Combat and Operational Stress 101
Part I – Understanding Stress and Taking Care of Yourself

(PRESENTATION NOTES ONLY)

Notes from slide 2

Objectives

- **Define** stress and stressors
- **Understand** the stress response on the mind and body
- **Identify** stressors within the military
- **Discuss** how some stress is good and necessary for optimal performance
- **Explain** the stress continuum
- **Become** self-aware of your stress zones and coping behaviors
- **Describe** stress interventions for the mind and body
- **Define** what buddy care is and is not
- **Explain** what encompasses a buddy care interaction
- **Identify** available areas support for your buddy

Notes from slide 3

Stress happens to us. Stress is our body's response to a stressor. People react differently to stressors, not everyone has the same response.

Discussion Questions:

-What stresses you out?
-How do you know when your stressed?
-What is the difference between stress and a stressor?
-What are some examples of each?
-What is the purpose of stress? Are there any benefits to stress?

Notes from slide 4

Some Stress is Necessary

Stress is not a bad thing. We need some levels of stress in our everyday lives. Too little or too much stress can negatively impact your performance and ability to accomplish goals.

The purpose of stress is to signal to us that something is happening that needs our attention and action.

Stress helps us learn and develop essential coping skills. As you try different strategies to cope with stress ,you figure out what works for you, and in what situations you can use these same strategies in the future.

Notes from slide 4 (continued)

Discussion Questions:

-Why do you think some stress is necessary?

-What is the purpose of stress?

Notes from slide 5

When you are calm and relaxed, it can be difficult to perform optimally. Your body has not prepared for action because there is no threat yet. When we encounter stressful situations, your body prepares to act and to optimize your performance. But you can also become too excited and too worked up; this leads to stress reactions that can impair your performance and eventually burn you out.

Discussion Questions:

- Can you think of a time when stress motivated you to perform at an optimal level? (examples: taking a test, completing a physical training)
- What is your optimal level of stress? Do you have ways of increasing or decreasing your level of stress?
- How can you manage stress to increase productivity and be the most successful?

Notes from slide 6

The demands of the military can be stressful and might bring out a stress response. However, the military can build and instill resilience in you through training and preparation. This allows you to adapt quickly to various stressful scenarios.

Discussion Questions:

-What operational events get you working at your maximum?
-What operational events get to be "too much" for you and stress you out?
-What are the wide range of deployments you might encounter that can cause stress for you and your family?
-What are examples of the four toxic stressors (wear and tear; life threat; inner conflict; and grief and loss) you might experience that can create stress?

Notes from slide 7

Remember that the DoD considers COSRs to be normal reactions to events and are not "diagnosed mental health conditions." COSRs are expected to resolve when the stressor abates.

Note to facilitator: The DoDI 6490.05 definition is below for reference:
DoDI 6490.05 defines COSRs as "The physical, emotional, cognitive, or behavioral reactions, adverse consequences, or psychological injuries of Service members who have been exposed to stressful or traumatic events in combat or military operations. COSRs vary in severity as a function of operational conditions, such as intensity, duration, frequency of combat exposure, rules of engagement, leadership, effective communication, unit morale, unit cohesion, and perceived importance of the mission, etc. COSRs do not represent mental health disorders or medically diagnosable conditions and concerns. Post-traumatic stress disorder is not equivalent to or another name for COSR."

Notes from slide 8

ASRs are physiological, automatic reactions to life threats such as a car accident or earthquake. A CSR is simply an ASR that takes place in the combat environment. The physiological effects are the same. ASRs can be intense, but don't last long.

Symptoms lasting more than 3 days after the stressor is removed might indicate an Acute Stress Disorder (ASD), and you should get help from a medical professional so that it doesn't get worse.

Notes from slide 9

Operational stress reactions (OSRs) occur in a variety of operational contexts and can be triggered by a variety of stressors. Like CSRs, OSRs are not considered a diagnosable behavioral condition and should improve when the stressor is removed.

Discussion Questions

- What stress category is affecting you most right now?
- What specific stressors are most affecting you right now, or have in the past?
- Do you notice any stress reactions with these stressors?

Notes from slide 10

- The duties performed on operations can expose military personnel to stressful and traumatic events. These stressors are likely to vary by operation, mission, and branch of service. Generally, certain operational contexts can lead to specific stressors which then lead to specific stress reactions. For example:
- Aircrews often fly from relatively safe rear areas into high-intensity combat and back; this constant transitioning from a secure area to a high-threat area is a typical demand facing aircrews.
- Troops on the ground may report different kinds of stressors.

Notes from slide 10 (continued)

- Stressors during training deployments might include isolation and confinement due to restricted environment as well as sleep deprivation.
- Although the belief exists that short-term sleep deprivation during training is necessary to prepare Service members for combat environments (that might require conducting operations with little sleep), sustained chronic partial sleep deprivation may become counterproductive to overall training objectives.

Notes from slide 11

- We've have spent some time discussing what stress is, some specific stressors in the military, and some of the reactions that you can experience if you are overwhelmed. Now, let's spend some time discussing how your body reacts to stress and why some stress is necessary to perform at your best.

Notes from slide 12

The Physiology of Stress

The effect of the stress response is widespread. Senses become sharper, muscles tighten, the heart beats faster, blood pressure rises, and breathing quickens. Although this arousal state may be adaptive in helping you cope with short-term stressors, a chronic state of arousal - when no threat or challenge is present, may lead to physical and emotional health problems unless effective coping mechanisms are utilized

As previously mentioned, (on Slide 8), combat stress and acute stress can lead to two types of reactions: 1) fight or flight, in which your body responds the same way if you are fighting or fleeing in response to a threat, or if you're super excited and ramped up (e.g., your team wins the Super Bowl), or 2) freeze, in which you feel like a deer caught in the headlights.

Notes from slide 12 (continued)

Although, stress responses can be different for everyone, too much stress can be a problem. Excessive stress might impair your performance, overwhelm you, and potentially make you a liability to your unit. Thus, we'll talk more about stress management techniques that can guard against these reactions a little later in this presentation.

Notes from slide 13

Our autonomic nervous system (ANS) manages the body's response to stress, and has two parts: the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) and the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS). Life threatening situations activate our ANS. First, our SNS powers us up; our blood pressure and heart rate increase, we produce more adrenaline that makes us stronger and more energetic, and we become more alert. We are preparing to fight or to flee.

After the threat passes, our PNS kicks in to power us down. Our blood pressure and heart rate decrease, we produce less adrenaline, and our awareness goes back to normal.

Discussion Questions:

-What does flight or fight mean to you?
-What are some examples of an appropriate time to fight?
-What are some examples of appropriate times to flee?

Notes from slide 14

- Now that we have talked about what your body does when you are stressed, let's talk about how to become aware of your stress levels.

Notes from slide 15

Being aware of your own warning signs of stress not only ensures you will look after yourself more effectively, but allows you to cope better in stressful situations and in situations we can't really control.

The more self-aware you are, the more likely you are to achieve our goals both at work and in the life generally. You are also more likely to engage in self care behaviors in order to cope, protect, develop, and improve our health and well-being in various situations.

The better you understand yourself, the more control you have in managing your stress towards a situation, and the better you can adapt your behavior to increase your effectiveness and performance

Check in on these areas of your life and assess yourself.

Notes from slide 15 (continued)

Discussion Questions:

- Do you know your strengths and weaknesses?
- Which situations are the most stressful for you?
- How do you react in those situations?

Notes from slide 16

You can't perform your best if you are unaware that an area of your life is not well. You may find yourself angry, irritable, or fatigued, and not understand why. But if you're aware that an area of your life needs help, you can work to improve it, and then improve your performance.

Awareness empowers you and gives you choices for action!

Discussion Questions:

- How does your stress manifest in you, physically, behaviorally, emotionally, and spiritually?
- When are you at your best physically, behaviorally, emotionally and spiritually?
- When are you at your worst?
- What are the personal and professional factors and experiences in your life that have most affected your work?

Notes from slide 17

Stress Continuum Model

The Stress Continuum was developed by the Navy and Marine Corps. It is a spectrum of stress responses categorized into four zones which establishes a common language to identify stress responses: Green "Ready" zone, Yellow "Reacting" zone, Orange "Injury" zone and Red "Illness" zone. It is a tool and is a common language that allows us to ***identify, engage and intervene*** when stress reactions or injuries are present. We have included a Blue "Idle" Zone. The zones are described as:

Notes from slide 17 (continued)

- Blue “Idle” zone: Unfocused and unmotivated.
- Green “Ready” zone: Wellness and adaptive coping
- Yellow “Reacting” zone: Mild and reversible distress or loss of function
- Orange “Injury” zone: More severe and persistent distress or loss of function
- Red “Illness” zone: Medical disorders arising from stress and unhealed stress injuries

Notes from slide 18

We now have a good idea of how to notice our stress levels. Now let's talk about what to do when we're so stressed that our performance starts to slip.

Notes from slide 19

Notice the list of healthy and unhealthy coping behaviors. Where do you best fit?

Engaging in unhealthy coping behaviors can actually add to your stress level. For example, if you are drinking too much, you might oversleep the next day or feel unwell, which could lead to more problems. If you find that you're engaging in unhealthy coping behaviors, try to change them, or ask for help in changing them.

Although there are things that you can control (e.g., maintaining a normal schedule), there are times when this might not be the case (e.g., having to work longer hours). However, to the extent possible, use strategic self-awareness and practice healthy coping behaviors to reduce stress and take care of yourself.

Notes from slide 20

- Next, we will introduce and practice some simple and effective mind interventions you can use to reduce your stress. These interventions are skills you may already be familiar with or use to control the things you can. Like all skills, they take some practice, but with repeated use you may find yourself becoming much more skilled at decreasing or preventing stress reactions.

Notes from slide 21

How and why this works – our mind gets too busy and goes around in circles, either thinking about the past, or worrying about the future. You can't change either one of them, and it's exhausting to think about!

Focusing your attention on the here and now gets you out of that unproductive mind trap. It's very calming to notice what's happening all around you, in the present.

Facilitator should take attendees through this example (about 2 minutes)

Notes from slide 22

Remember that stress is associated with an individual's **perception** of their ability to handle the adverse or demanding circumstances. Perception causes stress, but your perception can be inaccurate and untrue!

Let's say you have a fear of snakes. Someone throws a fake snake in your direction and you freak out as if the snake were real. The snake wasn't real, but you *perceived* the snake as real, and you stressed yourself out over nothing serious. But your mind was prepared for the worst, thinking that the snake was real.

Notes from slide 22 (continued)

Strategies to manage negative thinking:
- Notice that you may be in one of these thought traps
- If you have a conclusion or strong opinion on something, leave some room for doubt
- Gather more information on the situation
- Talk with trustworthy friends or family members about it before making decisions based on your conclusions

Consider asking yourself these questions to assess your thoughts:
- Is there substantial evidence for my thought?
- Is there evidence contrary to my thought?
- Am I attempting to interpret this situation without all the evidence?

Notes from slide 23

Over-generalizing: making a conclusion based on a single incident or a single piece of evidence. If something bad happens just once, then you expect it to happen over and over again. You may see a single, unpleasant event as part of a never-ending pattern of defeat.

Mind-reading: Assuming what other people's thoughts and intentions are with limited information.

Emotional reasoning: Using your feelings and emotions to make conclusions without a balance of other information.

Notes from slide 24

How to make your thinking more realistic:
- **Separating the behavior from who you** are helps with over-generalizing
- **Seeing the role of past experience and leaving room for doubt** helps with mind-reading
- **Evaluating the evidence** helps with emotional reasoning

Discussion Questions
- What traps do you fall into?
- What types of negative thinking can you relate to?
- What are some examples of negative thinking that you have experienced? ***How did you overcome those thoughts?***

Notes from slide 25

- Now we'll talk about some body interventions, and practice these simple and effective techniques to reduce stress

Notes from slide 26

Sleep deprivation impairs alertness and cognitive performance, including the ability to understand, adapt and plan under rapidly changing circumstances; rest is key.

It can be challenging for you to get enough sleep, but it's still a good goal to pursue. Discuss moving obstacles to good sleep with command or with your spouse, or change some of your habits using these tips.

Following these simple behavioral sleep tips can significantly improve your sleep as well or even better than using sleep medications (or alcohol), which can have side effects, lose effectiveness over time or potentially lead to increased dependence.

Notes from slide 27

The only way to lower your heart rate is by slowing your breathing. It really works! Navy SEALS use this technique as part of their training. By slowing down their heart rate, they can focus. This is especially important for snipers and infantry who may have to shoot and need their hands to be steady.

Notes from slide 27 (continued)

Tactical breathing is a simple technique that a person can do anywhere.

1. Close your eyes. Breathe in through your nose and inflate your belly while counting to four slowly. Feel the air enter your lungs.
2. Hold your breath inside while counting slowly to four. Try not to clamp your mouth or nose shut. Simply avoid inhaling or exhaling for 4 seconds.
3. Begin to slowly exhale for 4 seconds, decreasing the air in your belly.
4. Repeat steps 1 to 3 at least three times. Ideally, repeat the three steps for 4 minutes, or until calm returns

Source for instructions in notes: https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/321805#the-box-breathing-method

Notes from slide 28

Tension in the muscles is a common reaction to stress. So when you practice this stress-reducing technique, you can pump the brakes on your stress response when it's on overdrive.

PMR can help you address (and control) the physical symptoms of stress.

We don't have time to move through all of our body parts today, but we'll go through a few muscle groups so you can get an idea of how this works.

Sit back or lie down in a comfortable position.
Begin by taking a deep breath (inflating your belly again) and noticing the feeling of air filling your lungs. Hold your breath for a few seconds.

Notes from slide 28 (continued)

Release the breath slowly and let the tension leave your body.
Take in another deep breath and hold it.
Slowly release the air
Even slower now, take another breath. Fill your lungs (inflating your belly) and hold the air.

Slowly release the breath and imagine the feeling of tension leaving your body.
Now, move your attention to your feet. Begin to tense your feet by curling your toes and the arch of your foot. Hold onto the tension and notice what it feels like.
Release the tension in your foot. Notice the new feeling of relaxation.

Notes from slide 28 (continued)

Next, begin to focus on you lower leg. Tense the muscles in your calves. Hold them tightly and pay attention to the feeling of tension.
Release the tension from your lower legs. Again, notice the feeling of relaxation. Remember to continue taking deep breaths.

Next, tense the muscles of your upper leg and pelvis. You can do this by tightly squeezing your thighs together. Make sure you feel tenseness without going to the point of strain,
And release. Feel the tension leave your muscles.

Begin to tense your stomach and chest. You can do this by sucking in your stomach. Squeeze harder and hold the tension a little bit longer.

Release the tension. Allow your body to go limp. Let yourself notice the feeling of relaxation.
Continue taking breaths. Breathe in slowly, noticing the air fill your lungs, and hold it.

Notes from slide 28 (continued)

Release the air slowly. Feel it leaving your lungs. Next, tense the muscles in your back by bringing your shoulders together behind you. Hold them tightly. Tense them as hard as you can without straining and keep holding. Release the tension from your back. Feel the tension slowly leaving your body, and the new feeling of relaxation. Notice how different your body feels when you allow it to relax.

(Script from TherapistAid.com)

This is all we have time for, but your embedded provider can guide you through your whole body.

Link to Navy audio demonstration: med.navy.mil/sites/nmcphc/health-promotion/psychological-emotional-wellbeing/relax-relax/pages/progressive_muscle_relaxation.html

Notes from slide 29

- In Part II, you'll learn more about stress management and using the stress continuum model to take action for yourself and for your buddy.