

Bridging Performance Optimization and Psychological Health Approaches for Warfighter Readiness

Authors: Park, Gloria H., Givens, Melissa, & Deuster, Patricia D.

Conference Theme: (#4) From shell shock to mental fitness - Human Performance
Topics: High Performance

Summary: The U.S. Department of Defense continues to demonstrate academic, applied, and policy interest in support of Warfighter resilience, readiness, and well-being, through Total Force Fitness (TFF) and Human Performance Optimization (HPO). Although an emphasis on mental health endures, Warfighter readiness can be defined by more than just the absence of pathology.

Methods-Results: This presentation begins by introducing advances in the conceptual and theoretical understanding of the full spectrum of psychological health and performance in support of Warfighter readiness. To align with a performance-oriented framework, psychological service delivery has evolved to include optimizing Service Member health and performance of mission essential tasks and preserving mission readiness beyond the sole goal of ameliorating psychological illness. Approaches to alleviating mental illness and supporting optimal performance are often viewed as completely independent at conceptual, practical, and policy levels. While the distinctions have been helpful in identifying boundaries for ethical practice, it has also led to siloed efforts for meeting and advancing well-being and performance needs for all Warfighters. Areas of theoretical and empirical overlap in approaches to cultivating optimal performance and well-being will then be introduced.

The science of performance psychology offers a framework to provide Warfighters with mental skills required to enhance discrete performances across a broad range of tasks, from marksmanship, recovery from injury, execution of tactical strategy to decision-making and navigating complex environments. Focused human performance approaches can be leveraged to help preserve resources and increase engagement in mental health protective behaviors for Service Members.

Conclusion: Engagement in the full-spectrum of psychological interventions can help warfighters and their families capitalize on mental strengths and skills, promote overall well-being, mental health, and enable optimal performance while simultaneously decreasing the stigma associated with seeking and receiving psychological support.

