

# Stress in Service Members



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## KEYWORDS

- Military stress • Military culture • Deployment cycle • Alcohol use disorders
- Posttraumatic stress disorder • Early interventions • Nonpharmacologic treatment

## KEY POINTS

- Understand the unique attributes of military life.
- Understand the common military stresses.
- Most service members adapt without difficulty.
- Stress is cumulative.
- Trauma exposure is common.
- Screen for posttraumatic stress.
- Screen for alcohol use disorders.
- Early intervention should emphasize nonpharmacologic management.

## INTRODUCTION

Military service is a unique form of employment. It is one of the few occupations that modern societies can compel. Voluntary military service increases motivation but does not reduce the hazards or its stressors. Nations maintain militaries for many reasons, ranging from more offensive, aggressive purposes, such as the acquisition of territory, to more defensive reasons, such as protecting the citizenry from real or imagined threats. The purpose of any military is the projection of power, with the capability to initiate or repel an armed conflict. Whatever the inciting reason, Carl von Clausewitz, the erudite nineteenth-century German military strategist, summed it up best by declaring “that war is the continuation of politics by other means.”<sup>1</sup>

Another distinctive aspect of military service is the ever present and persistent risk of death. This is not an existential threat. Even during periods of prolonged peace,

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Abbreviations	
AUD	Alcohol use disorders
GABA	$\gamma$ -Aminobutyric acid
NMDA	<i>N</i> -Methyl- <i>D</i> -aspartate
PDHRA	Post-Deployment Health Reassessment
SBIRT	Screening, Brief Intervention and Referral to Treatment

military service members must confront the real potential for a sudden life-changing deployment. During war, the risk is naturally greater, both in terms of personal harm and collateral exposure from witnessing the morbidity, mortality, and destruction that conflicts create.

Aside from conscription and the risks of morbidity and mortality, military life introduces individuals to a subculture that requires adaptation for successful integration. As much as injury and death is a core facet of military life, so is a countervailing trend denying this possibility. The myth of invincibility or invulnerability is essential, honed through military training, and bolstering an unwavering confidence in the mission, weapons, and leadership.<sup>2</sup> Acceptance reduces anxiety but may also collaterally reduce group discussion about the horrors of war, almost as if talking about one's thoughts and feelings erodes the myth of invincibility. The service member's adoption of the myth seems to thrive, perhaps even intensify, after returning from combat, resulting in the further pursuit of risky activities.<sup>3</sup>

Other attributes of military life include obedience, regimentation, subordination of self to the group, integrity, and flexibility. Military training begins the conspicuous process of indoctrinating these values from the moment that a person first dons a uniform. The purpose is clear: to promote self-confidence and ensure faithful allegiance when it is most needed. The battlefield is not the place to argue. Each person has a purpose, guided through the leadership of more senior individuals. A predictable social structure, clearly visible on a military uniform, is a tangible reminder of authority, which offers the reassurance that comes from leadership.

One of the more important aspects of military life is unit cohesion. Unit cohesion, as the term implies, is an intangible glue the binds the individual members to the group. Each person draws both strength and comfort from the arrangement. Unit cohesion is particularly important on the battlefield, with mutual support affecting everything from the outcome of the conflict to the management of casualties. Various concepts promote unit cohesion, such as buddy support, but one of the defining values of military service is the expectation that no one is left behind.

In terms of assessing military stressors, it is important to understand the service member's environment. Those involved in combat operations experience periods of intense danger, which might alternate with periods of inactivity. Normal sleep is often one of the first casualties of combat. Communications with family and friends may be disrupted. The normal comforts of home are exchanged for the harsher, more spartan, battlefield. Privacy is often sacrificed. There is no real downtime; war demands a focused concentration, a watchful vigilance, and an energetic drive.

All service members in combat experience varying degrees of stress (**Box 1**). Military training is the tonic that reduces the stress sufficiently for service members to perform their job. Yet, training alone does not entirely determine the outcome. Each service member has their unique personality and coping styles. In some cases, the service member's constitutional makeup inhibits their integration. A clinical vignette helps show such a situation.

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