

Army to Assess Soldiers' Emotional, Mental Fitness

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 14, 2008 – The Army has launched an initiative to include soldiers' mental and emotional fitness, along with their physical form, as a comprehensive assessment of troop health.

A driving force behind the creation of the wider-ranging appraisal is the high rate of post-traumatic stress disorder, with 20 percent of combat forces returning from Iraq and Afghanistan reporting symptoms, said Brig. Gen. (Dr.) Rhonda Cornum, the Army's assistant surgeon general for force projection.

“Being ‘Army Strong’ is, in fact, being more than just physically fit,” Cornum said last week in a panel discussion at the annual Association of the U.S. Army conference. “A lot of it’s in your head.”

Cornum recommended that the Army evaluate comprehensive fitness as aggressively as it does physical fitness. Similar to the way the Army grades physical health along an axis, scores will be meted out for mental and emotional capacity.

Strong fitness in these latter realms is characterized as high levels of resilience, adaptability, self-confidence and agility. On the other hand, if soldiers exhibit stress, insecurity, immaturity or a lack of discipline, they might receive a poor score.

Soldiers who register a mid-level score may undergo education or training, while those with ratings just below average might receive some form of therapeutic regimen. The Army will step in when soldiers need direct intervention, Cornum said.

The general said the most vulnerable demographic is members of the junior enlisted ranks, who tend to be younger than their higher-ranking counterparts. But the proposal entails comprehensive fitness assessments for all force members, over their entire careers.

At the senior enlisted level and within the officer corps, emphasis will be placed on training programs

to help these personnel instruct and instill these values in their younger subordinates.

“This is going to be a culture change for the Army,” Cornum said, “but I think it’s really important, because these are life skills and capabilities that you can train.”

Joining Cornum was Army Col. Craig Currey, director of the Basic Combat Training Center of Excellence at Fort Jackson, S.C. He said the Army’s goal is to produce “ground combatants” -- soldiers who are as fit mentally and emotionally as they are physically.

The amount of time to transform civilians into ground combatants is more limited than in the past, the colonel said, as 80 percent of new Soldiers are deployed within a year after basic training.

“The old days of basic training and then going to a unit somewhere and learning from the [noncommissioned officers] really is not happening, because they’re ending up in combat,” he said.

The Army used to rely on role-modeling as its main mechanism for conveying what Currey deemed “intangibles” -- spiritual and emotional readiness for combat. Now, the service’s goal is to institutionalize such training through their new comprehensive approach.

Army Col. (Dr.) Charles Milliken, a psychiatrist at the Walter Reed Institute of Research, said that just as troops join the Army for different reasons, soldiers also have individual strengths and weaknesses. A more holistic initial assessment will help the Army steer individuals into more appropriate developmental programs, where necessary, he said.

“The goal of the assessment is to push people into programs sooner,” he added.

Army Sgt. Maj. John Heinrichs, who works in the Office of the Sergeant Major of the Army, welcomed the new focus on mental health, which he called equally important as physical health.

“Every dollar, every hour we invest in this, will pay for itself in the future,” he said. “This is a part of balancing the Army.”