

## COMBAT & OPERATIONAL STRESS CONTROL MYTHS AND FACTS

### DISCUSSION LEADER'S OUTLINE

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Good morning my name is \_\_\_\_\_. Today we will be talking about Combat & Operational Stress Control Myths and Facts.

The **ground rules** for this discussion are:

- (1) No personal attacks on anyone's opinions
- (2) Allow each participant to express themselves
- (3) Make head calls at your leisure, just don't interrupt the group
- (4) Keep your language clean as not to offend others
- (5) PARTICIPATION BY ALL!!!!!!

#### **Gain Attention**

You were deployed with Sgt Torres years ago; he kept a carefree attitude and joked often, at the time you thought nothing could bring him down. He'd been resilient, even when he experienced a close brush with death. On a separate deployment, 3 months ago, Sgt Torres lost a Marine while on convoy to a downed aircraft for a recovery operation. You are newer to Sgt Torres' unit and were very excited to hangout and catchup but you've noticed some changes in his behavior. Over a couple of months you've seen him get aggressive with Marines in the shop, to the point of yelling, for no obvious reason. During the work day, you know something is wrong when you see Sgt Torres reach out to choke another sergeant. You restrain Sgt Torres and calm him down. You've seen him involved in arguments recently but this is a significant incident, you decide to confront him in a private setting. He tells you that he has experienced intrusive thoughts and flashbacks of that convoy but hasn't told anyone else.

**Key points** for the discussion today will be:

- (1) Recognize warning signs of combat and operational stress
- (2) Explaining the causes of stress injuries
- (3) Identifying resources for getting assistance with combat and operational stress

**Learning Objective:** After this guided discussion, you will be more aware of the warning signs of combat and operational stress and the causes of stress injuries. You will also have a better understanding of how to get assistance for combat and operational stress.

#### **DISCUSSION**

How many of you remember the stress continuum? The stress continuum has four zones to help identify levels of stress in units and individuals: Ready-Green, Reacting-Yellow, Injured-Orange, and Ill-Red. Marines in the Green Zone adapt to cope with stressors and continue to function well. Marines in the Yellow Zone are reacting to temporary or mild stress and show temporary signs of stress that go away on their own. Marines in the Orange Zone might show a lasting change in behavior or personality caused by more severe and persistent forms of distress or loss of function. Marines in the Red Zone experience severe distress or some loss of function that has gotten bad enough or persisted long enough to be diagnosable, its symptoms if unmanaged may significantly impact a Marine's career and family. (If participants cannot recall characteristics for each zone, review the enclosure.) We will begin by examining warning signs of combat and operational stress.

### **KEY POINT 1**

1. A common myth is that “*I won’t see combat/probably won’t deploy, so none of this is relevant to me.*” **Correction:** Statistics show that Marines who don’t see combat also experience high rates of operational stress reactions. Even the most motivated and well-trained Marines can find themselves challenged by combat and operational stress. It’s important to recognize signs of combat or operational stress in yourself and in others.
2. Marines may not recognize that they are experiencing stress-related issues; peers, leaders, and even family members often see the signs first. If you recognize warning signs in a fellow Marine, talk to him or her.
3. What are the issues in Sgt Torres’ scenario? (Participants need to provide all the answers below.)
  - a) Sgt Torres is a combat veteran who lost a Marine on his last deployment and is currently having intrusive thoughts and flashbacks.
  - b) Although he used to be carefree and resilient, he is having anger issues to the point of yelling, for no obvious reason.
  - c) Over a couple of months you see his aggressiveness and arguments which escalate to an incident of him attempting to choke another sergeant, during the work day.
  - d) However Sgt Torres does not want to speak to anyone.
4. Signs of stress injury, in the Orange Zone, are:  
*Note: Even one or two of these may present a significant impact to stress levels.*
  - a) Having difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep.
  - b) Waking up from recurrent, vivid nightmares.
  - c) Being unable to enjoy usually pleasurable activities.
  - d) Problems with concentrating and memory.
  - e) Feeling persistent, intense guilt or shame.
  - f) Feeling unusually remorseless or emotionally cold.
  - g) Experiencing attacks of panic or blind rage.
  - e) All these symptoms are in relation to a Marine’s normal demeanor and activities, making it vital to know your fellow Marines and look for changes in their behavior. Marines can recover from stress-related issues with the proper support.

**Interim Summary:** Even the most motivated and well-trained Marines can find themselves challenged by combat and operational stress. Sgt Torres appears to be experiencing a stress injury, in the Orange Zone. It is important to find support for stress injuries early. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) research confirms that intervention offered when symptoms appear prevents, in some instances, the onset of a long-term impact disorder. Let’s discuss the causes of stress injuries.

### **KEY POINT 2**

1. There are four stressors that tend to cause Orange Zone stress injuries; pay close attention to these:
  - a) Life threat: An immediate threat to your own life, whether in a combat zone, realistic training, or even a car accident.
  - b) Loss: The death of a friend, family member, mentor, leader or other individuals close to you.
  - c) Inner conflict: Carrying out or bearing witness to acts or failures to act that do not align with your beliefs.
  - d) Wear and tear: Lack of sleep, insufficient rest and restoration, and the accumulated effects of smaller stressors over time, such as from non-operational sources.

2. You need to identify these four types of stress (Life threat, Loss, Inner conflict, Wear and tear) and pay particular attention to Marines when they have experienced one or more of these stressors.
3. Cohesive, well-disciplined units have fewer severe stress reactions.
  - a) Marines should routinely debrief each other after an operation and discuss what they saw and how they felt.
  - b) It's important to notice what's different in your fellow Marines. Are they behaving like their usual selves? Listen and observe mood, behavior, appearance, and body language.

**Interim Summary:** Some Marines can overcome stress-related issues on their own and some will need help. We have to recognize when fellow Marines are having problems with stress and get them the help they need. Let's talk about resources for getting assistance with combat and operational stress.

### **KEY POINT 3**

1. A common myth is that *"Asking for help will make me appear weak and/or less of a Marine."*  
**Correction:** It is your responsibility, and part of the commitment you made to the Corps, to be ready to handle whatever the Marine Corps needs of you at any time. You can only do this by being at your best, and sometimes that means asking for and accepting help.
2. It's important to accept help and encourage fellow Marines to seek help because there are potential personal and professional consequences of unmanaged issues.
3. Current Marine Corps policy is for commands to create a climate where seeking help is encouraged to promote maximum personal and unit readiness.
4. Understand that getting or giving help is aligned with our Corps Values: honor, courage, and commitment.
5. Teamwork is important; it is your responsibility to intervene when a fellow Marine is in distress or making poor decisions.
6. Thinking back to the scenario, what resources are available to help Sgt Torres?
  - a) Big five: peers, chain of command, chaplain, medical/Marine Corps Community Services resources (Substance Abuse Counseling Center (SACC), Community Counseling Center (CCC), Family Advocacy Program (FAP)), and the DSTRESS Line (1-877-476-7734)
  - b) OSCAR
  - c) Military and Family Life Consultant (MFLC)
  - d) Military One Source

### **SUMMARY/CONCLUSION**

Today we discussed Combat & Operational Stress Control Myths and Facts. You know the warning signs of combat and operational stress and the causes of stress injuries. Sometimes managing stress means seeking help; this makes us stronger, especially if we do it before stress becomes overwhelming. You now have a better understanding of how to get assistance for combat and operational stress.

#### **Closing Statement:**

Marines can recover from stress-related issues with the proper support. It is your responsibility to intervene when a fellow Marine is in distress or making poor decisions. It's important to notice what's different in your fellow Marines. Listen and observe mood, behavior, appearance, and body language. It's important to accept help and encourage fellow Marines to seek help because there are potential personal and professional consequences of unmanaged issues. The Marine Corps offers resources to assist you, including the "Big five" resources: peers, chain of command, chaplain,

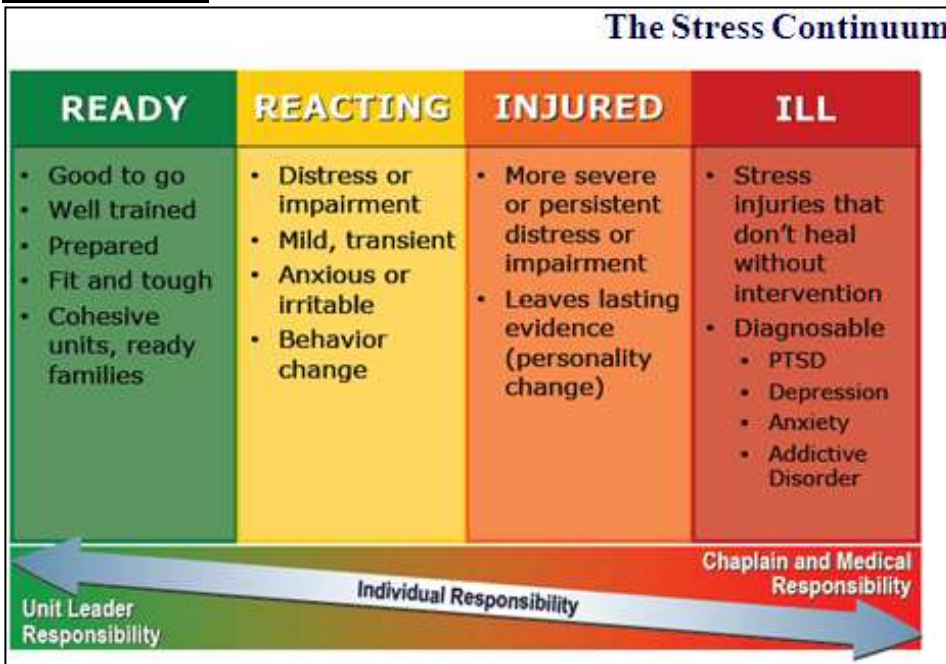
medical/Marine Corps Community Services resources (Substance Abuse Counseling Center (SACC), Family Advocacy Program (FAP) and Community Counseling Center (CCC)), and the DSTRESS Line (1-877-476-7734), these can help before issues become overwhelming and direct you to other resources if necessary.

### **END OF DISCUSSION**

### **RESOURCES**

1. Combat Stress MCRP 6-11C
2. MCO 5351.1 Combat and Operational Stress Control Program
3. MAPIT Guide. Retrieved from [http://bhini.usmc-mccs.org/uploads/MAPIT\\_Guide.pdf](http://bhini.usmc-mccs.org/uploads/MAPIT_Guide.pdf).

### **ENCLOSURE 1**



1. Green is Ready. Signs of a Ready Marine, in the Green Zone are:
  - a) Remaining calm and steady
  - b) Being confident in oneself and others
  - c) Getting the job done
  - d) Remaining in control
  - e) Possessing sound mind, body, spirit and social fitness
  - f) Behaving ethically and morally
  - g) Retaining a sense of humor
  - h) Being at peace with oneself
2. Marines in the Green Zone adapt to cope with stressors and continue to function well. The Green Zone is where most of us are most of the time; when a stressor enters the picture, we can slide into the Yellow Zone.
3. Yellow is Reacting. The Yellow Zone is always temporary, common, and reversible. There is some anxiety, irritability, and behavior change, but the Marine is going to go back to Green on his or her own after the stress is removed. Every Marine goes in and out of the Yellow Zone.

4. Signs of stress reaction, in the Yellow Zone are:
  - a) Cutting corners on the job
  - b) Being short tempered, irritable or grouchy
  - c) Having trouble falling asleep
  - d) Eating too much or too little
  - e) Losing some interest, energy or enthusiasm
  - f) Not enjoying usual activities
  - g) Keeping to oneself
  - h) Being overly loud or hyperactive
  - i) Feeling worried, anxious or fearful
  - j) Feeling sad or angry
  - k) Being negative or pessimistic
  - l) Diminished mental focus
5. Marines in the Yellow Zone are reacting to temporary or mild stress and show temporary signs of stress that go away on their own. Even though Yellow Zone stress reactions are temporary, you have a responsibility to engage fellow Marines experiencing temporary stress and help them manage their stress to return to the Green Zone.
6. Orange is Injured. Marines in the Orange Zone might show a lasting change in behavior or personality caused by more severe and persistent forms of distress or loss of function. Because Orange Zone stress injuries may not resolve on their own and may last for many years; you have a responsibility to engage resources and get Marines in the Orange Zone assistance. In some cases, Orange Zone stress injuries may get worse and go into the Red Zone.
7. Signs of stress injury, in the Orange Zone, are:
  - a) Having difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep
  - b) Waking up from recurrent, vivid nightmares
  - c) Being unable to enjoy usually pleasurable activities
  - d) Losing the ability to remember or think rationally and clearly
  - e) Feeling persistent, intense guilt or shame
  - f) Feeling unusually remorseless or emotionally cold
  - g) Experiencing attacks of panic or blind rage
  - h) All these symptoms are in relation to a Marine's normal demeanor and activities, making it vital to know your fellow Marines and look for changes in their behavior. Marines can recover from stress-related issues with the proper support
8. Red is Ill. Marines in the Red Zone experience severe distress or some loss of function that has gotten bad enough or persisted long enough to be diagnosable, its symptoms if unmanaged may significantly impact a Marine's career and family. This Marine may have Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS), anxiety, or depression. Only a qualified medical officer can diagnose a Marine in the Red Zone. You CAN help identify symptoms associated with the Red Zone; if you think a Marine is in the Red Zone, refer them for assistance utilizing the assigned representative within your chain of command.
9. Signs of stress illness, in the Red Zone, are:
  - a) Experiencing attacks of panic or blind rage
  - b) Long-lasting and disabling distress or impairment of normal functioning
  - c) Symptoms that worsen over time rather than improve
  - d) Problems and issues that return after improving or seeming to resolve
  - e) Impairment that does not significantly improve within several weeks of returning from deployment

## **ENCLOSURE 2**



1. Protective factors reduce the likelihood of experiencing behavioral health issues. Imagine that these factors are shields helping to block combat and operational stress, intimate partner abuse and child maltreatment, suicide, and substance use disorder.
2. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines protective factors as: *Individual or environmental characteristics, conditions, or behaviors that reduce the effects of stressful life events. These factors also increase an individual's ability to avoid risks or hazards, and promote social and emotional competence to thrive in all aspects of life, now and in the future.*
3. When protective factors are strong, Marines are better able to withstand life's stressors, such as relationship stress and financial stress, and are more likely to avoid risky behaviors. They are also less likely to have negative reactions to combat and operational stress. They are more likely to develop and maintain resilience.
4. The factors closest to the Marine— in the first two center rings— are internal to us. We are not necessarily born with the internal factors, but with practice, we can incorporate them into our daily lives. Protective factors can be strengthened with practice.
5. As we move outward, we see protective factors that are influenced by others, including peers and leaders. There are times when external resources are necessary to resolve issues. These are not the only protective factors available to us; you may have other things that work for individuals.