Making sense of suicide:
Insights from hardiness research and theory

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Overview

• Describe sources of stress in military and security operations

• Discuss psychological hardiness as an important stress-resilience resource

• Detail some countermeasures for ameliorating major operational stress factors

• Present a model of suicide based on hardiness theory

• Describe leader & organizational steps to increase hardy-resilient responses throughout the workforce – and reduce suicide
Bad news: stress happens
- a part of life (esp. military, police)
- stress can take a toll
- 10-30% of soldiers can experience PTSD, depression, anxiety
- can contribute to alcohol & drug abuse, suicide
Psychosocial stressors in security operations

1. **ISOLATION**: Can be physically remote, far removed from family; Poor communication lines; Different cultures; Newly configured units, low cohesion

2. **AMBIGUITY**: Mission Definition unclear; Unclear Command Structure; Role Confusion (Warrior or Peacekeeper?); unknown tour length

3. **POWERLESSNESS**: Rules-of-Engagement Restrictions; Limited Activity; Cultural/Language Barriers; Red tape; can’t get things fixed, repair parts; Relative Deprivation

4. **BOREDOM** or EXISTENTIAL BOREDOM: Repetition & Predictability; Lack of Meaningful Work and Activities

5. **DANGER**: Threat of Harm (Terrorists, Mines, Snipers, Disease); Psychological Threat (Exposure to suffering, civilians, refugees)

6. **HIGH PACE OF OPERATIONS**: Heavy workload, many commitments & fewer available forces means frequent & longer deployments, shorter training cycles, loss of sleep, less time for families
Good news: most people cope quite well with stress!

If we understand this better, we can design:

- more effective training & prevention programs
- healthier work & community environments

“We’re just not reaching that guy!”
Context: many factors influence resilience

Including:

• Heredity
• Early childhood experiences
• Personality
• Social resources
• Work environment
Hardy-Resilient Style

• A **generalized** tendency to see the world as interesting & meaningful; to see self as able to exert control; to see change as opportunity to learn and grow

• **Commitment (vs. alienation):** tendency to feel deeply involved in life – including work activities, social world, physical world, and oneself

• **Control (vs. powerlessness):** belief you can control or influence events in your experience

• **Challenge (vs. threat):** anticipation of change as an exciting challenge to further development

**Courage** – to choose the future  
**Forgiveness** / Future orientation (can “let go” of past injuries)  
**Learning orientation** (past is not forgotten – is lessons)  
**Humor** (sense of humor)
Sample research findings 1

Hardiness predicts continued good health under stress:

• Middle managers (Kobasa, Maddi & Kahn, 1982; Kobasa et. al., 1985)


• Bus drivers (Bartone, 1989)

• Athletes (Maddi & Hess, 1992; Golby et al, 2003)

• U.S. Army casualty assistance workers (Bartone et al, 1989)

• Gulf War soldiers (Bartone, 1999; Bartone, 2000)

• Norwegian Navy cadets (Bartone, Johnsen, Eid, Brun & Laberg, 2002)

• Israeli officer candidates (Westman, 1990)

• Israeli war POWs (Waysman, Schwarzwald & Solomon, 2001)

• Peacekeeping soldiers (Bartone, 1996)
Sample research findings 2

Hardiness also predicts:

- Less depression and PTSD in police officers (Andrew et al., 2008)
- Better performance in police shoot/no-shoot scenarios (Barton et al., 2004)
- Higher basal cortisol and beta-endorphin levels, less psychological distress (Zorrilla et al., 1995)
- More robust immune system responses to infection (Dolbier et al., 2000)
- Better peripheral vision in football players (Rogers et al., 2003)
- Positive use of emotion / anxiety in athletes (Hanton et al., 2002)
- Retention in West Point cadets (Bartone & Kelly, 2005) and civilian college students (Lifton et. al., 2006)
- Success in Army Special Forces selection course (Bartone et al., 2007)
- Success in Israeli secret service selection course (Zach, Raviv & Inbar, 2007)
- Higher HDL levels (good cholesterol) in NDU students (Bartone et al., 2009)
Hardy-Resilient Style

- **Commitment (vs. alienation):** tendency to feel deeply involved in life – physical world (*umwelt*), social (*mitwelt*), self (*eigenwelt*)

- **Control (vs. powerlessness):** belief you can control or influence events of your experience

- **Challenge (vs. threat):** anticipation of change as an exciting challenge to further development
Countermeasures for isolation (alienation)

- Provide advance information on what to expect (including culture and language training)
- Have veterans of the operation give briefings
- Invest in pre-deployment unit activities to build trust and cohesion
- Encourage use of e-mail, phone, fax, newsletters, webcams
- Support media coverage (AFN, TV & Radio, print)
- Seek opportunities to interact with other forces
- Engage with the local culture as much as possible
Countermeasures for ambiguity (control)

• Clearly define the mission, rules, roles

• Clarify chain-of-command and authorities

• Hold frequent meetings with troops to give info updates

• Hold regular command briefings, “country briefings”

• Encourage questions, spirit of learning

• Remind troops of importance of mission – it is worthwhile
Countermeasures for powerlessness (control)

• Leaders - explain & justify ROEs

• Info briefs; classes on host culture, language

• Ensure fair access to supplies, services, benefits, and explain any differences honestly

• Focus on fixing the things that can be fixed…. Let go of the rest!

• Focus attention on areas you can control (eg. civic works projects)

• Use “compensatory self-improvement”
Countermeasures for boredom (alienation)

• Develop creative training programs that maintain interest & skills;

• Use exchange programs with other forces in AO;

• Offer self-development & education programs, distance-learning (“Compensatory Self-Improvement” activities);

• Civic works projects

• Compensatory self-improvement activities
Countermeasures for threat – danger
(challenge, control)

• Provide good training, equipment, supplies, maintenance
  (aids survival and also boosts confidence)

• Leaders provide sensible policies (reasonable risks)

• Communicate to soldiers, especially as regards threat

• Expert field medical care and evacuation

• Memorial services

• Conduct regular “defuse” - event oriented debriefs
Countermeasures for high Optempo
(control, alienation)

- Reduce duration and frequency of deployments
- Implement policies fairly – standard deployment lengths
- Avoid deployment extensions
- Mid deployment R&R?
- Volunteers are better than conscripts
- Adequate force sizing and structure for mission commitments
Clarifying the factors that can lead to suicide

**Formative - causative factors:**
- Heavy workload, insufficient rest
- Long, frequent deployments
- Lack of trust in senior leaders
- Moral conflicts
  - Duty to army, or duty to family?
  - Corruption
  - Double standards
  - Loyalty to friends vs report violations?
- Social disintegration – low cohesion
- Isolation
- Powerlessness
- Depression
- Hopelessness – no end in sight

**Precipitating factors:**
- Relationship problems
- Money problems
- Job loss
- Other life stressors

**Enabling factors:**
- Easy access to weapons
- Alcohol
- Drugs
- Time of day? (night)
- Solitude

**Background factors:**
- Pre-existing vulnerability (low hardiness)
- History of violence, criminal behavior
- History of mental health problems

**Suicide**
Military suicide - A “Perfect Storm”

Alienation is the common denominator; social, organizational, & individual factors all contribute

**Individual background**
- Lowered standards for entry
- Criminal, medical waivers
- Less educated
- Low hardy, more vulnerable
- Medical history

**Mission ambiguity**
- Nature of mission? War?
- COIN? Legitimate?
- Who is the “enemy?”
- Unclear chain-of-command
- How do people see us?
- What is “victory”?

**Powerlessness & Social Isolation**
- Unable to resolve dilemma – Can’t desert – can’t help family;
- “Catch-22” – no matter what I do, no good can result;
- No end in sight;
- Isolated

**Values conflicts**
- (Moral dilemmas)
- Are we good or evil?
- Duty to Army, vs. duty to family
- Legitimate war?
- Kill or be killed?
- Kill civilians?
- Report violations?

**Policy**
- Mission definition
- Troop strength
- Deployment cycles
- OPTEMPO

**“doesn’t matter”**

**Alienation & Loss of control**

**Suicide**
- Homicide
- Family violence
- Drug, alcohol abuse

**Precipitators:**
- Marital problems
- Financial problems
- Failure, loss

**Enablers:**
- Weapons
- Alcohol, drugs
- Time of day (night)
Preventing military suicide - A holistic approach

Build hardiness - commitment: Focus on multiple levels, social, organizational, & individual

**Hardiness**

- Commitment
  - Mission clarity
    - Senior leaders are clear on strategy & goals
    - Lower level leaders interpret, define achievable tasks and goals
    - Clear chain-of-CMD
  - Values consonance
    - (Moral consistency)
    - Clear mission & charter
    - 6-month deployments
    - Training & Standards
    - Fairness
    - Leaders are honest & share hardships
    - Rewards

- Sense of Control
  - Cohesion - Social integration
    - Leaders who listen
    - Communication with family
    - Reasonable tours
    - Available support – chaplains, mental health
    - Reduced stigma
    - Compensatory self-improvement

- Control
  - Policy
    - Clear mission definition
    - Sufficient troop strength
    - Sensible deployment cycles
    - Reduced OPTEMPO

- Individual
  - High selection standards
  - Education & moral character
  - Hardiness-stress resilience
  - Training for hardiness & healthy coping skills

- Resilience
  - Sustained health & performance
How leaders can increase hardiness across the organization:

1. Lead by example…. Model a hardy approach to life and work, demonstrating commitment, control, challenge (stress is good!)

2. Encourage “hardy” thinking - sense-making of experience
   - in how tasks, missions are planned, discussed, executed
   - in how mistakes, failures, casualties are talked of, interpreted
   - in debriefings, AARs: focus on events & positive constructions

3. Seek out (create) meaningful / challenging group tasks, & then capitalize through reflection and recognition

4. Communicate respect, commitment to unit members
Focus on the 3-C’s of hardiness:

**Build Commitment:** Provide awards, recognition, community support… tells the troops what they did was worthwhile, and builds a sense of connectedness…. Hold unit / family get-togethers

**Build Control:** Provide choices… avoid one-size fits all solutions; give troops and families opportunity to have input into programs, what they want to see; remind them they are in control of their own destiny

**Build Challenge:** Keep pushing the message, this was a learning experience, you have learned and become a better, stronger, wiser person because of what you’ve been through; foster active, positive problem solving coping approaches
Conclusion

-Hardiness theory and research provides scientific basis for understanding human resilience, and preventing suicide and other ill-effects of stress in security operations

-Leaders & organizations can increase hardiness in the workforce by:

1. Reinforcing the *meaningfulness* of activities and events (including loss and failure) *(commitment)*
2. Maximize opportunities for *control* and choice *(control)*
3. Focus on value of *change* and novelty for learning and development *(challenge)*