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## Army program works to make soldiers fit in body and mind



**View Photo Gallery** — The Army has launched Comprehensive Soldier Fitness, a controversial \$125 million program to instill psychological strength in soldiers.

By Michael E. Ruane, Published: July 5, 2011 [E-mail the writer](#)

FORT BRAGG, N.C. — The soldiers crowd around a large conference table, their maroon berets scattered on top. A digital clock on the wall shows the time in Afghanistan and Iraq. The unit's flag, hung with battle streamers, rests at one end of the room.

Outside, not far away, stands the 16-foot bronze statue of World War II paratrooper "Iron Mike," grim-faced with submachine gun in hand — the epitome of the rugged American soldier.

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But the training here this morning has little to do with war.



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A young soldier from Rhode Island is telling how his wife walked out on him when she was two months pregnant and he fell into depression and alcoholism.

A burly soldier with red hair admits that he has a bad temper, which leads to disputes with his spouse. There are murmurs of assent around the room, and other problems galore.

It feels like an intense group-therapy session.

In a way, it is.

It's also a radical shift in the Army's approach to mental health, a switch from the just-suck-it-up tradition of the past and a change that was expected to get a grumpy reception from rank-and-file "Joes."

But the new program, designed largely by outside psychologists, appears to have been embraced by soldiers.

The critics, it turns out, are other psychologists.

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The Army, burdened by almost a decade of war and beset by increases in suicides, substance abuse and combat stress, embarked on the controversial \$125 million project to instill psychological strength in soldiers the same way it teaches physical fitness.

The program, called [Comprehensive Soldier Fitness](#), is designed to make soldiers more psychologically "resilient" amid the pressures of combat, repeated deployments, and family and financial crises.

The effort runs counter to many military traditions.

"It's a big culture change," said Col. Jeffery Short, a physician and the program's medical director.

"For decades," he said, the Army attitude was "everybody's just going to be tough. . . . You're going to sweat this out, and when you come out the other end, you're going to be better for it.

"Now, to concentrate on how people are thinking, and how they're feeling . . . that is an Army culture change," he said.

[Brig. Gen. Rhonda Cornum](#), who oversees the program, said: "The Army recognized that its historical way of dealing with psychological fitness was to wait until somebody showed evidence of not having psychological fitness and then trying to fix it."

This is an effort to help soldiers before that happens.

The program includes a mandatory confidential online assessment tool so soldiers can



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gauge their emotional status around issues such as relationships, job satisfaction and life in general. They can take further optional online training to get help in areas where they would like to improve.

The Army also wants resilience to be taught face to face, classroom-style and is in the process of teaching "master resilience trainers," who go back to their bases and conduct sessions in person.

There, the MRTs use slides, excerpts from TV shows and round-the-table discussions to talk about ways to stay optimistic, avoid prejudging others and forestall "catastrophic thinking," or dwelling on worst-case scenarios.

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**LuvDCArea** wrote:

7/5/2011 12:49 PM GMT+0800

As a psychotherapist, this is long past due. The suck-it-up and get-along approach has not worked. Suicides among soldiers is much higher than the general population's. PTSD is, too.

The armed forces have been notorious for neglecting their personnel's mental health, both while the their personnel are on active duty and after discharge.

A better solution, even yet, would be to withdraw troops from Afghanistan, immediately, as there is no way to win that war. Also, we are unable to articulate our objectives, there, clearly. Additionally, Afghanistan's president has called us "an occupying presence." Obama's so-called troop withdrawal plan will still leave 67,000 to 68,000 troops in Afghanistan -- that does not seem like a withdrawal, to me. It seems like a sham!



**trambusto** responds:

7/5/2011 2:31 PM GMT+0800

The VA recognizes ONLY PTSD as a legitimate mental illness that they will cover. If a soldier becomes depressive or alcoholic due to damages that occurred to them during service (a service-connected disability) then the VA tells them "tuff sh\*t, move along. NEXT!"



**bannyB** responds:

7/5/2011 7:07 PM GMT+0800

Its something that is important to prevent from mental illness.

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