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ARE WE LOSING A GRIP ON REALITY? THE POWER OF STORYTELLING TO PROMOTE PERSONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RESILIENCE[1]

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Dedication

This paper is dedicated to the men and women of the United States military and their families who have displayed the utmost courage in the sharing of their personal lives to educate the rest of us about trauma and hardship. I am lucky that dozens of individuals have shared their emotional journeys and professional expertise with me, as though I were a life-long friend or family member. Thank you for sharing your life with me. Our military needs more people like you to ensure personal and organizational resilience.

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The Power of Storytelling

Introduction

The best lessons I ever learned in life came from the worst. Life's experiences do not go away upon the completion of an event, they become our stories. Former Chief of Staff of the Air Force, General Mark A. Welsh III encouraged all airmen to share the details of their lives and to learn from those of others, often stating, "every Airman has a story."[2] While the experience of trauma, such as death, physical assault, sexual assault, and divorce, are not uncommon, they are often brushed aside as something that only happens to other people. However, most people will experience adversity and significant negative events within a lifetime.[3] Furthermore, we have all had a day that we would consider the worst day of our life. If by chance a particular experience does not happen to you, it undoubtedly will happen to someone you know, someone you love, or someone that works for you.

In the US military, the perspective gained from experiencing hardship or listening to that of another person is essential to personal and organizational resilience. Imagine yourself as a Colonel who once considered himself suicidal or a Senior Master Sergeant whose daughter was abducted. These experiences would undoubtedly change your perspective on life and leadership forever. Are you willing to share that experience in attempt to help others? Unfortunately, stigmas and perceived culture of mental toughness often block an individual's willingness to disclose personal hardship. To break this, leaders must recognize the realities of life and the value of real life experiences to promote professional intimacy, strengthened relationships, and authenticity in order to learn from those around us. Through storytelling programs such as the Air Force's "Storytellers," the military may be able to build a culture that not only promotes individual resiliency but also strengthens the organization as a whole.

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The Reality

The narratives of our past are often written by the intense emotions associated with our experiences. Negative experiences may result in a stress response or emotional state that not only alter an individual's perceived past but also the direction of his or her future. We often read stories on social media about a particular family's hardship and resultant shattered dreams but fail to evaluate the probability of occurrence or consider the possibility that it could happen to us. In reality, trauma is occurring all the time. Although we may attempt to distance ourselves both physically and emotionally from hardship, connecting with those who have experienced traumatic events is essential to our personal and organizational health.

The statistics behind life's traumas offer valuable insight to commonality of hardship. By establishing baseline understanding of the likelihood of specific traumas, service members may realize they are not alone in their emotional journey. The following data provides a brief overview of several life events that some individuals may find traumatic:

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Death

In 2010, the US military experienced 1,485 deaths out of 1,685,178 total service members.[4] Less than a third were the result of hostile action.[5] That's 1 out of 1,134 service members or .00088 percent of the total service. Compare that to the 2010 death rate for the United States in which there were 799.5 deaths per 100,000 people.[6] This equates to 1 in every 125 people. The argument is not that the military is safer than other careers, but to highlight the commonality of death in everyday life. Many of us may not necessarily have to deal with a military death, but we all have family members or friends that may be of an age where death is likely to occur. In many cases, there is emotional trauma associated that affects the mental well-being of those we care about.

Divorce

For those of us who have experienced divorce either as the result of a failed marriage or perhaps as a child in the household, it is common to experience an acute sense of loss. While you may feel alone, you are not. In 2014, there were 813,862 divorces in the US.[7] Additionally, statistics suggest that forty to fifty percent of American couples will get divorced in their lifetime.[8]

Sexual Assault

RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network), the nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization, reports that 321,500 Americans age 12 and older are sexually assaulted or raped each year.[9] Furthermore, 1 out of every 6 American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime.[10] On average this equates to one sexual assault every 98 seconds.[11]

Violence

In 2016, the US Department of Justice reported that 5.7 million people were victims of violent crime, including over 1.3 million cases which involved personal injury.[12] This included 480,940 nonfatal firearm victimizations.[13] Additionally, an estimated 15.9 million people were victims of property theft.[14] Historically, domestic violence accounts for approximately 21 percent of all violent crime.[15]

Additional research into any of these topics yields thousands of articles, books, and personal stories from those affected by tragedies such as these. For those of us in the military, you may be thinking, "I'm 25, I'm not going to die from heart disease any time soon," or "I'm single, divorce rates don't matter to me." However, our personal health and mental well-being are not only affected by our own life experiences, but also from those that we know. We all have

a mother, father, brother, sister, child, friend, co-worker, boss, or subordinate whose health and well-being, both physically and mentally, is important to us. In fact, it might be the death of our best friend or brother that has the greatest impact to our daily life. So often, the military services focus on the statistics of active duty members and fail to consider how the experiences and hardships of our entire personal network play a role in shaping our own stories.

Understanding Personal Network Size

An individual's personal network consists of a range of social connections consisting of family, friends, coworkers and acquaintances.[16] The number of people we know can be estimated, but how well we know someone is arguably left to the eye of the beholder. A random Facebook friend with limited online interaction is fundamentally different than a sibling who you talk to on a daily basis or a subordinate who takes orders. Simply put, there exists a scale of intimacy with those we are connected. Having a large personal network does not necessarily constitute knowledge of the personal stories of those in your network. However, the size of our networks does affect the probability that someone within your network has experienced a specific trauma.

Due to the difficulty in reliably listing every person an individual may know, accurately measuring personal network sizes is quite challenging.[17] The Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy and the Applied Statistics Center at Columbia University determined the average network size of an individual to be 611 people.[18] Similarly, the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan "fact tank" based in Washington D.C., suggests that the average American has 634 ties in their overall network.[19] Considering the military lifestyle is often full of permanent changes of station, deployments, and temporary duty locations, the personal network sizes of military members are constantly evolving and growing in size. Leaders and subordinates alike

must recognize the likelihood that the hardships of everyday life have occurred and will continue to occur to the people around them.

Everyone Has Had A Bad Day

Developing an all-encompassing formula that captures the probability of experiencing life's most difficult challenges with the nuances of life is nearly impossible. We cannot simply multiple the rate of traumatic events by the number of people in our personal network to estimate the number of those affected. Furthermore, what one person considers traumatic may not be traumatic for the next. Who we are (age, race, sex, genetics), where we live (neighborhood, rural/urban lifestyle), what our personal habits are (food/alcohol consumption, drug use), and chance play a role in what trauma is experienced but do not define the emotional response of the individual experiencing the event. For some, the loss of a pet might be the most intense emotional trauma they have ever faced. For others, perhaps it's the divorce of their parents. Regardless, we have all had a bad day. The level of trauma associated with that particular day is relative to our own unique histories. It is unfair to assume one person's hardship outweighs that of another when the observer has not shared in the experience. More importantly, everyone has the right to consider some event in their life to be the worst thing that's ever happened to them. Discovering and understanding what particular hardships entail may lead to shared connections that can be exploited into support for others.

The PEW Research Center conducted a study to analyze the awareness of an individual to other people's stressful life events. In the study, participants were asked if they knew someone who experienced a major life event in the past year. The results found that[20]:

- 50% knew someone who had been hospitalized or experienced a serious accident or injury
- 43% knew someone who had been fired or laid off
- 36% knew someone who had experienced the death of a child, partner, or spouse

- 31% knew someone who had gone through a marital separation or divorce
- 26% knew someone who had experienced a demotion or pay cut at work
- 22% knew someone who had been accused of or arrested for a crime
- 22% knew someone who had been the victim of a robbery or physical assault

Expanded over a ten, twenty, or thirty-year career, these events are likely to occur multiple times to someone in your life that matters. Perhaps more important than understanding the likelihood of a stressful event occurring is the various emotional response that individuals may have. Responding to stressful events may come with relative ease or intense hardship. How individuals respond depends on their personal resiliency.

Resilience is common, yet unpredictable

Most people in their life "will experience at least one violent or life-threatening event" and nearly all "will experience the pain and disorientation of losing a loved one."[21] However the vast majority of us will recover with relative ease. Recovery from the associated stress will challenge the hardiest among us and all of us will cope in various ways and magnitude.[22] Although chronic distress, recurrent intrusive memories, and years of grief may impact some, others find coping mechanisms that result in short-lived reactions and a relatively rapid return to normal levels of functioning.[23] It is this return to normalcy that is typically associated with the definition of resilience.

The Air Force defines resilience as "the ability to withstand, recover and/or grow in the face of stressors and changing demands."[24] "Bouncing back" is a commonly accepted term associated with resilience. The phrase implies recovery from hardship but fails to capture the long-term emotional effects that may linger in the months or years after a traumatic experience. Perhaps a more appropriate definition is one described in the Journal of Advanced Nursing: "The ability of an individual to adjust to adversity, maintain equilibrium, retain some sense of control over their environment, and continue to move on in a positive manner."[25]

Individuals characterized as resilient have the ability to separate from unpleasant life events and effectively cope with stress and negative emotions.[26] They are predisposed to living and often display increased self-esteem, self-efficacy, and emotional stability.[27] These individuals play an active role in preventing negative consequences when faced with adversity and identify challenges in life as the chance of gaining a new experience.[28] For those exposed to situations of potential trauma, resilience has shown to be surprisingly common despite extremely stressful events.[29] In fact, "the majority of persons exposed to violent or life-threatening events do not go on to develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and a surprising proportion demonstrate resilience to such experiences."[30]

Resiliency has been the subject of many studies as the military increasingly focuses on comprehensive physical and mental health for its service members. Military leaders often quote rising suicide rates and the need for individual and family support during hardship as reasoning for such studies. However, like the American public, many military families cope extremely well when faced with hardship despite additional military related stressors, such as relocation, long work hours, and family separations.[31] Others find themselves without hope or simply lost in life. The problem lies in that there is no objective standard for how an individual will respond to trauma and "predicting human behavior is extremely difficult."[32] An individual may respond to one hardship with extreme resiliency only to find him/herself fail in the next. The military focuses its efforts to find these individuals in order to sustain a healthy force.

A 2011 study of resiliency in the USAF, completed by the RAND corporation, emphasized the lack of a survey instrument, professional assessment, or biological test in which individuals may use to determine levels of resiliency when facing stress or adversity.[33] In other words, we have no idea who will respond negatively to one of life's inevitable hardships nor a

method to uncover these people. This is no different than predicting an aircraft accident. If we knew when they were going to happen, we would do something about it. In attempt to prepare for the future and avoid repeating mistakes, we look to our past to learn from the accidents and experiences of others. Aircrew members often consider emergency procedures as "written in blood," as the steps to survive the event would not exist if not for aircrew members of the past giving their life. If we can use debriefs, after-action reports, and regulations to capture and share the lessons learned in our professional careers, perhaps we can adopt a similar philosophy towards the traumas and hardships in life. The sharing of our personal stories is the first step.

Storytelling

Stories are an essential form of communication in which individuals share messages, entertainment, experiences, and knowledge with one another.[34] The perspectives of an individual experiencing an event or witnessing an event can provide explanation, persuasion, description, or disclosure of the details surrounding the event.[35] Furthermore, "stories bring meaning to our lives, convey values and emotions, aid in reaffirming and validating our lives and experiences, and have the ability to connect us with our inner selves, with others, and with society."[36] These connections promote a healthy culture built upon personal relationships and resiliency. By first understanding the development of our own personal stories, we discover how disclosure of struggle has the ability to transform lives, including our own, through the development of professional intimate relationships and a resilient mindset.

Personal stories often take form as a mechanism to view our possible self and represents the outcome in which an individual recovers from trauma.[37] Following a traumatic event, an individual must mentally relive experiences to construct a narrative about their past self. This in turn develops the narrative of a possible self or lost possible self that describes how life could

have been if not for the life changing experience.[38] In other words, if a traumatic event never occurred and our future path never changed, who would we be? By understanding the construction of our past and possible selves we can analyze the results of a traumatic event.

There are three potential outcomes following the development of a story: learn from the experience, return to a state of equilibrium, or fail to grasp the realities of life. Carmine Gallo, a keynote speaker and bestselling author of "The Storyteller's Secret," suggests that personal transformation is a critical piece to a compelling personal narrative.[39] It's not necessarily the experience that makes a powerful story but how the experience transforms the person. This follows the same structure as any great movie: the hero struggles, finds personal growth, then ultimately succeeds in life.[40] Imagine the story of Batman had he not grown in the face of adversity. Without the character transformation following the murder of his parents, Batman's story would be much different. Those who can learn from stressful experiences or use the act of storytelling itself as a catharsis to hardship, are considered to have post traumatic growth (PTG).

PTG can be defined as the "occurrence of any positive personal change, including changes in self-perception, relationships with others, and appreciation of life resulting from coping with life crises."[41] Although often seen as an outcome to storytelling, PTG can also be the means by which a storyteller experiences and identifies personal enhancement.[42] There exists an opportunity for a more meaningful and valuable life following a traumatic event where the process of storytelling contributes to the transformation of an individual.[43] Those who have experienced PTG have described a growing sense of strength and feeling of greater experience in life.[44] Promoting an environment that allows individuals to share their experiences will enable those who have failed in resilience to bond with those who have shown PTG in their own lives.

The military environment is filled with operating instructions, memorandums, PowerPoint presentations, and computer-based training modules that offer static, complicated, and often ephemeral training processes. Storytelling offers an alternate avenue in which individuals can share messages through simple, timeless, and memorable means. It is one of humankind's oldest art forms having existed since humans first started talking about their lives. Today, like the past, your age, sex, race, education, and profession, stories have little bearing on your ability to speak or understand a story.[45] Whether a doctor, pilot, mechanic, or commander, storytelling combines individual passion with a life lesson into a message that is potentially timeless. For most, we can easily recall a story conveyed by someone close to us in which the storyteller shared a life experience or intense emotion in attempt to prepare us for our own encounter with a similar event.

The sharing of personal stories offers both the storyteller and the audience an opportunity to benefit from life's experiences and trauma. The differences and similarities between perspectives are revealed in the disclosure of experiences. For the storyteller, repeating painful experiences allows the individual to make sense of the situation from a different perspective.[46] Research has shown that deliberately thinking about and processing a traumatic event leads to personal growth.[47] Storytelling enables the storyteller to re-evaluate their most intense emotions in an environment that is removed from the original trauma. By igniting an emotional state, the storyteller can reframe the experience and evaluate the past. As a result, the individual can reflect on painful moments, make sense of their feelings, and move on with their lives.[48] This personal reflection results in a hardy and resilient character who understands that negative emotions do not have to be threatening to their mental health. Instead they can be shared as a meaningful component of life.[49]

For the audience, listening to a story of hardship offers guidance and perspective to someone else's life journey. Listeners may be able to relate their own experiences to those of the storyteller or simply gain insight to an experience that they have never had. Understanding how others have overcome adversity and hardship fosters a learning environment for personal development. In result, we can use the stories of others to change our attitudes, actions, and thought processes. Consider a young adult whose parents shared a story of getting married too young. The father may attempt to sway his child in a certain direction based on the pros and cons of his own experience. Understanding the father's perspective may lead to change in the child's marriage considerations because of the connection with his story.

Factors of Storytelling

The social environment in which an individual may share a personal story of trauma is an important factor in examining the benefits of disclosure. While research has produced no results that the effects of written and verbal emotional disclosure during bereavement improve personal coping to acute stress or trauma, some experts encourage appropriate self-disclosure under the right conditions.[50] Mancini and Bonanno argue that "without a supportive environment, the benefits of disclosure are diluted."[51] "The usefulness of verbally disclosing traumatic experiences with others depends at least in part on whether or not the social environment is perceived to be receptive, supportive, or willing to offer help."[52] A study examining 9/11 terrorist attacks and positive views of oneself highlighted the importance of the social environment. Those who perceived an environment in which others were willing to listen to stories about the experience were more likely to express resiliency to the effects of the terrorist attacks.[53] Simply put, it matters if people listen. Similarly, if the intent of the story is to pass a

message, the audience will not learn from the experience if they are not listening to what is being shared.[54]

While some people simply don't want to listen, for those that do, there may be a downside to the exposure of others' stress and trauma. Evidence suggests that awareness of others' difficulties might add to an individual's psychological stress.[55] The PEW Research Center did a study on the "cost of caring" in which they tested whether or not stress was contagious through social media. Data analysis concluded that women scored 14% higher on their own measure of stress if they were aware that someone close to them experienced the death of a child, partner, or spouse.[56] Similarly, women scored 5% higher if someone close to them had been hospitalized or experienced a serious accident or injury.[57] For men, stress levels increased when someone close to them had been accused of/arrested for a crime or if an acquaintance experienced a demotion/pay cut (11% and 9% respectively).[58] While this data supports the concept that stress may be contagious when stories of hardship are shared, it does not account for the potential benefits received by the listeners. Some listeners find it rewarding to support and comfort those in need. Others recognize the importance of each individual to the overall resilience within the organization. Military leaders must ignore the downside of exposure to stress and trauma in order to promote a healthy work environment.

Culture plays a critical role in the social context and environment in which individuals may share their stories.[59] Dr. Paul Bartone of the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research in Washington D.C. argues that “organizational policies might actually interfere with healthy coping processes.”[60] He suggests that an ideal military organization would support practices that assist individuals and groups to “transform loss, suffering, and death into a psychological asset

instead of a liability, a source of strength and commitment rather than of prolonged mental destress."[61]

Barriers to Storytelling

Military culture plays a significant role in the likelihood that an individual shares his or her story. Stigmas associated with mental health, as well as career progression concerns, command climate, trust, and dissonance between self-image and a "warrior ethos," may help explain why personal stories remain private.[62] Although the average personal network size may be over 600 people, research suggests that the average American only has 2.16 discussion confidants.[63] Furthermore, "nine percent of Americans reported that they had no one with whom they could discuss important matters."[64] Simply stated, we might know a lot of people, but we fail to grasp what experiences define them.

One reason for weak relationships is the inherent fear to share our deepest and darkest secrets without affecting professional or social repercussion. Lt. Col. Wendy Travis, the Chief of Mental Health Policy and Program Evaluation at the Air Force Medical Operations Agency, stated in an Air Force Times article that "one in ten active duty members reported untreated mental health problems and that 90 percent of these personnel had no intention of seeking mental health services."[65] Why are military members so afraid to share their stories? By dissecting stigmas associated with military culture it may be possible to overcome some of the concerns that exist.

The disclosure one's story may lead to concerns regarding mental health care, in which the exposure of details may include the admission or perception of desiring, needing, or obtaining mental health treatment. Seeking or requiring mental health treatment is frequently viewed as weak or against military norms. The "warrior ethos" culture of strength, group

cohesion, and an individual ability to cope in combat encourages the individual to minimize mental health seeking behavior.[66] To avoid the risk of professional or peer rejection, individuals assume that he or she must embody traits of toughness and resilience.[67] Avoidance of rejection is exacerbated by cultural expectations to repress and feel shame of perceived weakness.[68] In result, military members learn to repress their emotions in order to avoid situations in which they must share potential mental health concerns or the admission of emotions.

Disclosure of perceived weakness is often avoided in fear of professional development stifling. A Department of Defense Health Related Behaviors Survey, conduct by RAND in 2014 revealed that 37.7 percent of participants believed mental health assistance would harm their career.[69] The fear of the unknown plays a role in the perception that one's career may be affected by the admission of mental health concerns, especially for those military members who hold special duty status.[70] Individuals on flying status, personnel reliability program (PRP), or with security clearance access unfortunately weigh the impacts of accessing mental health over career goals.[71] Seeking help gives power to the mental health professional in the determination of whether or not the individual can maintain special access or job privileges. In result, the fear of losing control over one's future limits the disclosure of stories.

The likelihood of an individual to share his or her experience may in fact rest upon trust of the command climate. A 2008 study on mental health stigma in the military found that the level of support from the command or commander could contribute positively or negatively on mental health experiences.[72] For those who fear professional repercussion, a commander who is supportive of mental health seeking behavior may help break the stigma associated with perceived weakness. In units that do not take mental health problems seriously, service members are less likely to seek help or complete mental health treatment.[73] Arguably, changing the

culture begins with leaders who promote an environment of trust and professional intimate relationships rather than oppress and ignore emotional struggles.

Additionally, studies reveal that men are culturally expected to be in control of their emotions.[74] It is easy to assume that the emotional retelling of one's story may bring about the very emotions individuals are expected to repress. Even if mental health stigmas are absent, the storyteller must trust the audience not to take advantage or judge the individual in his or her state of vulnerability. While extreme cases may require leadership intervention to ensure the safety of all members of the unit, allowing the storyteller to share stories of the past may help the audience prepare for the future.

Storytellers

The power of storytelling has begun to take root in Air Force resiliency programs across the globe as more military leaders have recognized the benefits of sharing life experiences. In July 2012, a small team of airmen at Incirlik Air Base, Turkey, developed an event, appropriately named "Storytellers" to capture the personal stories of others. The event was based on the notion that "Every Airman Has a Story," popularized by General Mark Welsh, and influenced by the growing sensation TED Talks. Lt Kitsana Dounglomchan, Co-Founder of "Storytellers," explained that the event was tailored to be the exact opposite of a commander's call.[75] It was specifically designed to create an intimate environment in which individuals could share real stories of tragedy and hardship. In less than six years, the "Storytellers" concept has expanded from a single event at Incirlik to a reoccurring program at over 20 bases.

Much like the lessons it teaches, the "Storytellers" program has spread by word of mouth. Its semi-formal structure has yet to be standardized by Air Force Headquarters and the option to host the event is decided by individual bases. Each event is coordinated by a team of personnel

that often includes community support coordinators, master resiliency trainers, and former storytellers. Typically, four to six volunteers are selected to speak for 10-15 minutes each about a personal experience. They are not forced or mandated to share a specific message, as the intent is to learn from the story itself. The event coordinators offer recommendations and public speaking tips to the presenter to ensure a clear delivery. The hardships discussed are typically unfiltered emotional recollections of traumatic events that include suicide, homicide, sexual assault, physical assault, terminal diagnoses, and death. Although many of the stories are viewed as shocking, they represent reality of trauma that our friends, peers, colleagues, subordinates, and bosses have endured.

In an effort to validate the effectiveness of storytelling in the Air Force, an informal search was conducted to locate individuals who have shared personal experiences of hardship in attempt to educate others about trauma and resiliency. Twenty-one participants composed of 4 civilians, 2 NCOs, 8 SNCOs, 2 CGOs, and 5 FGOs responded to questions about their experiences. Twelve of the twenty-one spoke in the program "Storytellers." The remainder took part in similar storytelling-type events (i.e., Kirtland Talks, a TED Talks spin-off), coordinated storytelling events, or have used storytelling as a leadership and mentoring tool in their career. Their comments and thoughts regarding their experience of storytelling were combined into the following points:

1. We are all human.

The group stressed the importance that storytelling humanizes the storyteller. Life's twists and turns can happen to an O-10 just as much as an E-1. By sharing stories across all ranks, we can break down stereotypes that suggest our senior leaders are either immune to hardship or resistant to sharing experiences.

"It's nice to remember that underneath this uniform is a person who has overcome struggles and challenges to get to where they are, regardless of the stripes on the sleeve or the rank on the collar. It humanizes us." - Lt Kitsana R. Dounglomchan, Co-Founder of "Storytellers"[76]

2. There is a right way to share a story.

The effectiveness of storytelling is complicated. There are right and wrong times and places to use storytelling as the means to convey a message. Furthermore, the audience, whether one person or three-hundred, wants someone or something they can relate to. Some stories transcend generations with ease, others are more difficult to connect with. Ensuring the story is presented in a sincere and authentic manner is critical to building trust and empathy with the audience. This helps build a connection in which you can inspire and move others. Without a connection, the message may not resonate with the crowd.

"The audience and who is in it (all ranks being considered) determines whether or not your story is received and processed." - Alexis D. Allen, Speaker at "Storytellers"[77]

3. Storytelling is therapeutic.

All of the respondents agreed, storytelling is beneficial to the storyteller. The act of sharing enabled each storyteller to process their past and self-reflect on the particular hardship they faced. Some respondents argued that the act of storytelling simply "felt good." Others found it therapeutic to connect with people who had a common experience or emotional response. The environment and manner in which the story is received is critical to enabling this response.

"Being able to publicly tell my story felt awesome. I no longer felt like I was hiding anything, and I was able to show that those who push through sexual assaults are not victims, they are survivors." - SSgt J. Doe, Speaker at "Storytellers"[78]

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4. Storytelling empowers the audience.

All members of the group advocated that the audience benefits from listening to stories. For those who connect with the message or emotions of a story, the audience member is reminded that he or she is not alone. Furthermore, storytelling allows individuals to share a learned process. The receiver is exposed to new perspectives and realities of life that they may not have experienced.

"I don't travel to the bad side of town when it's dark! I know that my bank would never call me and ask me for my SSN. I understand these things because of stories and experiences of others and paying attention to the experiences of others so that I may gain perspective is absolutely invaluable." – MSgt Darryl M. Lane, informal storyteller[79]

5. Air Force culture includes a perception that senior leaders are not allowed to have bad days.

There exists a perceived weakness in the admission of self-struggle. As rank increases, some individuals feel as though their age and experience is enough to handle the struggles of trauma and hardship in order to avoid appearing weak. A majority of the group felt as though senior leaders view themselves as immune to hardship and unwilling to allow subordinates to view them as normal people. Furthermore, all ranks agreed that admission of struggle was beneficial for senior leaders to expose their authentic selves if shared correctly. Vulnerability in a professional setting has incredible power if senior leaders recognize that they are allowed to have a bad day.

"I didn't feel my story was worthy of discussion when I first told it, in fact I thought it made me look weak. I know now that others can identify their experiences in what I say and how I got through my issues." - Col Jeffrey J. White, Speaker at "Kirtland Talks"[80]

6. Air Force culture needs more storytelling.

Mixed opinions exist in the acceptance of storytelling within the Air Force. Some argued the Air Force embraces the concept while others felt the culture was resistant. All respondents

felt the future military environment should include open and personal interactions. Storytelling is the method to enable this culture.

"As the vice wing commander, I was the inaugural storyteller which opened the floodgates for others to share their experiences." - Col B. Philip Heseltine, Jr., Speaker at "Storytellers"[81]

7. Our stories and resultant life lessons have the ability to make our future better.

Real stories told by real people are much more impactful than PowerPoint slide-shows or computer-based training. Storytelling can help breakdown stereotypes and stigmas associated with overcoming hardship by placing the audience member in the shoes of the storyteller. By understanding a hardship, the emotional response, and lessons learned, individuals can build skills to overcome future adversity.

"People can see themselves in the story, which makes it a powerful educational tool." - Lt Col Jannell C. MacAulay, Speaker at "Kirtland Talks"[82]

What We Can Learn

There are a handful of leadership models and techniques that reinforce the value of investing in relationships to strengthen oneself, the organization, and our networks.[83] As stories are more frequently shared, common experiences are more likely to be discovered and subsequently open new paths in life for relationships to blossom. In turn, these relationships help foster a positive work environment in which individuals have increased knowledge of our stories of tragedy and hardship. When, not if, emotional trauma strikes a member of the organization again, the organization is postured to provide the necessary support.

In a way, personal stories are the after-action reports for real life. The military captures inefficiencies and lessons learned in almost every action it takes, yet for some reason, we seem to relearn hardship and trauma despite its reoccurrence. It is possible to debrief life the way we debrief an aircraft sortie. Just as a pilot who makes an inappropriate decision discusses the

events leading up to the decision in the post-mission debrief, individuals can share life's experiences, so all may benefit from the unique perspectives and lessons learned. If we accept the fact that hardship and trauma will occur to either ourselves, a loved one, or at the very least a member of our personal social network, then let's use our stories to prepare others for the future. By fostering an environment that is open to sharing of personal stories, leaders may be able to build a culture that is open to professional intimacy. A level of connectedness between subordinates, leaders, and peers is critical to breaking down the stigmas associated with the reality of life.

Currently, the military uses educational approaches to breakdown stereotypes in hopes to replace stigma with factual information.[84] Comprehensive Airman Fitness, Green Dot Training, Wingman Day, Resiliency Day and a host of other buzz words fill our careers with the next best answer or training program to life's twists and turns. Education is cheap and can reach a large audience with little effort.[85] However, "any advocate can develop a PowerPoint presentation on the myths versus facts about mental illness among soldiers and disseminate it on the internet."[86] While this may produce short term effect on attitudes, there exists significant limitation to magnitude and duration of the improvements.[87] To affect cultural change perhaps we can use our stories to explain the challenges in life. Mandated training can be reinforced with a culture that treats and debriefs life with the attitude it deserves: normalcy. It is normal to experience trauma and hardship. Let us share our stories to breakdown the fear and assumptions associated with the disclosure of our hardships, traumas, and emotions so we can learn from each other. Our unique stories in life are too valuable to keep to ourselves.

Recommendations

1. Capture additional qualitative and quantitative data for military storytelling events such as "Storytellers" to produce a more detailed analysis. Event coordinators should capture attendance numbers as well as audience feedback to evaluate the successes and failures of the program. Coordination with the mental health office or chaplain services may produce a correlation between attendance and those seeking help for personal trauma as stories may inspire help seeking behavior.

2. Evaluate the probability of traumatic events occurring within an organization based on the rank and length of service of an individual may help focus resiliency events and training on specific life events. Understanding which traumas are more likely to be experienced will allow individuals and organizations to posture for common emotional responses. For example, a seven-year Captain will likely encounter five divorces in his career versus a 25-year Colonel who will likely encounter thirty.

3. Develop an informal, volunteer-based database to capture those individuals who have shared their traumas and hardships. Personal stories are a valuable resource to commanders and resiliency trainers to garner the do's and don'ts for future occurrences. Additionally, some individuals who are struggling with a traumatic event may desire to converse with someone who has shared a similar experience. Having a group of individuals that are willing to discuss their particular hardship may help build connections that promote personal relationships and resilience.

4. Incorporate storytelling behavior and education into training programs at all levels, such as Airman Leadership School and Squadron commander courses, to promote a cultural shift towards a professional environment that is open to the sharing of personal hardships. It is

critical for individuals to learn how to effectively communicate through storytelling to ensure the appropriate lessons are shared.

5. Use social media and online platforms to promote storytelling. Consider the use of confidential communities to promote discussions between individuals with shared hardship or trauma who do not wish to share in a public or professional environment.

Conclusion

Our lives are surrounded by individuals who have bounced back from intense hardship and traumatic experiences. In fact, we all have experiences in our past that offer life lessons for the future. Understanding the unique stories of those around us is critical to promoting a military culture that accepts the realities and struggles of everyday life. Furthermore, awareness of the commonality of specific traumatic events and the likelihood that they will happen to you or someone in your personal network is essential to promoting an environment that is accepting of personal struggle. For those in life who have already proved resilient to a particular hardship, the sharing of their journey may assist others in the healing process. Storytelling enables persons of all ranks and backgrounds to humanize experiences that are often viewed as unlikely to occur. When shared, we are able to create professional intimate relationships that not only promote individual resiliency but also create an organizational culture that is capable of discussing life's everyday challenges. Storytelling may be the ultimate conduit to debrief life as we all have an experience from which others can learn.

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