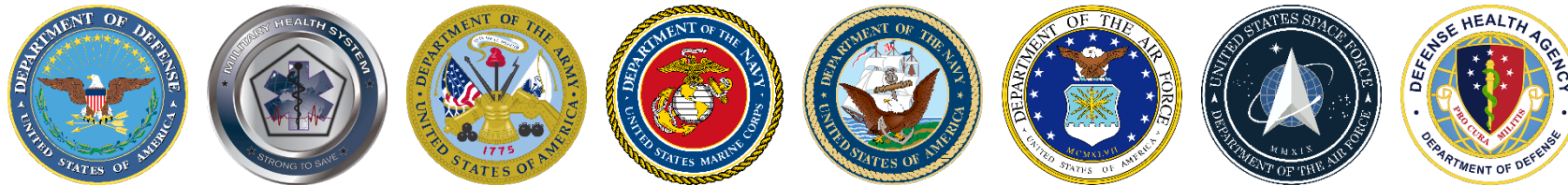


Combat and Operational Stress 101

Part I – Understanding Stress and Taking Care of Yourself



Goals of This Training

- The overall goal of this training is to encourage you to enhance total fitness by optimizing physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing
- **Part I** of this training focuses on Combat and Operational Stress (COS):
 - What it means
 - How it affects you
 - What to do about it
- **Part II** of the training will focus on how to take action for yourself and your buddies

Understanding Stress

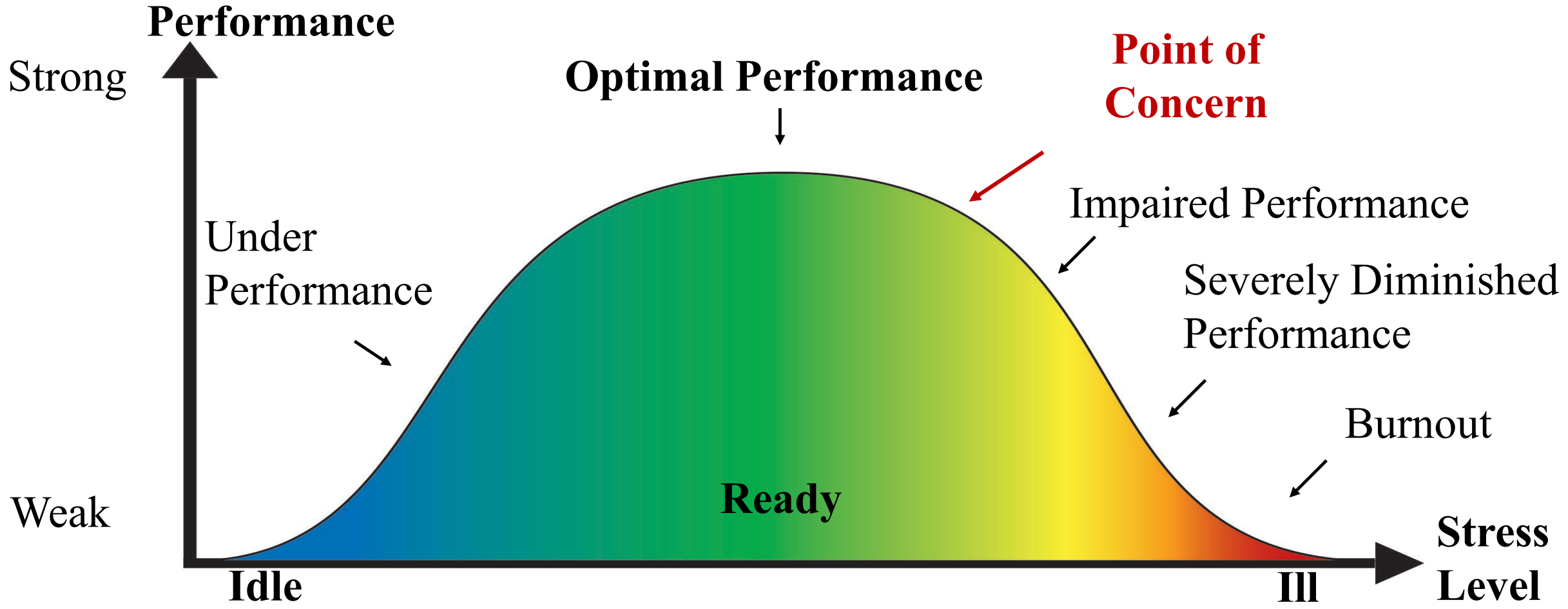
- Stress is:
 - A state of *mental* or *emotional* strain, or *tension* resulting from demanding circumstances
 - Associated with an individual's perception of their ability to handle the demanding circumstances
 - Can have positive & negative physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral effects
- What are stressors?
 - Any event, experience, or environmental conditions that causes stress
 - These events or experiences are perceived as threats or challenges to individuals and can be physical or psychological
 - Can include general life stressors as well as military-specific stressors

Some Stress is Necessary

Stress is essential for:

- Optimal performance
- Strength & toughness
- Growth & development
- Developing new skills
- Meeting challenges
- Performing difficult missions

Success Requires Some Stress



Stress and Military Demands

Meeting the demands of the Military

- Maintaining a forward presence (deployments, combat environments)
- Increased work demands with decreased staff
- Leader/management styles
- Career concerns
- Environmental conditions (climate, noise, & smells)
- Certifications, qualifications, & inspections
- Family adjustment, separations, & PCSing
- Ethical decision-making in difficult situations



Photo Credit: US Army photo

Combat & Operational Stress Reaction (COSR)



- COSRs can occur in a variety of environments such as combat, extreme temperatures, and tight living quarters
- COSRs have physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral effects and are:
 - Considered normal reactions to events and are not “diagnosed mental health conditions”
 - Short lived reactions that are expected to resolve soon after the stress abates or by using simple stress management interventions
- However, combat and operational stress reactions are really two different things:
 - *Combat stress reactions* are intense but brief survival responses to life threat events
 - *Operational stress reactions* vary according to the type, intensity, and duration of the stressor

Combat Stress Reaction is an Acute Stress Reaction



- Combat Stress Reaction (CSR) is an Acute Stress Reaction (ASR) in a combat situation
- CSRs and ASRs are **extreme life or death situations** which cause an immediate and expected survival response
- They can result in two different types of reactions:
 - Arousal = Power Up (Fight or flight – adrenaline response)
 - Shutdown = Power Down (Freeze – “deer in the headlights”)
- Combat Stress Reaction is brief - it occurs during the stressful event and may last between a few hours to a few days after the event
- Combat stress reactions have been reported for over 2,000 years in all battle situations and have been called Shellshock, Soldier's Heart, and Combat Neurosis

Photo Credit: US Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Jacob N. Bailey

Operational Stressors and Reactions

Stress Category	Potential Operational Stressors	Potential Operational Stress Reactions
Work	Task load, clash with leadership, deployment, PCS, increased risk of injury/death	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Change in weight - Changes in appetite - Loss of energy - Anxiety/restlessness - Problems with sleep - Apathy - Withdrawing from usual activities/interactions - Anger
Family	Separation, missed milestones, conflict	
Spiritual	Strain on belief in God, difficulty making sense of what happens, questioning purpose in life	
Values	Inner conflicts over competing values, such as personal values conflicting with military values	
Physical environment	Extreme climates, isolation, noise	

Examples of Operational Stressors & Reactions



Operational context →	Stressor →	Stress reaction/specific symptoms
High op-tempo	Sleep deprivation	Impaired memory and attention
Restricted environments	Isolation and confinement	Increased overall stress levels
Guard post assignments	Boredom and monotony	Disorientation and demoralization
Warzone deployment	Continuous noise (e.g., diesel generator)	Sleep disruption, decrease in cognitive and psychomotor performance
Desert deployment	Heat	Impaired concentration, irritability

The Physiology of Stress

Stress Affects Your Mind and Body

Mind

- Focus narrows
- Senses sharpen
- Brain processes information faster



Body

- Stress hormones released
- Blood redirected to muscles
- Blood pressure increases
- Energy is used more efficiently

The Autonomic Nervous System

The Body's Automatic Response to Stress

Fight or Flight (Sympathetic)	Rest & Digest (Parasympathetic)
↑ Increased Blood Pressure	↓ Decreased Blood Pressure
↑ Increased Heart Rate	↓ Decreased Heart Rate
↑ Increased Strength, energy	↓ Decreased Strength, energy
↑ Increased Inflammation	↓ Decreased Inflammation
↑ Increased Blood Sugar	↓ Decreased Blood Sugar
↓ Decreased Digestion	↑ Increased Digestion
↑ Increased Brain Alertness	↓ Decreased Brain Alertness

Stress Management: Developing Self-Awareness

Self-Care: Start with Self-Awareness

- Self-Awareness helps to:
 - Identify strengths and weaknesses
 - Understand reactions in specific and overall stressful situations
 - *Manage & not be overwhelmed* by emotions
 - Stay calm and figure out solutions
- What are your main personal sources of stress?
 - Work
 - Family
 - Values
 - Physical Environment
 - Social-interpersonal
 - Spiritual
 - Psychological environment
 - Other?

How Self-Aware Are You?

Physical	What is happening to my physical health and well-being?
Emotional	How do I feel during and after I finish work and in my personal life?
Perceptions	How do I make sense of my experiences at work and in my personal life?
Activities	How well do I balance my work and personal life?
Relationships	How has work impacted on my relationships (coworkers, family, & friends)?
Expertise	What am I learning in my work role? Am I growing in my personal life?
Spiritual	How have my faith and personal meanings changed?

Stress Continuum Model - Be Aware of Your Current Zone and Alert to Changes



Idle	Ready	Reacting	Injured	Ill
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lethargic - Unfocused, not thinking clearly - Unmotivated, apathetic - Bored - Slow, unproductive - Time goes slowly - Not contributing to the unit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Good to go - Well-trained - Fit and focused - Cohesive units - Ready families - Personal & social life is good - Optimal performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Distressed or impaired - Decrease in function or performance - Mild & temporarily anxious, irritable or sad - Physical or behavioral changes - Trouble sleeping - Difficulty concentrating - Increase in alcohol related incidents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More severe or persistent distress - Serious suicidal or homicidal thoughts - Experiencing panic attacks or rage - Disruption of moral values - May leave lasting memories, reactions, and impressions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Experiencing orange zone symptoms for more than 60 Days - Stress injuries that don't heal without help - Symptoms persist, get worse - Feeling depressed or anxious - Feeling suicidal and/or homicidal with a plan

Stress Management: Taking Care of Yourself

Practice Healthy vs. Unhealthy Coping Behaviors



Healthy Coping

Unhealthy Coping

Getting adequate rest, nutrition, exercise

Not taking care of yourself

Spending time with others

Criticizing or blaming self or others

Trying to maintain a normal schedule

Working too many hours

Focusing on something proactive that you can do to manage the situation better

Excessive alcohol use or illegal/prescription drug abuse

Seeking counseling or getting information

Aggressive or violent behavior

Telling yourself it's OK to be upset temporarily

Reckless or impulsive behavior

Meditation

Smoking or chewing tobacco

Decreasing Stress Reactions: Mind Interventions



Examples of Mind Interventions

- Focus attention on the here and now
- Challenge negative thinking

Focus Attention on the Here and Now

Why and How? Get out of your head using your sensations rather than thoughts and judgments

- Focus on your breathing and how your body feels
- Notice what's happening in your environment

Do these exercises anywhere, anytime:

Sight: Name things you see as you slowly scan the environment

Sound: Listen to the noises inside and outside of the room

Touch: Feel objects around you (e.g., a rock, a ring, the rough bark of a tree)

Taste: Take a bite of food and consider the texture and flavors

Smell: Notice the smell of leaves and plants around you

Photo Credit: Pixabay.com

Challenge Negative Thinking

- Our minds take shortcuts because we don't have the time or energy to fully process everything
- When under stress, the critical thinking parts of the brain shutdown and the mind makes fast decisions, so we rely on these shortcuts even more
- Our minds tend to focus on negative things so we can plan for the worst



Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Automatic, fast, less effort - Easier decision-making/clarity - Often leads to blame and anger, which can feel empowering 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reactive and often inaccurate - Might stem more from the past than current situation - Can make situation worse

Negative Thinking

Examples of inaccurate thinking that can happen when someone is under stress

- **Over-generalizing:** making a conclusion based on a single incident or a single piece of evidence. If something bad happens just once, then you expect it to happen over and over again: **“I am a bad person because I made this mistake.”**
- **Mind-reading:** Assuming what other people’s thoughts and intentions are with limited information: **“My partner hasn’t texted back in an hour so they must not care about me.”**
- **Emotional reasoning:** Using your feelings and emotions to make conclusions without a balance of other information: **“I feel afraid so there must be someone in the house”.**

Realistic Thinking

When might a situation call for a more realistic thought?

- **Over-generalizing:**

- “I am a bad person because I made this mistake”
- “I made a mistake and feel guilty”

- **Mind-reading:**

- “My partner hasn’t texted back in an hour so they must not care about me”
- “My partner might just be busy and I’m worried because I’ve been hurt in the past”

- **Emotional reasoning:**

- “I feel afraid so there must be someone in the house”
- “I tend to feel afraid at night even when there’s no evidence that someone is in the house”



Photo Credit: US Air Force photo

Decreasing Stress Reactions: Body Interventions



Photo Credit: Stocktrek Images

Examples of Body Interventions

- Change habits to get better sleep
- Practice tactical breathing
- Use progressive muscle relaxation

Tips for Better Sleep – The Foundation of Optimal Performance



Establish a regular time for going to bed and follow as best you can, even on weekends

Avoid fluids just before bedtime so that sleep is not disturbed by the need to urinate

Use the bed for sleep and sexual relations only

Eat light meals and schedule dinner four to five hours before bed

Avoid naps, especially in the evening

Spend a half hour in the sun each day

Exercise before dinner

Do not look at the clock

Do something relaxing 30-minutes before bed

Avoid caffeine in the hours before sleep

No internet or television

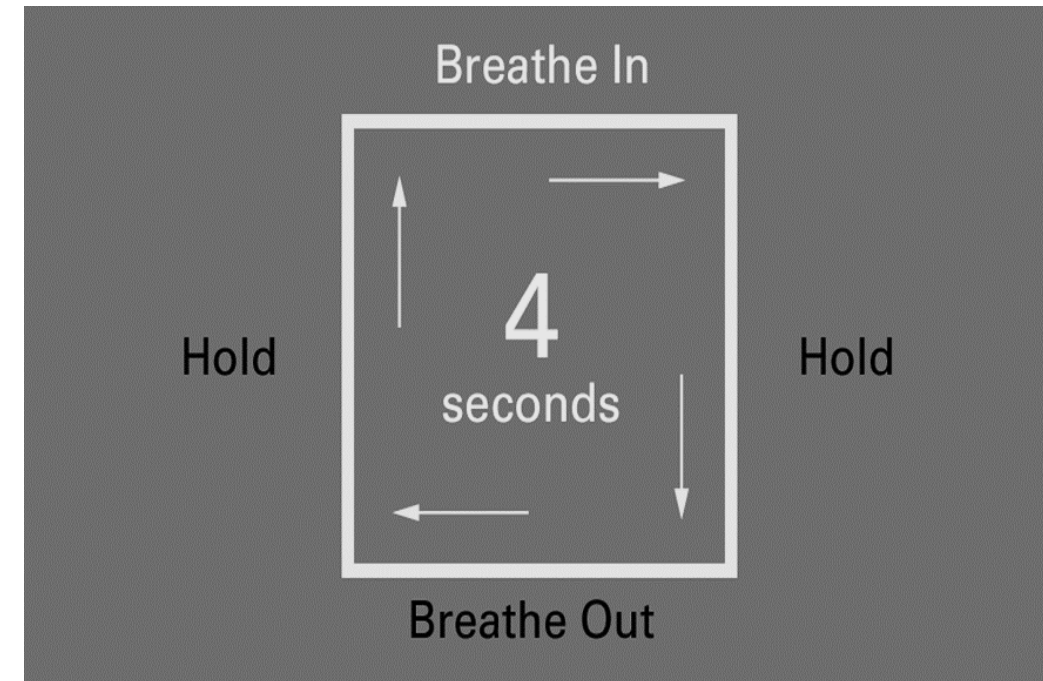
Minimize sleep distractions

Tactical Breathing Instructions: How to Lower Your Heart Rate and Arousal Level

- Breathe slowly and deeply
- Use abdominal muscles (your belly!), not chest
- It can be helpful to focus on calming thoughts and releasing tension

Steps:

1. Inflate your belly and slowly inhale, count to 4
2. Hold breath, count to 4
3. Exhale slowly, count to 4
4. Pause, count to 4
5. Repeat!



Progressive Muscle Relaxation – A Way to Relax Your Body



- How to:
 - Start with one part of your body: moderately tighten the muscles in your toes first, then relax them, and work slowly up the muscles in the rest of your body
 - Moderately tense muscles for 5-10 seconds and inhale deeply, then exhale and slowly release the tension while feeling the warm and heavy sensation that occurs when you relax
 - Do not tense any areas where you are injured or have had a prior serious injury
- You can do it during stress to calm down, after intense stress to release tension, and before going to sleep
- Ask your embedded provider for instructions and a practice session
- Download the Breathe2Relax app for Android or iPhone

Part I Wrap-Up

- Remember that some stress is necessary to perform optimally
- Stress tells your mind and body, “Danger is near and we need to prepare!”
- Too much stress can lead to stress reactions which can hurt your performance
- Awareness of your stress zone can help you realize when you need to take action
- Simple and effective mind and body interventions can help you reduce your stress

Photo Credit: US Army photo