



Create cohesive, high-performing teams that foster trust & connection through small group discussions.

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## STAYING SHARP: A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO OPERATIONAL READINESS

Maintaining a razor-sharp edge, both personally and professionally, is paramount for ACC Airmen navigating the complexities of modern military operations. The demands of current and future conflicts, coupled with the desire for a long and healthy life after service, necessitate a proactive approach to reducing and managing the impact of operational stress. This is not merely a matter of physical conditioning, although maintaining peak physical fitness is crucial for enduring arduous conditions; it requires a holistic approach encompassing physical, cognitive, and emotional well-being.

### Operational stress comes in many forms:

- Physical exertion
- Sleep disruption
- Emotional and psychological strain
- Cognitive overload
- Poor nutrition

Managing operational stress requires a comprehensive approach to maintain well-being. Physical fitness provides the base, giving Airmen the stamina to handle physical demands. But today's warfare also requires strong mental skills. The amount of information, fast decisions, and complex operations can cause mental overload. So, training to improve mental agility, adaptability, and decision-making under pressure is key. Also important are strategies for getting enough sleep, eating well, and managing emotions. These things directly affect thinking, resilience, and overall health.

Discipline and prioritization are essential for leadership and personal success, especially when facing constant operational demands. Prioritizing mission-essential tasks is vital for mission success. However, it's also important to prioritize self-care, including getting enough sleep, staying fit, and connecting with loved ones. This requires Airmen to make conscious choices that support both mission readiness and their long-term well-being through discipline, flexibility, and adjustment of priorities as needed. It's an ongoing process, not a one-time fix. By focusing on this holistic approach, Airmen can improve their performance and live fulfilling lives, both during and after service.

### WATCH...

**Warrior Airmen: How Combatives and Jiu-Jitsu Fuel the Air Force Ethos** [2:55]



### DISCUSS...

1. Beyond physical fitness, what specific strategies build cognitive and emotional resilience? How can leaders support these?
2. How can Airmen and Guardians prioritize self-care amidst demanding operations? What is leadership's role in modeling healthy behaviors?
3. You are a flight leader preparing your team for a high-stakes deployment to a contested environment. The mission will be demanding, requiring long hours, limited sleep, and complex decision-making under pressure. You know maintaining both mission effectiveness and teammate well-being is crucial. How do you practically apply the principles of ruthless prioritization, holistic well-being, and creating a supportive environment to prepare your team for this mission and ensure their sustained resilience throughout?



“There are no secrets to success. It is the result of preparation, hard work, and learning from failure.”

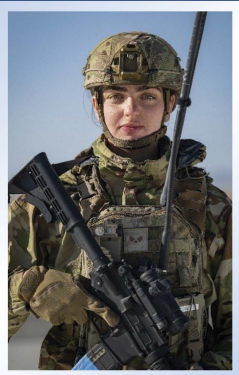
– Colin Powell

“Don't expect to be motivated every day to get out there and make things happen. You won't be. Don't count on motivation. Count on discipline.”

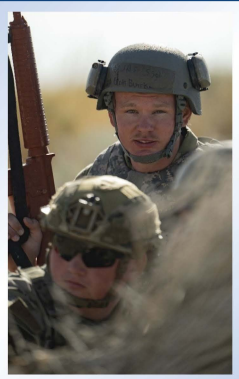
– Jocko Willink

“Self-Discipline is the ability to make yourself do what you should do, when you should do it, whether you feel like it or not.”

– Elbert Hubbard



Air Force Senior Airman Kahlea Schatz, defender from the 75th Security Forces Squadron, led multiple teams of SFS Airmen during exercise PANTHER SHADOW in Wendover, Utah, April 24, 2025. By integrating ACE principles at the squadron level, the wing increases combat resilience across multiple domains. (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Zachary Rufus)



U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Brett Buerkle, a dedicated crew chief assigned to the 4th Fighter Generation Squadron, takes cover during a simulated attack in Wendover, Utah, April 24, 2025. Airmen practiced operating in dispersed environments, complicating enemy targeting and improving flexibility. (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Zachary Rufus)

### Prioritization Exercise

The small group receives a set of realistic operational scenarios depicting various stressful situations (e.g., deployment with limited resources, long hours with sleep deprivation, critical incident responses, etc.). The group will prioritize the top 3 strategies from their toolkit/knowledgebase that would be most effective in each scenario and then discuss why they chose those strategies and how they would adapt them to the specific circumstances.

### Related Resources






The Real Warriors Campaign offers resources and confidential support for service members, veterans, and families facing psychological health challenges, including stress management and resilience building. <https://www.health.mil/Military-Health-Topics/Centers-of-Excellence/Psychological-Health-Center-of-Excellence/Real-Warriors-Campaign>

The DAF Integrated Resiliency Tools and Guidance website provides resources and tools to address a variety of needs and stressors that can exacerbate operational stress.

<https://www.resilience.af.mil/Tools-and-Guidance/>



# COMBATING OPERATIONAL STRESS: A CHART OF STRATEGIES

STRESS TYPE	STRATEGIES	DESCRIPTION	BENEFITS
<b>PHYSICAL EXERTION</b>  	Prioritize Physical Conditioning	Regular exercise focusing on strength training and cardiovascular fitness.	Builds stamina, reduces fatigue, strengthens the body, and improves resilience to physical demands.
	Hydration and Electrolyte Balance	Drink plenty of water throughout the day, even before feeling thirsty. Increase intake significantly during physical activity and in hot environments. Utilize electrolyte drinks or tablets strategically to replenish lost salts and minerals, especially during intense sweating or prolonged exertion. Consult with a healthcare provider about appropriate electrolyte supplementation.	Prevents dehydration, maintains energy levels, supports optimal physical function, aids in thermoregulation, and minimizes muscle cramps.
<b>COGNITIVE OVERLOAD</b>  	Time Management and Prioritization	Effective planning, delegation, and ruthless prioritization of tasks. Utilize time management tools and techniques to maximize efficiency.	Reduces mental clutter, allows for focused attention on essential tasks, and minimizes feelings of being overwhelmed.
	Mental Breaks and Downtime	Schedule regular short breaks throughout the day to rest and recharge mentally. Engage in activities that promote mental detachment from work, such as mindfulness exercises or brief walks.	Improves cognitive function, prevents mental fatigue, enhances focus, and improves decision-making abilities.
<b>SLEEP DISRUPTION</b>  	Sleep Hygiene Practices	Establish a regular sleep schedule, even on days off. Create a relaxing bedtime routine to signal the body it's time to sleep. Optimize the sleep environment: dark, quiet, and cool.	Promotes consistent and quality sleep, which is crucial for cognitive function, mood regulation, and physical recovery.
	Napping Strategies	Utilize short, strategic naps (20-30 minutes) to mitigate the effects of acute sleep deprivation. Avoid longer naps, especially later in the day, as they can disrupt nighttime sleep.	Provides a temporary boost in alertness and cognitive performance when sleep has been compromised.
<b>POOR NUTRITION</b>  	Meal Planning and Preparation	Plan meals in advance and prioritize nutrient-dense whole foods. Pack healthy snacks and meals to ensure access to nutritious options, even when operational demands are high.	Ensures consistent intake of essential nutrients, supports a balanced diet, maintains stable energy levels, and strengthens the immune system.
	Prioritize Protein Intake	Ensure adequate protein intake throughout the day, especially after physical exertion. Include protein-rich foods in meals and snacks.	Supports muscle recovery and repair, maintains lean muscle mass, promotes satiety, and helps stabilize blood sugar levels. Crucial for maintaining physical and cognitive performance under stress.
<b>EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL STRAIN</b>  	Social Support and Connection	Prioritize maintaining connections with loved ones and build strong support networks. Communicate openly and honestly about challenges and seek emotional support when needed.	Provides emotional buffering, reduces feelings of isolation, and fosters a sense of belonging and security.
	Stress Management and Coping Mechanisms	Utilize stress reduction techniques such as deep breathing exercises, mindfulness, meditation, or yoga. Practice these techniques regularly to build resilience and manage stress effectively.	Helps manage stress, anxiety, and emotional responses to challenging situations. Promotes emotional regulation and improves overall psychological well-being.