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# Mental Stress Training Is Planned for U.S. Soldiers



D. Myles Cullen/U.S. Army

At a recent training session in Philadelphia, Sgt. First Class James Cole and other soldiers participated in role-playing and learned mental fitness techniques intended to help them in combat.

By BENEDICT CAREY  
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PHILADELPHIA — The [Army](#) plans to require that all 1.1 million of its soldiers take intensive training in emotional resiliency, military officials say.

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The training, the first of its kind in the military, is meant to improve performance in combat and head off the [mental health](#) problems, including [depression](#), [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) and [suicide](#), that plague about one-fifth of troops returning from Afghanistan and Iraq.

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Active-duty soldiers, reservists and members of the National Guard will receive the training, which will also be available to their family members and to civilian

employees.

The new program is to be introduced at two bases in October and phased in gradually throughout the service, starting in basic training. It is modeled on techniques that have been tested mainly in middle schools.

Usually taught in weekly 90-minute classes, the methods seek to defuse or expose common habits of thinking and flawed beliefs that can lead to anger and frustration — for example, the tendency to assume the worst. (“My wife didn’t answer the phone; she must be with someone else.”)

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The Army wants to train 1,500 sergeants by next summer to teach the techniques.

In an interview, Gen. George W. Casey Jr., the Army's chief of staff, said the \$117 million program was an effort to transform a military culture that has generally considered talk of emotions to be so much hand-holding, a sign of weakness.

"I'm still not sure that our culture is ready to accept this," General Casey said. "That's what I worry about most."

In an open exchange at an early training session here last week, General Casey asked a group of sergeants what they thought of the new training. Did it seem too touchy-feely?

"I believe so, sir," said one, standing to address the general. He said a formal class would be a hard sell to a young private "who all he wants to do is hang out with his buddies and drink beer."

But others disagreed, saying the program was desperately needed. And in the interview, General Casey said the mental effects of repeated deployments — rising suicide rates in the Army, mild [traumatic brain injuries](#), post-traumatic stress — had convinced commanders "that we need a program that gives soldiers and their families better ways to cope."

The general agreed to the interview after The New York Times learned of the program from Dr. Martin E. P. Seligman, chairman of the [University of Pennsylvania](#) Positive Psychology Center, who has been consulting with the Pentagon.

In recent studies, [psychologists](#) at Penn and elsewhere have found that the techniques can reduce mental distress in some children and teenagers. But outside experts cautioned that the Army program was more an experiment than a proven solution.

"It's important to be clear that there's no evidence that any program makes soldiers more resilient," said George A. Bonanno, a psychologist at [Columbia University](#). But he and others said the program could settle one of the most important questions in [psychology](#): whether mental toughness can be taught in the classroom.

"These are skills that apply broadly, they're things people use throughout life, and what we've done is adapt them for soldiers," said Karen Reivich, a psychologist at Penn, who is helping the Army carry out the program.

At the training session, given at a hotel near the university, 48 sergeants in full fatigues and boots sat at desks, took notes, play-acted, and wisecracked as psychologists taught them about mental fitness. In one role-playing exercise, Sgt. First Class James Cole of Fort Riley, Kan., and a classmate acted out Sergeant Cole's thinking in response to an order late in the day to have his exhausted men do one last difficult assignment.

"Why is he tasking us again for this job?" the classmate asked. "It's not fair."

"Well, maybe," Sergeant Cole responded. "Or maybe he's hitting us because he knows we're more reliable."

In another session, Dr. Reivich asked the sergeants to think of situations when such internal debates were useful.

One, a veteran of several deployments to Iraq, said he was out at dinner the night before when a customer at a nearby table said he and his friends were being obnoxious.

"At one time maybe I would have thrown the guy out the window and gone for the jugular," the sergeant said. But guided by the new techniques, he fought the temptation and decided to buy the man a beer instead. "The guy came over and apologized," he said.

The training is based in part on the ideas of Dr. Aaron Beck and the late Albert Ellis, who

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“Psychology has given us this whole language of pathology, so that a soldier in tears after seeing someone killed thinks, ‘Something’s wrong with me; I have post-traumatic stress,’ ” or P.T.S.D., Dr. Seligman said. “The idea here is to give people a new vocabulary, to speak in terms of resilience. Most people who experience trauma don’t end up with P.T.S.D.; many experience post-traumatic growth.”

Many of the sergeants were at first leery of the techniques. “But I think maybe it becomes like muscle [memory](#) — with practice you start to use them automatically,” said Sgt. First Class Darlene Sanders of Fort Jackson, S.C.

To track the effects of the program, the Army will require troops at all levels, from new recruits to officers, to regularly fill out a 170-item questionnaire to evaluate their mental health, along with the strength of their social support, among other things.

The program is not intended to diagnose mental health problems. The results will be kept private, General Casey said.

The Army will track average scores in units to see whether the training has any impact on mental symptoms and performance, said Gen. Rhonda Cornum, the director of Comprehensive Soldier Fitness, who is overseeing the carrying out of the new resilience program. General Cornum said that the Army had contracted with researchers at the [University of Michigan](#) to determine whether the training was working, and added that corrections could be made along the way “if the program is not having the intended effect.”

This being the Army, the sergeants at the training session last week had questions about logistics. How would teachers be evaluated? How and when would Reserve and Guard units get the training?

Perhaps the biggest question — can an organization that has long suppressed talk of emotions now open up? — is unlikely to have an answer until next year at the earliest. But the Army’s leaders are determined to ask.

“For years, the military has been saying, ‘Oh, my God, a suicide, what do we do now?’ ” said Col. Darryl Williams, the program’s deputy director. “It was reactive. It’s time to change that.”

A version of this article appeared in print on August 18, 2009, on page A1 of the New York edition.

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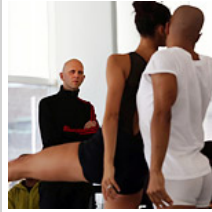


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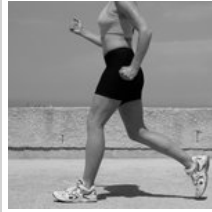
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