins with the notification that a unit or individual is going to deploy, and continues well beyond redeployment. It is always a requirement. It's approach should be systemic. It must take into account the interaction between the mission and events on the home front. Reintegration is the process of readjusting to family life, to work environment and to social life following return from the deployment.

### **2.4.4. Armed forces should provide middle and long term monitoring of physical and psychological well being for all service personnel who have deployed.**

The effects of traumatic events and other factors associated with deployments can emerge or remain long after deployment.

Remaining issues and considerations:- Should Armed forces have a system of pre-discharge assessment for military personnel leaving the service?- Are Armed forces responsible for recurrent habitual monitoring of service personnel beyond the end of their military career?

### **2.4.5. Armed forces should consider providing additional long-term support services for current serving personnel and their families.**

Deployment is a common and recurrent occupational event. The effects of a mission or several missions can endure and even become permanent. Leaders may want to consider providing long term support in terms of telephone support services, family/partners support services, offering medical services, ...

## **3. WAY AHEAD**

It is the intention of the task group that this report receives as wide a circulation as possible within military leaders and psychological support professionals, in the hope of soliciting their views, comments and/or recommendations.

This feedback will allow the task group to fine-tune the above stated recommendations, to work out the remaining issues and considerations, and to prepare the symposium on Stress & Psychological Support in Modern Military Operations in Brussels (Belgium) 24-26 April 2006. This symposium will offer an excellent opportunity for military leaders and psychological support professionals to interact and share ideas and experiences. It will also provide the task group with the necessary input to finalize the handbook.

If you wish to comment, find out more about the task group's work or to assist in our objectives, please contact the authors for they can put you in touch with your national representative.

