

CHAPTER 3

POSITIVE COMBAT STRESS BEHAVIORS**3-1. Introduction**

Combat and war bring out the best and the worst in human beings. The direction which a combat stress behavior takes, positive or negative, results from the interaction of the physiological and social context in which the stress occurs and the physiologic stress response (preparing the body for fight or flight). The purpose of good military leadership, discipline, and training is to bring out the best while preventing the worst.

3-2. Increased Alertness, Strength, Endurance—Exhilaration

a. The physiological arousal caused by the stress process feels very good when it is optimal. Soldiers describe it with words such as thrill, exhilaration, adrenaline rush, and high. The resulting sense of focused alertness, heightened strength and endurance, and the feeling of competence (ready for instant response) is called being on a hair-trigger or on the razor's edge. It gives its possessors the winning edge.

b. Combat veterans may remember war and their missions in it as the most exciting, most meaningful time in their lives—the high peak against which later life may seem flat and dull. Veterans returning from combat may have an experience not unlike withdrawal from addiction to stimulant drugs—a period of apathy and boredom, perhaps even of depression, during which they may be inclined to deliberately indulge in dangerous activity for the thrill of it.

3-3. Gamesmanship and Sportsmanship

a. Combat has been described as the Great Game. (Conversely, organized sports have been called the moral substitute for war.) Many tribal or clan-based cultures have practiced raids, ambushes, and skirmishes against other tribes for the thrill of the lethal game, valuing the loot more as trophies and proof of valor than for its material worth. Many fought carefully to avoid total victory because then they would have no worthy enemies left to fight.

b. From the sense of war as an honorable sport and of the enemy as an honorable opponent arose self-imposed rules of fair play or chivalry. These rules have slowly become the Law of Land Warfare.

c. With organized civilization, wars intensified and were more often fought for victory and total dominance. The sense of battle as an exciting game continues at many levels, even in modern conflict. For many soldiers, not only stopping enemy machines but also killing individually-targeted enemies still gives the thrill of the successful hunt.

d. With conscript armies and the increasing mechanization and depersonalization of combat, the game metaphor may be rejected by the frontline soldiers. This rejection occurs usually only after they have suffered bitter experiences from having tried to play the game. The battle-hardened and weary veterans may still view combat as the great game among themselves.

These veterans resent having others who do not share the risk see them as only players, or treat the deaths of their buddies as nothing more than a normal part of the game.

3-4. Sense of Eliteness and Desire for Recognition

a. *Sense of Eliteness.* Combat veterans who have achieved a high level of combat-stimulated proficiency and self-confidence are likely to consider themselves and their unit elite. They walk with pride and may expect special consideration or deference from others less elite. They are likely to want to do things their way rather than by the book. They may adopt special emblems, insignias, or TSOPs which set them apart. Up to some degree, this eliteness is a positive combat stress behavior which enhances combat performance. However, it is also likely to irritate others, both peers and superiors in the chain of command. The latter recognize and adhere to the importance of uniformity and fairness (not showing favoritism) as key factors in sustaining military discipline and common purpose. The higher chain of command must mediate between these two legitimate positions (eliteness and uniformity) to gain the benefits of each. This is done with as few as possible of each position's negative side effects.

b. *Desire for Recognition.* Most soldiers desire public and long-lasting recognition for their hard work, suffering, and bravery. Awards and decorations are primarily given for this reason. Because the desire for recognition is so strong, it is important that the chain of command be perceived as awarding recognition properly and fairly. Failure to award recognition fairly (or failure to be perceived as awarding recognition fairly) can have long-term consequence on morale and stress within a unit. Most soldiers accept the fact that not all acts of heroism will be noticed. They acknowledge that

receiving an award/decoration depends not only on the heroic act but on who observed it. It also depends on the leader to write the documentation. Commanders will differ in their policy regarding the criteria for the different award. It is desirable to give everyone positive motivation by making awards and decorations accessible, but if they are too easy to get, they quickly lose their value. This devaluation creates resentment in those who most deserve the special recognition. For this reason, higher command may set numerical limits on how many of each type of decoration that each subordinate commander may award. Good leaders will try to assure that exceptional performance and heroic acts get recognized based on merit. It is important that awards be distributed across the ranks, commensurate with performance without regards for race or gender. When it is not possible to give everyone a medal, leaders may write letters of commendation or, as a minimum, give a strong verbal "well done" for exceptional performance.

3-5. Sense of Purpose

War, with its stakes of life or death, victory or defeat, tends to create a sense of patriotism and common purpose that overcomes petty complaints, jealousies, and self-interest. This is true not only in combat soldiers but also in rear area troops. It is even true among the civilians on the home front, provided they are emotionally mobilized and behind the war effort. They, too, may look back on that time of common purpose and unity with nostalgia.

3-6. Increased Religious Faith

It is probably an exaggeration to say that there are "no atheists in the foxhole," but many soldiers and civilians do find that danger, and especially the unpredictable danger of modern war,

stimulates a new or stronger need for faith in God. If this is fused with a sense of purpose in fulfilling God's will, it may lead to living a better life, increased dedication to duty, and attempting to make the world better in spite of the horrors and evils seen in war. In some cultures and religions, acceptance of God's will, fatalism, faith in the afterlife, or the reward for dying in a holy cause may also contribute to exceptional bravery and disregard for death. However, such faith does not always promote good tactical common sense. It can lead to unproductive loss of life unless guided by sound leadership.

3-7. Personal Bonding

While patriotism and sense of purpose will get American soldiers to the battlefield, the soldiers' own accounts (and many systematic studies) testify that what keeps them there amid the fear of death and mutilation is, above all else, their loyalty to their fellow soldiers. This loyalty was first called cohesion by Ardant Du Picq (the 19th century French officer and student of men in battle):

a. Cohesion literally means stick together. The objective measure of cohesion is whether a soldier will choose to stay with his buddies and face discomfort and danger when given the opportunity or temptation to choose comfort and safety. The extreme measure of cohesion is willingness to die with fellow soldiers rather than leave them to die alone, or to choose certain death (as by throwing oneself on a hand grenade) in order to save their lives.

b. Bonding within the combat team is itself a positive combat stress behavior. Working together under stress to overcome difficulty and discomfort in order to accomplish a common goal is a good way to build cohesion in a small team. Normally, such bonding requires a long period of working together to become strong. However,

the addition of danger and potential death which can be prevented only by trust and teamwork, plus living together 24 hours a day for days and weeks on end, forges the bond much faster and stronger. Combat soldiers describe the bond, hesitantly or openly, as love.

c. The closest bonding naturally forms with one's buddy in combat—the only soldier with whom an individual ideally can share his deepest thoughts and concerns. This bonding will also include the other close team members. Some of these may be people whom a person might have expected (and probably did expect on first introduction) to dislike intensely due to individual personality differences or ethnic or racial prejudices. However, once these soldiers have proved themselves reliable, trustworthy, and competent, they become bonded brothers in arms. Being included in the cohesion does have to be earned by combat performance, but once established, it can lead the team to overlook or even condone other noncombat-related faults.

3-8. Horizontal and Vertical Bonding

a. *An Interlocking Framework.* Horizontal bonding is the personal loyalty between peers in the small team. This must be complemented by vertical bonding (the personal loyalty and trust between the team's enlisted soldiers and their officer and NCO leaders). At the next higher echelon, the junior officers and NCOs must develop strong horizontal bonding with their peers and vertical bonding with their leaders. This hierarchical framework of personal loyalty and trust is needed to provide the troops at the small team level with a transmitted confidence in the units to their right, left, front and rear.

b. *Cohesion, Operational Readiness Training.* The Army's experimental cohesion, operational readiness training (COHORT)

program creates new combat arms companies which keep the same soldiers together through basic training and links them with their leaders in advanced individual training. The COHORT program then keeps the personnel in the company or platoons together (as much as possible) through the first enlistment. This maximizes the horizontal bonding and first level of vertical bonding. Studies have confirmed that COHORT companies quickly reach a higher level of proficiency than units with high turnover of personnel (turbulence). They score high on measures of cohesion. However, they also demand much more of their leaders.

c. *Cautions.* Personal bonding is not enough to produce a good military unit. It is possible to have teams which share very high personal bonding, but which are not dedicated to the units' combat mission. In that situation, their cohesiveness may be directed solely to keeping each other comfortable and safe. Such teams can be difficult and even dangerous to lead. They may try to take as little risk as possible, and leaders who lead them into danger, for example, may find themselves alone and unsupported.

3-9. Unit Identity

a. *Esprit de Corps.* Team cohesion must be strengthened by a sense of the unit's military history and its mission and by a sense of shared identity which reminds soldiers of how they should act. This sense is called esprit de corps or simply esprit.

(1) In ancient Rome this identity was formed around the numbered Legion (such as Julius Caesar's famous Tenth) with its golden eagle standard.

(2) In the British Army, a soldier's identity is still strongly focused on the Regiment, with the unit's hundreds of years of history, and

supported usually by a regional basis for recruiting.

(3) Since the Civil War and WWI, the US Army has discouraged regional recruiting. The focus for our military identity has tended to be the branch (with its insignia), special training (airborne or ranger tabs, green or red berets), the division (with its distinctive patch), and the battalion (with its unit flag and battle streamers).

b. *New Manning System.* The Army's new manning system is seeking to reinforce unit identity by designating regiments and giving them distinctive regimental crests. The system will encourage career progression which brings the same officers and NCOs together again in different assignments. This will provide the personnel more time working together in which to form horizontal and vertical bonding at all levels. It also will increase the shared sense of tradition.

c. *Summary.* The patches, insignias, flags, and standards provide visual reminders of the tradition and quick identifiers of who our fellow members are. The names or numbers which designate the unit provide a conceptual framework for the esprit de corps to develop around. However, the more important issue is the content of the verbal or written tradition. For the esprit de corps to call forth positive combat stress behaviors under stress, it must model the desired behaviors—courage, loyalty to buddies, obedience to all lawful orders, initiative and ingenuity, endurance even in the face of impending disaster, and self-sacrifice. It must also uphold the code of honorable conduct of American values and the Law of Land Warfare.

3-10. Unit Cohesion

a. Especially in small units, all soldiers come to know and appreciate their peers and

leaders. They recognize how all members of the unit depend on one another. With this recognition comes a feeling of intimacy (personal bonding) and a strong sense of responsibility. This mutual trust, based on personal face-to-face interaction, is called “cohesion.” Also important is esprit de corps, the feeling of identification and membership in the larger, enduring unit with its history and ideals—the battalion, regiment, and division, and beyond them the branch and the US Army. Cohesion holds units together; esprit keeps them dedicated to the mission. Personal bonding alone is like steel wire mesh: it is extremely hard to break but easy to bend. Unit identity (or patriotism, or other abstract ideals) is like concrete: it keeps its shape but shatters easily under the pressure and pounding of combat. Combining the two is like reinforced concrete: it neither bends nor breaks. It can only be chipped away chip by chip and is extremely hard to demolish even that way.

b. Like other positive combat stress behaviors, unit cohesion is not free of potential drawbacks. The possible liabilities resulting from an excessive sense of eliteness was mentioned above in paragraph 3-4. Highly cohesive units may also be really slow to accept and incorporate new replacements. When too many of the old unit members are lost in too short a time, the unit may either fail catastrophically, lose many veterans as battle fatigue casualties, or lose the unit esprit and become totally concerned only with self and buddy survival. Unit leaders and the higher headquarters need to take appropriate actions to safeguard against these possibilities.

3-11. Heroism

a. The ultimate positive combat stress behaviors are acts of heroism. The citations for winners of the Medal of Honor or other awards for valor in battle document almost unbelievable feats of courage, strength, and endurance. The

hero has overcome the paralysis of fear, and in some cases, has also called forth muscle strength far beyond what he has ever used before. He may have persevered in spite of wounds which would normally be so painful as to be disabling. Some heroes willingly sacrifice their lives knowingly for the sake of their buddies.

b. Those who survive their own heroism often have a difficult time describing how it happened. A few may not even remember the events clearly (have amnesia). More often they remember selected details with remarkable clarity. They may say, “I don’t know how I did it. I remember being pinned down and scared, but I saw what needed to be done, and something came over me. It was like it was happening to someone else” (or “like I was watching myself in a movie” or “like an out-of-my-body experience”).

c. In psychiatry, these experiences would be called dissociative reactions. If they resulted in inappropriate behavior, they would be classified as dissociative disorders. Indeed, many such cases may go unrecorded except by sad letters from the soldier’s commander to the family—killed while performing his duties. However, when the behavior has been directed by sound military training (drill) and strong unit cohesion, the doer receives a well-deserved medal for heroism in order to encourage similar positive combat stress behavior in others. Posthumous medals also console the survivors and the heroes’ families and reassure them that the memory of the hero will live on in the unit’s tradition. Medals are awarded based on the results of a soldier’s actions, not for the motives that prompted such actions or acts of bravery.

3-12. Positive and Misconduct Stress Behaviors—The Double-Edged Sword

Positive combat stress behaviors and misconduct stress behaviors are to some extent a double-edged

sword or two sides of the same coin. The same physiological and psychological processes that result in heroic bravery in one situation can produce criminal acts such as atrocities against enemy prisoners and civilians in another. Stress may drag

the sword down in the direction of the misconduct edge, while sound, moral leadership and military training and discipline must direct it upward toward the positive behaviors. (See Figure 3-1.) The following chapters will explore this issue further.

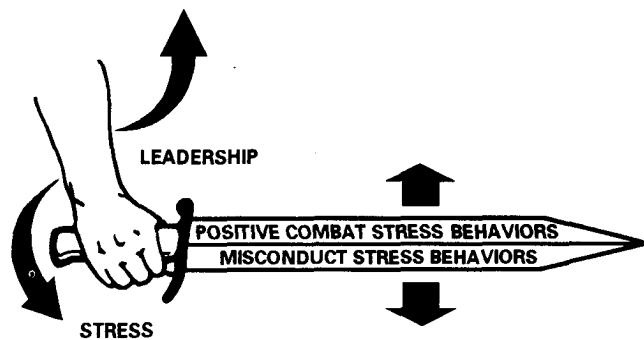


Figure 3-1. Positive and misconduct stress behaviors—the double-edged sword.