

U.S. Army War College

Maximizing Senior Leader Health and Wellbeing



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MAXIMIZING SENIOR LEADER HEALTH AND WELLBEING

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Chapter 7

SENIOR LEADER RESILIENCE

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“Operational readiness is based on strength and resilience. Senior leaders who recognize the importance of resilience in their own lives and the lives of their people will lead better in the most stressful environments on and off the battlefield.”

-Major General D. A. Sims, II

Senior leaders are, by definition, resilient. By the time they are promoted to a position of strategic responsibility, they have undoubtedly weathered a series of difficult real-world challenges, supervising soldiers, managing resources, and experiencing the ups and downs of military life. These same senior leaders know that they have “the ability to face and cope with adversity, adapt to change, recover, learn, and grow from setbacks.”¹ While they may have moments of self-doubt, and glimpses into the imposter phenomenon, they would not have made it this far if they did not have a resilient core.

And because senior leaders in the Army are trained to learn and grow, they are also likely to wonder how they can reinforce their resilience. By being cognizant of their own resilience and the forces that strain that resilience, they can not only position themselves to be optimally effective leaders, healthy individuals, and loving family members, but also position themselves to support resilience in their subordinate leaders, and thus, by extension, the resilience of their troops.

Here is what this chapter is not about. It is not a summary or integrated review of Army programs or of doctrine. It is also not about creating a

1. U.S. Army, “Holistic Health and Fitness,” *FM 7-22* (Washington DC: Department of the Army, 2020), 3-4, https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN30714-FM_7-22-000-WEB-1.pdf

one-size-fits-all solution. Instead, this chapter is designed to support senior leaders by explicitly describing stressors they may face, identifying key strategies that can be used for coping, and demystifying the limits of resilience. By applying established scientific findings to the occupational context in which military senior leaders operate, this chapter delineates what leaders can do to boost their own resilience and the resilience of their teams.

Understanding the context

Stressors: Traumatic Events and Hassles

Most senior leaders are familiar with concepts related to traumatic stress. They know traumatic combat experiences are associated with greater risk of posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms, and other mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and alcohol misuse.² Leaders, particularly those who have deployed to combat, know that combat-related traumatic events include watching fellow soldiers get wounded or die, witnessing moral transgressions, and risking severe injury or death. Such traumatic events can impact an individual at the moment of exposure (in an acute stress reaction), shortly thereafter (in a combat stress reaction), or months later.³

Much has been written on the resilience of soldiers in the aftermath of combat. Indeed, several studies have documented that most soldiers are resilient in the face of these experiences, with approximately 75-80% not reporting mental health symptoms, 8-10% reporting the decline of symptoms following exposure to combat-related trauma, and 7-10% reporting the emergence of symptoms in the months following return home. Still others (approximately 2-3%) report mental health problems both prior to deployment and afterwards. The trajectories are similar whether the outcome is post-traumatic stress symptoms, aggression, or depression and anxiety.⁴ Of course, these kinds of results are based on self-

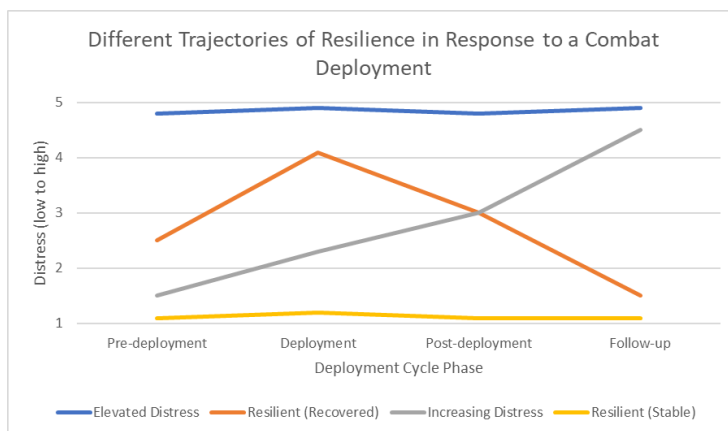
2. Marija Spanovic Kelber, Derek J. Smolenski, Don E. Workman, Maria A. Morgan, Abigail L. Garvey Wilson, Marjorie S. Campbell, Daniel P. Evatt, and Bradley E. Belsher, "Typologies of Combat Exposure and Their Effects on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Depression Symptoms," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 32, no. 6 (2019): 946-956. doi:10.1002/jts.22459.; Jeffrey L. Thomas, Joshua E. Wilk, Lyndon A. Riviere, Dennis McGurk, Carl A. Castro, and Charles W. Hoge. 2010, "Prevalence of Mental Health Problems and Functional Impairment among Active Component and National Guard Soldiers 3 and 12 Months Following Combat in Iraq," *Archives of General Psychiatry* 67, no. 6 (2019): 614-623. doi:10.1001/archgenpsychiatry.2010.54.w

3. K. E. Porter, H. M. Cochran, S. K. H. Richards, and M. B. Sexton, "Combat Stress." In *Stress: Concepts, Cognition, Emotion, and Behavior*, ed. George Fink, (San Diego, CA: Elsevier Academic Press, 2016), 365-371. <https://search-ebscohost-com.libproxy.clemson.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=psych&AN=2016-26280-045>

4. G. A. Bonanno, A.D. Mancini, J. L. Horton, T. M. Powell, C. A., LeardMann, E. J. Boyko, T. S. Wells, T. I. Hooper, G. D. Gackstette, & T.C. Smith, "Trajectories of trauma symptoms and resilience in deployed US military service members: Prospective cohort study" *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 200, no. 4 (2012): 317-323. <https://doi-org.libproxy.clemson.edu/10.1192/bjp.bp.111.096552>; Oscar A. Cabrera, Amy B. Adler, and Paul D. Bliese, "Growth Mixture Modeling of Post-Combat Aggression: Application to Soldiers Deployed to Iraq," *Psychiatry Research* 246 (2016): 539-544.; Oscar A. Cabrera and Amy B.

reported symptoms and trajectories of positive outcomes such as morale or flourishing may be somewhat different. To help conceptualize these different trajectories, Resilient – Stable, Resilient – Recovered, Increasing Distress, and Elevated Distress trajectories are depicted schematically in Figure 1.

Figure 1



Note: This figure does not represent specific data. It is a conceptual summary of patterns reported in published studies cited in this chapter.

Trajectory studies highlight the impact that traumatic experiences can have on individuals and the various factors that can moderate the impact of these experiences. Soldiers are also pretty good at estimating their own resilience. For example, one study surveyed a brigade, and asked soldiers who were about to deploy to Afghanistan to rate themselves on a resilience measure, answering questions such as “It does not take me long to recover from a stressful event,” and “I usually come through difficult times with little trouble.” They were then asked to rate their mental health symptoms after combat. Soldiers who said that they were resilient were right: even when they were exposed to high levels of combat, they reported fewer mental health symptoms compared to those who rated themselves lower on resilience.⁵ Interestingly, those individuals whose self-ratings predicted their actual resilience were more likely to report social connection after the deployment, suggesting that it is not just some internal fortitude but the ability to forge close relationships that help individuals sustain their mental health following combat.

Adler, “Psychological Distress across the Deployment Cycle: Exploratory Growth Mixture Model,” *BJPsych Open* 7 (2021). doi:10.1192/bjo.2021.50.

5. Thomas W. Britt, Amy B. Adler, and Jamie Fynes, “Perceived Resilience and Social Connection as Predictors of Adjustment Following Occupational Adversity,” *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 26, no. 4 (2021): 339–349. doi:10.1037/ocp0000286.

Although soldiers may be attuned to the impact of traumatic stressors and there is a fair amount of media attention on soldiers exposed to combat, soldiers are typically less attuned to the role of everyday hassles in resilience. Small hassles matter more than we think they do, with research on resilience highlighting the importance of everyday hassles in predicting individual wellbeing. Dan Gilbert, a renowned social psychologist from Harvard University, has extensively studied what makes people happy. He discovered a curious conundrum. People are not particularly good at predicting what will make them happy, what he terms “impact bias.”⁶ People tend to over-estimate the impact that bad things will have on them and under-estimate the impact that minor annoyances will have. In other words, people are not particularly good at predicting what is going to cause them stress.

In the military, this impact bias would mean that leaders might be prepared for an NTC rotation to spike their stress levels but not realize that getting a flat tire, having their hot water heater break, or getting into a minor disagreement with their child can chip away at their wellbeing and wear down their resilience. Even in a deployed context, minor hassles are more predictive of mental health symptoms than are combat-related events. For example, in a study of 168 US convoy operators in Iraq, Heron and colleagues found that daily hassles such as living conditions, long work hours, and availability of hygiene products predicted depression and PTSD symptoms more than combat exposure did.⁷ By underestimating the impact of these hassles, senior leaders might miss an opportunity to intervene and reduce the number of hassles that they and their units experience. They also have an opportunity to bolster their resilience – so that they are ready to handle the emotions that come with stressors.

Employee Resources for Responding to Stress and Adversity

Understanding resilience also means appreciating that there are individual differences in the resources that individuals bring to bear on how they respond to both traumatic events and everyday hassles.⁸ Military personnel have numerous resources for addressing stressful events, including individual (e.g., positive coping and physical fitness), unit (e.g., positive command climate, unit cohesion), family (e.g., emotional ties, nurturing), and community (e.g., belongingness, connectedness) resources. The possession or absence of these critical resources can affect whether individuals perceive a stressor as a threat or challenge.⁹ Viewing

6. Timothy D. Wilson, and Daniel T. Gilbert, “The Impact Bias Is Alive and Well.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 105, no. 5 (2013): 740–748. doi:10.1037/a0032662.

7. Elizabeth A. Heron, Craig J. Bryan, Craig A. Dougherty, and William G. Chapman, “Military Mental Health: The Role of Daily Hassles While Deployed,” *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 201, no. 12 (2013): 1035–1039. doi:10.1097/NMD.000000000000058.

8. L. S. Meredith, C. D. Sherbourne, S. L. Gaillot, L. Hansell, H. V. Ritschard, A. M. Parker, & G. Wrenn, “Promoting Psychological Resilience in the U.S. Military,” *Rand Health Quarterly*, 1, no. 2 (2011): 2.

9. Richard S. Lazarus, and Susan Folkman, “Cognitive Theories of Stress and the Issue of Circularity,” In *Dynamics of Stress: Physiological, Psychological, and Social*

a stressor as a challenge can make it more palatable than viewing it as a threat. Individuals who generally see stressors as challenges tend to have a growth mindset when responding to adversity; they perceive stressors as providing opportunities for developing and building efficacy.¹⁰

One popular theory describes resources as both relatively concrete, such as a car, house, and money, and more abstract, such as self-esteem, emotional attachments, and optimism. In this theory, called the Conservation of Resources Theory, resource components can be linked together and form a kind of “resource caravan.”¹¹ For example, senior leaders who possess the resource of emotional intelligence will have healthier relationships, and these relationships will result in the availability of interpersonal support. Both emotional intelligence and interpersonal support are part of the resource caravan that can help leaders respond effectively to different types of stressors.

Not only do individuals have these different resources, but these resources can be depleted or replenished over time. The idea that individuals have a reservoir of resources to draw from is the theory’s cornerstone. The Conservation of Resources theory posits that if individuals use too much of their personal resources without replenishment, they will not be as effective. Indeed, a prolonged loss of resources is predictive of burnout, and depleted resources also place individuals at greater risk for struggling to address subsequent challenges. This continuous depletion of resources is known as a “loss spiral.”¹²

A “loss spiral” is akin to the concept of allostatic load which describes how over the course of a lifespan, an accumulation of stress can significantly hinder different physiological systems from functioning.¹³ This concept helps explain why individuals with adverse childhood experiences (like witnessing physical abuse, having a family member die by suicide, or growing up in a household with substance use problems) may have heightened physiological reactivity that increases wear-and-tear on the body. This load places them at risk for a range of negative physiological

Perspectives, eds. Mortimer H. Appley and Richard Trumbull, (New York, NY: Plenum Press, 1986) 63–80. <https://search-ebscohost-com.libproxy.clemson.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=psych&AN=1987-97126-004>.

10. Alia J. Crum, Modupe Akinola, Ashley Martin, and Sean Fath, “The Role of Stress Mindset in Shaping Cognitive, Emotional, and Physiological Responses to Challenging and Threatening Stress,” *Anxiety, Stress & Coping: An International Journal* 30, no. 4 (2017): 379–395. doi:10.1080/10615806.2016.1275585.

11. Stevan E. Hobfoll, Jonathon Halbesleben, Jean-Pierre Neveu, and Mina Westman, “Conservation of Resources in the Organizational Context: The Reality of Resources and Their Consequences,” *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior* 5 (2018): 103–128. doi:10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-032117-104640.

12. Hobfoll, 103–128.

13. Bruce McEwen, and Elizabeth Norton Lasley, “Allostatic Load: When Protection Gives Way to Damage,” In *The Praeger Handbook on Stress and Coping*, Vol. 1., eds. Alan Monat, Richard S. Lazarus, and Gretchen Reevy, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers/Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007) 99–109. <https://search-ebscohost-com.libproxy.clemson.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=psych&AN=2007-05755-005>.

and psychosocial outcomes in adulthood such as autoimmune disease, heart disease, cancer, and depression.¹⁴ Leaders may see this dynamic with their soldiers, given that soldiers who enter the military are more likely to have adverse childhood experiences than civilians.¹⁵ In both the case of allostatic load and the loss spiral, excessive demands (in the absence of resources and recovery) can lead to greater vulnerability.

Clearly, many individuals with adverse childhood experiences adjust well and emerge successfully from difficult environments, particularly if they have one stable and supportive adult in their life.¹⁶ Moreover, individuals who can maintain or grow their resources can experience a “gain spiral.”¹⁷ A gain spiral is a marker of greater accumulation of resources and a corresponding improvement in one’s ability to navigate demands. That is why stress management programs will typically spend time talking about the need for self-care, and the need to replenish one’s resources through rest, relaxation, and engaging in diverting activities. Without replenishment, individuals are less able to navigate stressors that they might otherwise be able to handle.

The Army’s investment in replenishment is exemplified by the expectation that senior leaders successfully manage their own leave. And yet leave only occurs occasionally while individuals need to replenish daily and weekly as well. Thus, it is important for individuals to produce methods for replenishing themselves on a routine basis and not only during leave.

Sabine Sonnentag from the University of Mannheim has researched the importance of recovering from work when the workday is over. Individuals who fail to detach from work and who do not engage in appropriate recovery activities have fewer resources the next day for addressing challenges that they encounter.¹⁸ Ironically, recovery from work appears to be most important for those employees who are most engaged in their work.¹⁹ Senior leaders certainly fit in this category.

14. Cristina Barboza Solís, Michelle Kelly-Irving, Romain Fantin, Muriel Darnaudéry, Jérôme Torrisani, Thierry Lang, and Cyrille Delpierre, “Adverse Childhood Experiences and Physiological Wear-and-Tear in Midlife: Findings from the 1958 British Birth Cohort,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 112, no. 7 (2015): E738–46. doi:10.1073/pnas.1417325112.

15. John R. Blossnich, Melissa E. Dichter, Catherine Cerulli, Sonja V. Batten, and Robert M. Bossarte, “Disparities in Adverse Childhood Experiences among Individuals with a History of Military Service,” *JAMA Psychiatry* 71, no. 9 (2014): 1041–1048. doi:10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2014.724.

16. Ann S. Masten, Karin M. Best, and Norman Garmezy, “Resilience and Development: Contributions from the Study of Children Who Overcome Adversity,” *Development and Psychopathology* 2, no. 4 (1990): 425–444. doi:10.1017/S0954579400005812.

17. Hobfoll, et al. 2018.

18. Sabine Sonnentag, Laura Venz, and Anne Casper, “Advances in Recovery Research: What Have We Learned? What Should Be Done Next?” *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 22, no. 3 (2017): 365–380. doi:10.1037/ocp0000079.

19. Sabine Sonnentag, Eva J. Mojza, Carmen Binnewies, and Annika Scholl, “Being Engaged at Work and Detached at Home: A Week-Level Study on Work Engagement, Psychological Detachment, and Affect,” *Work & Stress* 22, no. 3 (2008): 257–276. doi:10.1080/02678370802379440.

Recovery activities can be passive (such as watching Netflix) or active (such as running). What matters more, however, is how well these activities enable someone to experience recovery. There are several different facets of recovery, to include engaging in an engrossing non-work activity that provides markers of progress and achievement (like woodworking, cooking, brewing beer, DIY projects, bird watching, etc.), making choices around the details of how to spend your time, and having fun and enjoying yourself. One of the most important facets of recovery, however, is psychological detachment, or mentally disconnecting from work during non-work time. This facet is the strongest predictor of recovery, operationalized as low levels of fatigue, according to an analysis of more than 50 psychological studies of individual workers.²⁰ Mindfulness may also provide a meaningful method of building one's capacity for attention and psychological detachment (see Chapter 6).

In the military context, experiencing psychological detachment from work can be a bit of a challenge. First, technology means that the individual is likely to be connected to work even during off-hours. Second, if someone is living on post or deployed, it may be more of a challenge to feel detached from work. So senior leaders need to think about how to create a sense of detachment in their own lives – perhaps through establishing work-free zones in their homes or taking day trips off post. How leaders chose to demand work from their own subordinates will also determine the degree to which their team members can recover adequately as well. Are leaders allowing subordinates time and space for recovery as a matter of routine? Are they encouraging effective recovery techniques? Steadman and colleagues further discuss the importance of recovery for the interface between work and home in Chapter 8 of the present volume.

Importantly, people can be trained to better recover from work to maintain the resources necessary for dealing with small and large demands. Hahn and colleagues trained employees on better recovery techniques.²¹ This training addressed effectively detaching from work, relaxing, and exploring non-work areas of mastery and control (like woodworking, cooking etc.). Employees reported greater confidence in recovering from work after the training and better recovery experiences and higher sleep quality. The point senior leaders can take away is that being more aware of the need for recovery can improve recovery and the ability to deal with demands. In addition, more recent research has revealed the importance of recovery not only when the workday is over, but also at different points during the workday. Studies show that employees who engage in brief *respite*s during the workday (such as taking a short break to walk or listen to music)

20. Andrew A. Bennett, Arnold B. Bakker, and James G. Field, "Recovery from Work-related Effort: A Meta-analysis," *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 39, no. 3 (2018): 262–275. doi:10.1002/job.2217.

21. Verena C. Hahn, Carmen Binnewies, Sabine Sonnentag, and Eva J. Mojza, "Learning How to Recover from Job Stress: Effects of a Recovery Training Program on Recovery, Recovery-Related Self-Efficacy, and Well-Being," *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 16, no. 2 (2011): 202–216. doi:10.1037/a0022169.

have more energy and perform better than employees who fail to engage in respites or instead do *chores* (e.g., checking email, constructing to-do lists) when taking a break from work.²² Although taking breaks during the workday may be especially difficult for leaders to schedule, even briefly disengaging from work through strategies such as mindfulness may be beneficial for sustaining motivation and performance.

Coping Depends on the Context

Recovery is one way to sustain resilience; coping strategies are another - although there is no one way to cope that works all the time. Originally, coping research focused on comparing two main approaches: problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. But the study results were not consistent. Sometimes studies found that problem-focused coping was useful (e.g., overspending could be handled by a problem-focused approach like establishing a budget), and sometimes studies found that emotion-focused coping was beneficial (e.g., stress from the death of a loved one could be managed by an emotion-focused coping approach of being with family members). So, which type of coping was better than the other? The answer was that the context determined what response was most effective.²³ For stressors that could be changed - like financial strain - problem-focused coping was a better, healthier strategy; however, for stressors that could not be changed - like loss - emotion-focused coping was better.

In the military, studies have borne out this distinction. For example, during basic combat training, Soldiers who use acceptance, a form of emotion-focused coping, actually do better in adjusting to military life.²⁴ While problem-focused coping is also associated with better adjustment, the association between acceptance and adjusting to military life is even stronger. Why is that? Because much of the military context is not within the control of the soldiers. Similarly, we have found an equivalent pattern in studies with soldiers in combat, with acceptance being a significant predictor of mental health particularly under conditions of high combat levels.²⁵

In fact, training that teaches individuals to distinguish between controllable and uncontrollable stressors and when to use which coping strategy has

22. Charlotte Fritz, Chak Fu Lam, and Gretchen M. Spreitzer, "It's the Little Things That Matter: An Examination of Knowledge Workers' Energy Management," *The Academy of Management Perspectives* 25, no.3 (2011): 28-39. doi:10.5465/AMP.2011.63886528.

23. Cecilia Cheng, Hi-Po Bobo Lau, and Man-Pui Sally Chan, "Coping Flexibility and Psychological Adjustment to Stressful Life Changes: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Psychological Bulletin* 140, no. 6 (2014): 1582-1607. doi:10.1037/a0037913.

24. Thomas W. Britt, Monique Crane, Stephanie E. Hodson, and Amy B. Adler, "Effective and Ineffective Coping Strategies in a Low-Autonomy Work Environment," *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 21, no. 2 (2016): 154-168. doi:10.1037/a0039898.

25. Thomas W. Britt, Amy B. Adler, Gargi Sawhney, and Paul D. Bliese, "Coping Strategies as Moderators of the Association between Combat Exposure and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Symptoms," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 30, no. 5 (2017): 491-501. doi:10.1002/jts.22221.

increased adaptation to stress.²⁶ Individuals who participated in this kind of coping flexibility training were better able to apply the appropriate coping strategy to their work demands and were less depressed four months later.

Most senior leaders are probably well versed in problem-focused coping. It plays into their strengths. Senior leaders typically like to make decisions, take action, and move forward. What may be less intuitive, however, is the utility of emotion-focused coping and acceptance for stressors that cannot be controlled. Understanding how to distinguish the two approaches can benefit senior leaders and their ability to prepare subordinates to manage these two types of stressors as well.

Self-awareness

Selecting and implementing the appropriate coping style for the context requires self-awareness, or the understanding of one's emotional or mental experience.²⁷ Ideally, self-awareness can be a foundational tool that prompts an individual to pause and select an optimal response. Self-awareness requires individuals to be able to identify emotions. Studies have shown that the brain is affected by the sheer act of labelling emotions.²⁸ Labelling emotions activates the part of the prefrontal cortex of the brain responsible for regulating emotion and reduces activation in the amygdala (the part of the brain responsible for emotion).

You may have heard the ability to make emotional distinctions referred to as emotional intelligence. For example, instead of identifying a negative emotion as simply feeling "bad," someone who is emotionally intelligent will be able to distinguish and label that emotion as feeling "guilty," "irritated," "disappointed," or some other specific nuanced experience. One way to train individuals in emotional intelligence is to highlight the differences between emotions, as exemplified by the emotion wheel in Figure 2.²⁹ By using the emotion wheel to put specific feelings into precise language, individuals can get smarter on their emotional experience.

26. Cecilia Cheng, Aleksandr Kogan, and Jasmine Hin-man Chio, "The Effectiveness of a New, Coping Flexibility Intervention as Compared with a Cognitive-Behavioural Intervention in Managing Work Stress," *Work & Stress* 26, no. 3 (2012): 272–288. doi:10.1080/02678373.2012.710369.

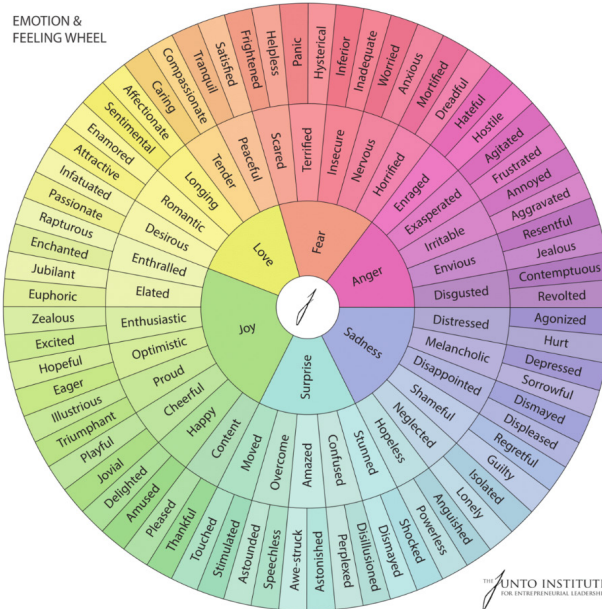
27. In social psychology, high levels of self-awareness can potentially interfere with functioning because it can magnify the experience of negative emotions. People can end up focusing on their own shortcomings at the cost of having a more objective perspective regarding a particular situation (Mark R. Leary, *The Curse of the Self: Self-Awareness, Egotism, and the Quality of Human Life*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004). doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195172423.001.0001.). In this chapter, we are considering self-awareness from the emotion regulation literature, which emphasizes emotional literacy as a cornerstone of adaptive responding.

28. Ahmad R. Hariri, Susan Y. Bookheimer, and John C. Mazziotta, "Modulating Emotional Responses: Effects of a Neocortical Network on the Limbic System," *NeuroReport: For Rapid Communication of Neuroscience Research* 11, no. 1 (2000): 43–48. doi:10.1097/00001756-200001170-00009.

29. Jared B. Torre, and Matthew D. Lieberman, "Putting feelings into words: Affect labeling as implicit emotion regulation." *Emotion Review* 10, no. 2 (2018): 116–124.

Indeed, research has shown that when individuals are trained to be more emotionally intelligent, they are better able to perceive the emotions that they and others experience, and they make better decisions in laboratory tasks.³⁰ Thus, it is important to be fluent in the language of emotions and not simply reduce emotions to the very basics (like “sad,” “mad,” and “glad”).

Figure 2



Note: Reprinted with permission. <https://feelingswheel.com/>

Leaders can help subordinate leaders and team members become more fluent in the language of emotions through leading by example and asking questions. When leaders identify their own emotions and use words that go beyond the basic primary emotions, they may be able to get those around them to tune into the distinctions that such words convey. And by asking questions or listening carefully and labelling the emotions they hear someone describe, they can help boost the emotional literacy of the team.

Emotion Regulation

After identifying one's emotional state, the next critical step is choosing how to respond. This ability to be deliberate in how to respond emotionally

30. Anna Alkozei, Ryan Smith, Lauren A. Demers, Mareen Weber, Sarah M. Berryhill, and William DS Killgore. "Increases in emotional intelligence after an online training program are associated with better decision-making on the Iowa gambling task." *Psychological reports* 122, no. 3 (2019): 853-879.

is critical not just for the individual but also the group around them – their subordinates and their families. How leaders react will filter down and establish the norms for emotional expression within their organization. Is this an organization that gets excited and “fired up” about upcoming events or is this an organization characterized by scolding and disappointment?

Learning how to respond deliberately to inner emotional experience is not easy. There are techniques such as mindfulness that can train the brain to strengthen non-reactivity to emotional experience (see Chapter 6). Other techniques that support emotion regulation typically involve cognitive restructuring. In cognitive restructuring, individuals are encouraged to consider a situation from a different cognitive vantage point. Albert Ellis, the developer of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy, illustrated the power of this process when he developed the ABC model, where A stands for Activating Events, B stands for Beliefs, and C stands for Consequences.³¹ The ABC model highlights that events do not cause emotions (consequences) directly. Instead, beliefs (or thoughts) influence how an event is interpreted, which leads to a subsequent emotion (or Consequence). The key in this ABC sequence is that beliefs can be irrational and by addressing the dysfunctional nature of certain beliefs, individuals can experience healthier consequences. In a small study introducing the concept of the ABC model to high school students, Saelid and Nordhal (2017) found that 90% of participants reported not being previously aware of the link between thoughts and feelings. In addition, training in the ABC model reduced dysfunctional thinking and increased feelings of hope relative to a comparison condition 6 months later.³²

The Master Resilience Training program in the US Army relies on the core tenets of the ABC model; the Army calls the model “ATC,” where the T stands for thinking.³³ The aim of training soldiers in the ATC model is to prompt them to reflect on what thoughts they are experiencing in response to a particular event and how those thoughts can be reframed to yield a different emotional outcome. Such reframing can happen through awareness of thinking traps, which are ingrained, automatic ways of interpreting events typified by all-or-none thinking.

Others have built on these foundational studies of cognitive restructuring and identified conscious and unconscious strategies to emotion regulation. One of the leading scholars in the area of emotion regulation, James Gross

31. <https://laptrinhx.com/albert-ellis-abc-model-in-the-cognitive-behavioral-therapy-spotlight-2558456028/>

32. Anette Gry Saelid, and Hans M. Nordahl, “Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy in High Schools to Educate in Mental Health and Empower Youth Health A Randomized Controlled Study of a Brief Intervention,” *Cognitive Behaviour Therapy* 46, no. 3 (2017): 196–210. <https://search-ebscohost-com.libproxy.clemson.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=psych&AN=2017-09819-002>.

33. Karen J. Reivich, Martin E. P. Seligman, and Sharon McBride, “Master Resilience Training in the US Army,” *American Psychologist*, Comprehensive Soldier Fitness, 66, no. 1 (2011): 25–34. doi:10.1037/a0021897.

at Stanford University, has developed a process model that explains how individuals both upregulate their emotions (e.g., increasing a sense of energy by jumping up and down before the ACFT) and downregulate their emotions (e.g., slowing down one's breath before giving a high-level brief).³⁴ He describes a series of processes ranging from what situations we select for ourselves (e.g., avoiding an irritating colleague may help us downregulate our feelings of frustration), how we modify that situation (e.g., bringing a family member to support us during a meaningful ceremony), how we shift our attention (e.g., looking away when watching someone perform a difficult task under stress), and how we alter our response to the situation (e.g., reappraising the situation, avoiding thinking traps). These strategies are more effective when used before an emotion has been experienced. For example, cognitive reappraisal is likely to be more effective than suppressing a felt emotion.

Other researchers have focused on the emotion regulation process following the emergence of a particular emotion. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) exemplifies how individuals can be trained in acceptance, using techniques such as metaphors that enable individuals to accept their emotion without necessarily responding to it.³⁵ These metaphors, such as placing an emotion on a leaf and watching it flow downstream, or imagining oneself as a mountain, strong and enduring, enable individuals to observe the emotion without automatically reacting to it.³⁶ In this way, emotions are observed and accepted. Emotions also need to be understood as normal responses to circumstances. For senior leaders, getting a "reality check" that their emotional experience is normal can be difficult if they are trying to maintain appropriate boundaries with those around them. They may need to search out colleagues and mentors to confirm that their emotions are understandable and normal.

Another technique that supports emotional regulation is personal distancing. Personal distancing allows individuals to place a space between their emotional experience and their sense of self. Personal distancing can be practiced by using a third-person pronoun to describe one's experience ("Tom is upset") as opposed to a first-person pronoun ("I am upset"). Research shows that using this third person pronoun can boost adaptation and reduce rumination.³⁷ It may sound strange, but studies show that this

34. James J. Gross, "Emotion Regulation: Current Status and Future Prospects," *Psychological Inquiry* 26, no. 1 (2015): 1–26. doi:10.1080/1047840X.2014.940781.

35. Steven C. Hayes, Jason B. Luoma, Frank W. Bond, Akihiko Masuda, and Jason Lillis, "Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: Model, Processes and Outcomes," *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 44, no. 1 (2006): 1–25. doi:10.1016/j.brat.2005.06.006.

36. Jillian C. Shipherd, Kristalyn Salters-Pedneault, and Joanne Fordiani, "Evaluating Postdeployment Training for Coping with Intrusive Cognition: A Comparison of Training Approaches," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 84, no. 11 (2016): 960–971. doi:10.1037/ccp0000136.

37. E. Kross, E., and O. Ayduk, "Self-Distancing: Theory, Research, and Current Directions." In *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 55, ed. James M. Olson, (San Diego, CA: Elsevier Academic Press, 2017), 81–136. <https://search-ebscohost-com.libproxy.clemson.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=psyh&AN=2017-28923-002>.

shift can positively impact reasoning in both younger and older adults.³⁸

Temporal distancing operates along a similar path and allows individuals to place their experience into perspective, again, inviting them to have some distance between themselves and their immediate emotional response.³⁹ One clever technique that can be used quickly is to ask “how will I feel about this situation five weeks from now? Five months from now? And five years from now?”). Just these questions alone can help individuals place their experience into temporal perspective, reminding them that this too shall pass – or at least not be as intensely painful as it is in the present moment. Temporal distancing also encourages individuals to avoid rumination. Mindfulness may also enable self-distancing and temporal distancing (see Chapter 6).

It is worth mentioning that emotion regulation does not mean clamping down on emotions or never expressing negative emotions. It is about being deliberate and authentic in how an individual chooses to respond. For example, leaders may decide to inject disapproval in their communication with a subordinate or express frustration on behalf of their team in response to a last-minute tasker. The key here is that the individual is aware of their emotional experience and able to regulate their emotional expression, so they are sharing their emotions at the right time, the right place, and in the right way. Of course, no one is going to regulate their emotions all the time – if someone is outraged, grumpy, fed up, and their resources are low and they are tired, or emotionally depleted, they may find themselves responding in an unregulated manner that they later may regret. The key is not to expect perfection or be an emotional robot but to identify and express the emotion appropriately.⁴⁰

38. Igor Grossmann, and Ethan Kross, “Exploring Solomon’s Paradox: Self-Distancing Eliminates the Self-Other Asymmetry in Wise Reasoning about Close Relationships in Younger and Older Adults.” *Psychological Science* 25, no. 8 (2014): 1571–1580. doi:10.1177/0956797614535400.

39. Emma Bruehlman-Senecal, Özlem Ayduk, and Oliver P. John, “Taking the Long View: Implications of Individual Differences in Temporal Distancing for Affect, Stress Reactivity, and Well-Being,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 111, no. 4 (2016): 610–635. doi:10.1037/pspp0000103.supp (Supplemental).

40. Deanna Geddes, Rhonda R. Callister, & Donald E. Gibson, “A message in the madness: functions of workplace anger in organizational life,” *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 34, no. 1 (2020), 28-47.

Leadership

Leaders can influence subordinates in a variety of ways, and the Army's Leadership Requirements Model offers a useful description.⁴¹ In addition, specific leadership behaviors can boost team leadership.⁴² Army studies show that when leaders engage in these specific behaviors, their units gain an edge. So that over and above being a good leader—as defined by Army doctrine—adding in these targeted behaviors into a leader's repertoire can help bolster a team's health and functioning. For example, when sleep is a target for leaders, they have units that report better quality sleep.⁴³ Even a hour of training in sleep leadership, in which platoon leadership teams learn about the conditions for healthy sleep, leading by example, educating unit members about sleep, encouraging healthy sleep, and considering sleep in operational planning, results in units that are twice as likely to report adequate sleep compared to units with leaders who do not get this training (see also Chapter 5).⁴⁴ Similarly, when health promotion is a key target, and leaders frequently engage in behaviors that support health promotion, soldiers benefit. For example, in one survey during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, soldiers were approximately 30% more likely to adhere to preventive health guidelines if their leaders engaged in health-promoting behaviors, even after accounting for ratings of general leadership.⁴⁵

Finally, when leaders support resilience and *People First* initiatives, soldiers are more likely to feel that these initiatives are relevant and helpful.⁴⁶ For example, in rolling out Wellness Checks, a pilot program involving a mandatory annual session with a Military and Family Life Counselor, soldiers who reported that their leaders actively supported the Wellness program were 30% more likely to report that the Wellness Check helped them in their professional life.

41. U.S. Army, "Developing Leaders", FM 6-22 (Washington DC: Department of the Army, 2020). https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN36735-FM_6-22-000-WEB-1.pdf

42. Amy B. Adler, Kristin N Saboe, James Anderson, Maurice L Sipos, and Jeffrey L Thomas, "Behavioral Health Leadership: New Directions in Occupational Mental Health," *Current Psychiatry Reports* 16 no. 10 (2014): 484. doi:10.1007/s11920-014-0484-6.

43. Brian C. Gunia, Maurice L. Sipos, Matthew LoPresti, and Amy B. Adler, "Sleep Leadership in High-Risk Occupations: An Investigation of Soldiers on Peacekeeping and Combat Missions," *Military Psychology* 27, no. 4 (2015): 197–211. doi:10.1037/mil0000078.; Brian C. Gunia, Amy B. Adler, Paul D. Bliese, and Kathleen M. Sutcliffe, "How are you Sleeping? Leadership Support, Sleep Health, and Work-Relevant Outcomes," *Occupational Health Science* (2021): 1-18.

44. Amy B. Adler, Paul D. Bliese, Matthew L. LoPresti, Jennifer L. McDonald, and Julie C. Merrill, "Sleep leadership in the army: A group randomized trial," *Sleep Health* 7, no. 1 (2021): 24-30.

45. https://www.wrair.army.mil/sites/default/files/2021-02/BHAT_Technical_Report_Phase_I_Public_Release.pdf

46. Douglas A. Sims II, and Amy B. Adler, "Enhancing Resilience in an Operational Unit," *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 47, no. 1 (2017): 9.

These specific leader behaviors—whether focused on sleep, health promotion, or *People First*—have some elements in common: First, leaders set the conditions for success. Second, leaders lead by example. Third, leaders educate and encourage their subordinates in the relevant topics. Fourth, leaders acknowledge the reality that their subordinates are encountering. Fifth, leaders plan and prioritize to optimize their subordinates in managing the specific topic. Engaging in domain-specific leadership can empower leaders to have an impact on their unit's resilience but any discussion of resilience in the military needs to also consider the limits of resilience as a solution to a particular challenge.

The Limits of a Resilience Lens

Resilience has its limits; acknowledging these limits is essential for senior leaders to avoid unnecessary pitfalls.⁴⁷ If senior leaders demand that resilience needs to be evident regardless of circumstances, they may have unrealistic expectations of their troops, of their own families, and of themselves, leaving them vulnerable and ill-prepared. The following points should be considered to understand the limits that a resilience lens offers.

(1) Everyone falters. While resilient thinking is a useful habit to cultivate, it is important to remember that everyone falters at some point. Bending under the strain of difficult demands does not mean someone is not resilient but that they have reached a point at which they need to take a break, respect their stress levels, and reach out for support from friends, family, or behavioral health professionals. Expecting perfection is not a resilient way of thinking, it is a set up for disappointment.

(2) Address the problem, not just the need for individual resilience. Focusing on resilience as an individual responsibility can prompt leaders to miss an opportunity to identify and tackle problems. Even just acknowledging a stressful reality facing a unit can be helpful. Members of the organization can feel understood, enabling them to align themselves with the senior leader rather than feel like they are on opposing sides.

(3) Expectations of resilience can impede reaching out for support. If everyone is expected to be resilient no matter what, individuals who are struggling may be reluctant to reach out for help before they need it or while they are experiencing distress. Senior leader messages must be carefully calibrated to set expectations of success while defining help-seeking as a sign of healthy coping. Counseling can be a useful tool, much like executive coaching or organizational consultation. It involves a safe place to be honest with oneself, to feel heard, and to share the burden, without fear of being judged or negative career implications. Senior leaders should also consider leveraging counseling opportunities to help them maintain their balance.

47. Amy B. Adler, "Resilience in a Military Occupational Health Context: Directions for Future Research," In *Building Psychological Resilience in Military Personnel: Theory and Practice*, eds. Robert R. Sinclair and Thomas W. Britt, (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2013), 223–235. doi:10.1037/14190-010.

Building a Culture that Promotes Resilience

With these three caveats in mind, senior leaders may want to consider what it would mean to create a culture that promotes resilience. Organizational culture, defined by MIT professor Edgar Schein at the Sloan School of Management, is reflected in an organization's artifacts, values, and assumptions.⁴⁸ Artifacts are the most visible markers of culture like building architecture, inside jokes and dress code. Espoused values are the organization's official norms, rules, and regulations, such as a unit's motto or policy. Underlying assumptions reflect deeply embedded attitudes that may not be visible to the outside observer, such as the organization's unwritten code of respect, attitude toward planning, and acceptance of certain emotions. Together, these elements of organizational culture can provide cues to incoming teammates about what is normal, what is expected, and what is genuinely valued⁴⁹.

Trying to shift an organizational culture is notoriously difficult and, in the military, it is particularly challenging because of the constant flow of individuals and leaders in and out of the organization.⁵⁰ For senior leaders interested in changing a culture, this turnover may mean having to reiterate what matters to them. While much has been written about changing organizational culture, the main pillars acknowledge that culture change begins with defining and communicating the goal and aligning strategy and processes to meet that goal.⁵¹

Communication is key and needs to occur at all levels, using a variety of methods, branding the new vision, and clarifying what aspects of the change that are non-negotiable. Change is also optimized by a sense of urgency, ensuring accountability, building coalitions, and creating short-term wins to help maintain momentum. In promoting cultural change, it is important to consider whether change needs to wait for all the component parts to be in place or whether change should be prompted regardless so that the perfect is not the enemy of the good. One way to help discern whether cultural change can be successfully advanced is to conduct a pilot. It is important to also measure efforts for course correction, reinforcing success, and helping the change stick. It is also important to be patient and not underestimate how difficult organizational change is.

48. Edgar H. Schein, "Culture: The Missing Concept in Organization Studies," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (1996): 229–240. doi:10.2307/2393715.

49. Steve M. Jex, & Thomas W. Britt, *Organizational Psychology: A Scientist-Practitioner Approach*, 3rd ed. (John Wiley & Sons Inc., Hoboken, NJ, 2014).

50. See Adler & Sowden, 2018, for a detailed description of how these elements apply to the military context. Amy B. Adler, and Walter J. Sowden. "Resilience in the military: The double-edged sword of military culture." In *Military and veteran mental health*, (Springer, New York, NY, 2018), 43–54.

51. John P. Kotter, "Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail. (Cover Story)," *Harvard Business Review* 73, no. 2 (1995): 59–67. <https://search-ebscohost-com.libproxy.clemson.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bth&AN=9503281992>.

In creating an organizational culture that promotes resilience, leaders may need to find creative ways to help their organization focus on the determinants of resilience (e.g., adaptability, cohesion, positive command climate), encourage healthy strategies (e.g., emotional awareness, restructuring, acceptance, distancing), and promote specific leader behaviors in their subordinate leaders (reminding them that showing up, emphasizing the topic, asking about the topic and talking about the topic in their own lives will make a difference).⁵²

One way that leaders can start is by assessing their organization in terms of soldier perceptions. That way, leaders know what to focus on in terms of gaps and what to build on in terms of strengths. While objective outcomes can be useful, they will not necessarily provide an understanding of the soldier's experience. Units can look great on paper in terms of training statistics and vehicle maintenance, but those metrics can be deceiving if they are indicative of a culture focused on check-the-block leadership rather than personal connection. Using alternative anonymous self-report surveys, focus groups, and battlefield circulation can provide a multi-dimensional understanding of readiness.

Even Winston Churchill "would disappear and pop up somewhere in London with ordinary people, to find out what they were thinking."⁵³ While the dramatization of this sort of moment in the movie *The Darkest Hour* may not have reflected a specific event, historians note that Churchill did engage in these kinds of spontaneous pulse checks with his constituents. The Army's equivalent of Churchill's conversations with ordinary Londoners is battlefield circulation, where leaders proactively seek unfiltered communication. This direct line of communication, coupled with surveys and the use of trusted junior leaders, can help senior leaders get a sense of their own organization's culture.

Conclusion

Coping with adversity, adapting to change, and recovering from setbacks are all key parts of being resilient. Being resilient is a process, not an end point. Recognizing the impact of traumatic stressors and daily hassles is a key start. It is also important to consider the need to adapt coping strategies, enhance personal resources, and guard recovery on a routine basis. Furthermore, the power of self-awareness and the diversity of emotion regulation strategies are all foundational to sustaining resilience. Paying attention to this foundation can help leaders not only be effective as individuals but can help them encourage resilience in their own organizations. Sharing these strategies with others can also help build a more resilient and ready force.

52. Meredith, et al. 2011, 2.; Douglas A. Sims II, and Amy B. Adler, "Enhancing resilience in an operational unit," *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 47, no. 1 (2017): 9.

53. <https://www.thewrap.com/darkest-hour-winston-churchill-sneak-off-london-underground-subway/>

Key Takeaways

- Senior leaders face numerous work and non-work demands that may decrease their resilience
- Differentiate what can and cannot be controlled for effective coping
- Try personal distancing (“I am angry” vs. “Tom is angry”) and temporal distancing (“how will I feel 5 weeks, 5 months, and 5 years from now?”) to help in emotion regulation
- Recognize that people misjudge what is going to be stressful for them – this is called impact bias
- Use nuanced labelling of emotions to impact the brain and improve emotion regulation
- Promote a culture focused on resilience by being patient, communicating at all levels, and following the Churchill method (aka battlefield circulation)

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