



Sources of Stress and Coping Strategies among US Soldiers and their Leaders

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Presented at European Health Psychology conference
St. Andrews, Scotland

OPTEMPO Report Series #13

7 September 2001

U.S. Army Medical Research Unit-Europe, Walter Reed Army Institute of Research,
U.S. Army Medical Research and Materiel Command



Purpose

- Present stress and coping findings based on data from the U. S. Army, Europe & Seventh Army and U. S. Army Medical Research Unit-Europe OPTEMPO/PERSTEMPO study.



Outline

- **Summary of Findings**
- **Introduction**
 - **Goals of the study**
 - **Overview of research program**
- **Stress, coping & health**
- **Methods**
 - **Data Analysis**
 - **Demographics**
 - **Method**
- **Results**
 - **Analytical Strategy: coding strategy**
 - **Organizational stressors**
 - **Work-related stressors**
 - **Individual/Personal stressors**
 - **Effects of stress: Physical & mental health**
 - **Effects of stress: soldier issues**
 - **Coping: Positive behaviors**
 - **Coping: Positive attitudes**
 - **Coping: Negative behaviors**
 - **Coping: Negative behaviors & cognitions**
- **Results (continued)**
 - **Leaders' views: Soldier stress**
 - **Leaders' views: Organizational response**
- **Results: Themes**
- **Conclusions**
- **Strengths and limitations**
- **Recommendations**
- **Point of Contact**



Summary of Findings

This technical brief presents findings from a two-year longitudinal study designed to assess the impact of operations and personnel tempo on soldier and unit readiness. Specifically, this brief focuses on issues of stress and coping based on data from interviews with soldiers and their leaders.

- Stressors identified include work related, organizational and individual stressors
- Coping responses include wellness behaviors, social support and stress relief.
- Stress was described as effecting physical and psychological health, retention and family.
- The organizational responses include provision of services and enhanced communication.
- Major themes that emerged:
 - Work itself and the pace of work are not necessarily the stressors.
 - Individual soldiers' expectations about the Army are not being met.
 - While many soldiers can and do use effective coping strategies, many adopt less effective ones.
 - Exercise is a preferred wellness behavior, yet often soldiers feel their workload preempts the time and/or inclination to work out.
 - While many soldiers use social support as a coping strategy, there is a striking lack of trust in the people with whom they can confide.
 - There are perceptions that leaders can't or don't protect soldiers from many institutional sources of stress.



Introduction

- The military environment has unique stressors:
 - Long hours, unpredictable work schedules
 - Dangers of the work environment
 - Stressors related to family separation
- Coping style can buffer the effects of stress on physical and psychological health
- This study investigates the types of stressors, appraisals, and coping responses of soldiers and their leaders, as well as the impact of stress on physical and psychological health



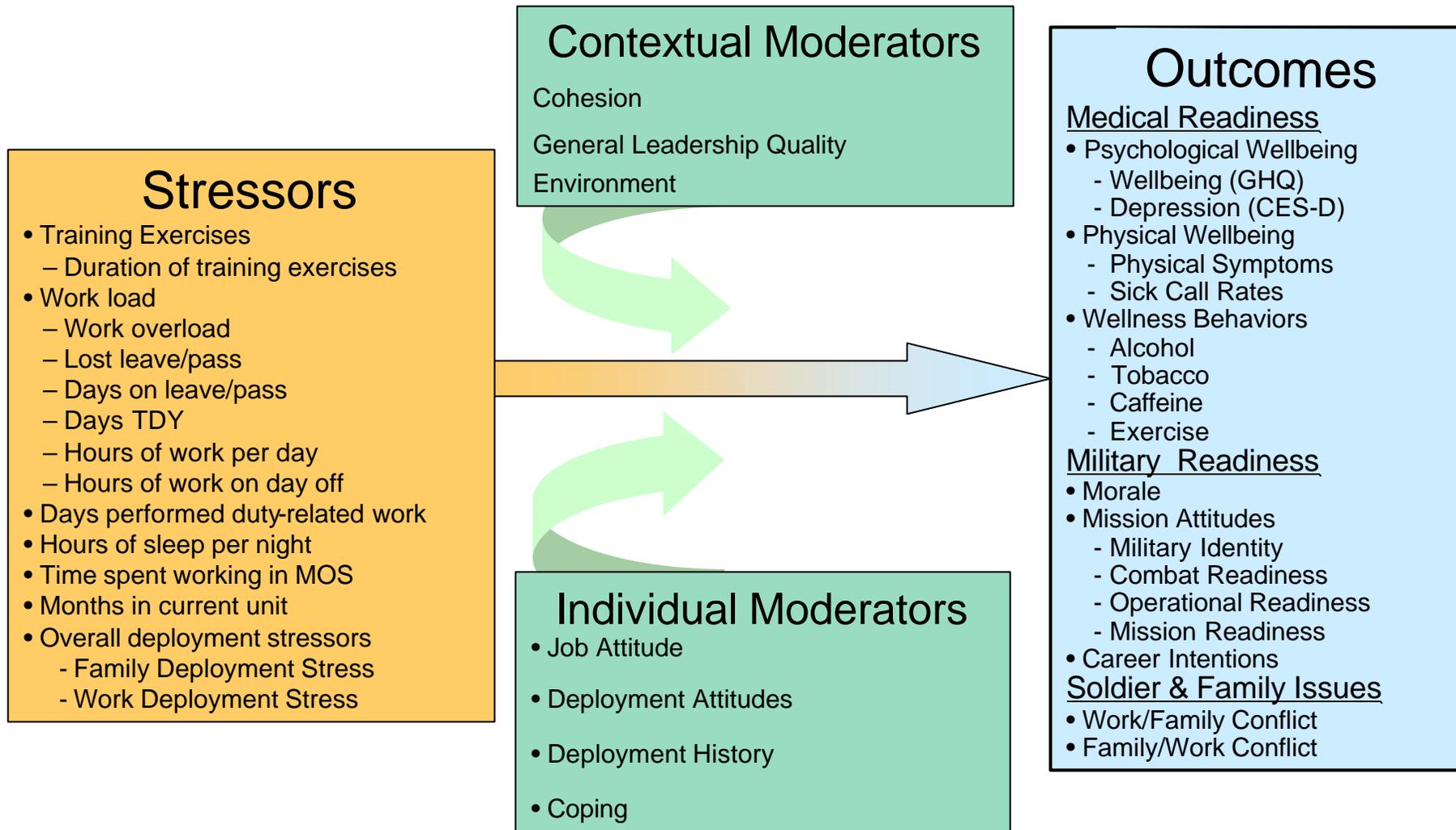
Goals of the study

Using qualitative methods, we seek to describe and understand the impact of workload on soldiers' and leaders' experiences.

- Identification of the stressors
- Appraisal of the stressors as challenging, threatening, potentially harmful or beneficial (Folkman & Lazarus)
- Identification of the options participants have for coping with the demands of the work environment, and the degree to which they use these coping behaviors
- Perceived effects of the coping responses



Overview of Research Program





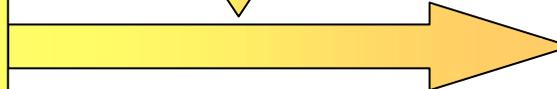
Stress, Coping and Health



Coping



Stressors



Soldier health



Methods

PROCEDURE

- Individual leader semi-structured interviews
- Focus group interviews

SAMPLE

- 20 Individual leader interviews
- 22 focus groups with soldiers



Recruited from 10 US Army units assigned to Europe, with interviews taking place in their home duty station, on training exercises, or on deployment



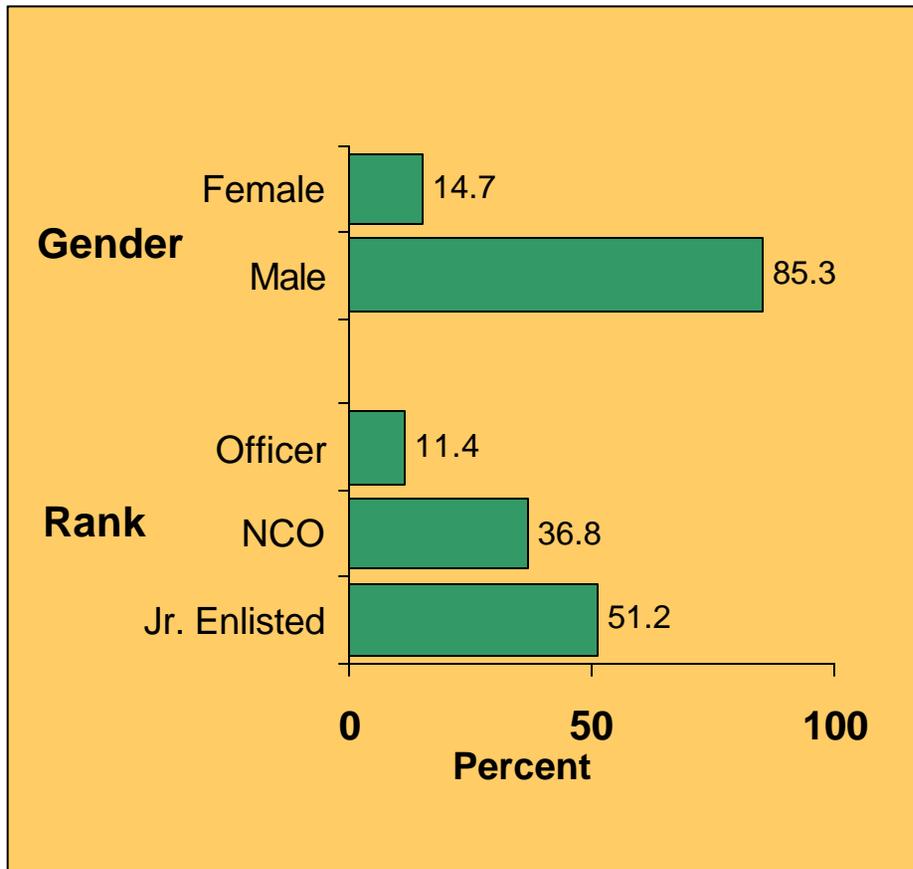
Data Analysis

Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis
software used: QSR NVivo

1. **Coding strategy** (from Bazeley & Richards 2000, and Strauss & Corbin, 1990)
 - Descriptive coding: Identifying concepts and placing them into categories
 - Concept coding: Relating categories, identifying clusters, identifying dominant themes
2. **Categories, seeking associations, ordering concepts**
3. **Within and Between group comparisons**
 - Soldiers vs. leaders



Sample Demographics (N=1422)



Marital Status

Married:	51.5%
Single:	39.2%
Sep./Div.:	9.3%

Race

White:	54.7%
African Amer.:	21.8%
Hispanic:	13.2%
Asian:	3.1%
Other:	7.1%

Education

High School:	39.7%
Some college:	47.4%
Bachelors degree:	10.9%
Graduate degree:	1.9%



Method

INTERVIEW GUIDE

What are the effects of your unit's schedule and pace of operations on your stress level and that of soldiers in your unit?

Probes

- How do soldiers let off steam when frustrated at work?
- Are people in your unit drinking/smoking more?
Getting into trouble?
- What role does the work schedule play in how much soldiers drink/smoke?
- What do you and people in your unit do to relax, unwind, de-stress?



Analytical strategy: Coding categories

Stressors

- Work-related:
- Organizational:
- Individual:

Examples

Work schedule/pace, tedious work, danger
Leadership, unpredictability of work schedule, barriers to stress relief, lack of care and concern
Quality of life, lack of personal time, not meeting personal goals, family issues

Coping responses

- Relief from stress: Alcohol, tobacco, withdrawal, outside interests
- Wellness behaviors: Exercise, positive attitudes, time management
- Social support: Seeking support, rumination, complaining

Effects of stressors

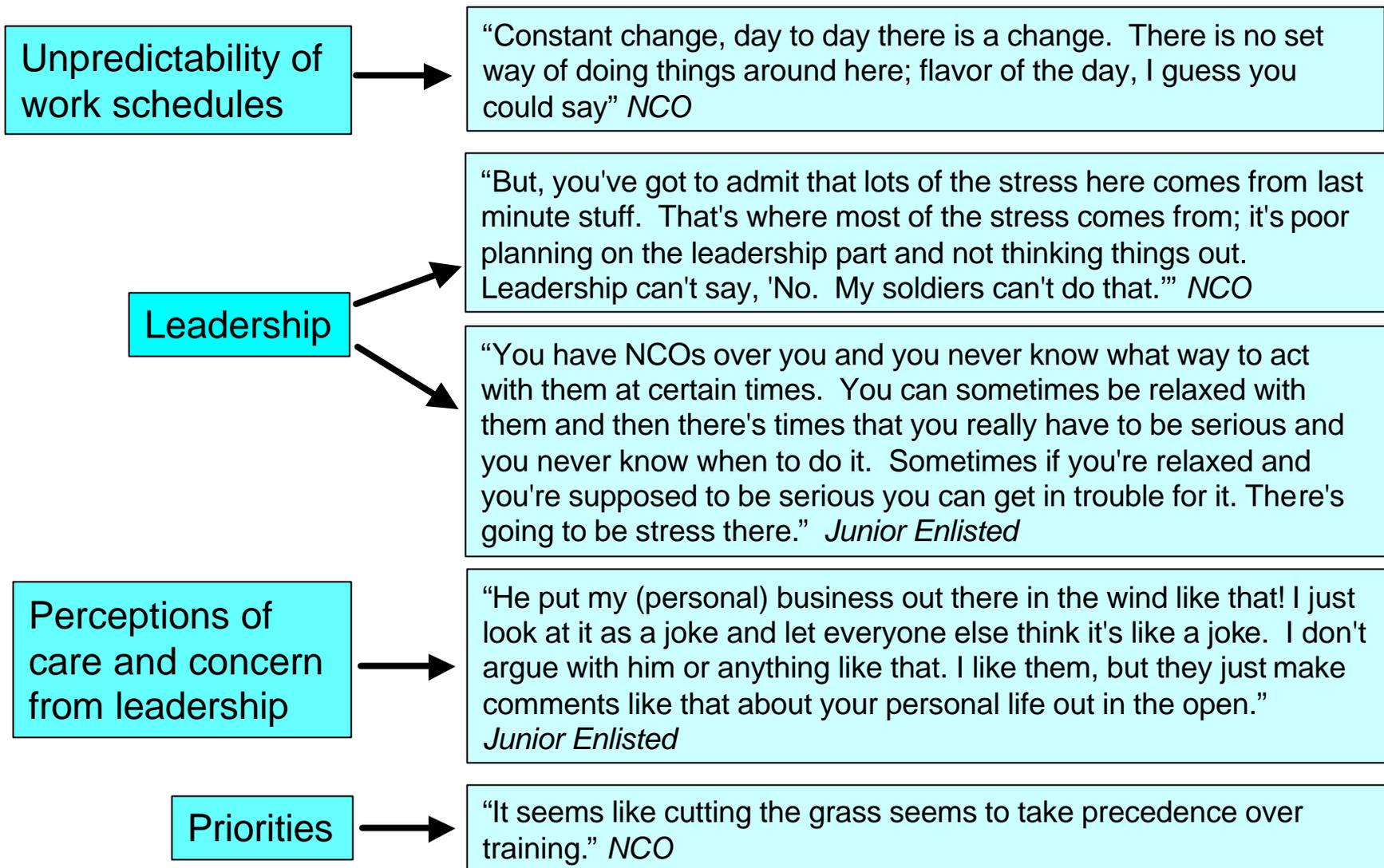
- Physical health: Fatigue, illness
- Mental health: Anger, depression
- Retention: Morale, cohesiveness
- Family: Less time with family, conflict

Organizational Responses

- Services: Provision of activities, counseling, amenities
- Communication: Schedules, duties, upcoming missions



Organizational Stressors





Work-related Stressors

Work load
and pace

“The pace is so quick - we are doing things constantly. We are tired. We are not getting time to recover between missions.” *Junior Enlisted*

Danger,
harm

“You are not allowed to rest when here (on deployment) where it would be safer to do so. Yet we still go out and do a heck of job, but it becomes a safety issue. You are rolling out at all times of day and night. The risk just keeps going up. My point to the leadership has always been, when are you going to do something about it? ...When someone gets hurt and when someone is gone...meaning dead? That's too late.” *NCO*

Not
working
in area of
expertise

“It always cracks me up to see the commercials about joining the Army to build a career and a future. We joined for that, for us it was to learn a language. We have some great linguists, but we have no instructors and no materials.” *Junior Enlisted*

Tedious
tasks

“That's reality, we got to do that stuff...mowing grass is easy...but I really wanted to come in the military and do something useful and I think they really need to balance that out more.” *Junior Enlisted*

“It's hard to take pride in yourself and what you do if what you're doing is cleaning a latrine, or picking up trash or cutting grass. (“HUAH!”) You remove value and emphasis on a person's skills and what they've learned.” *NCO*



Individual/Personal Stressors

Lack of personal time

“I think it’s because we work so much, we never have time to enjoy anything. I think we work so much here – we start at 0500 and gets off at 1930. People are just exhausted with this schedule so they don’t want to do anything.” *Junior Enlisted*

Discouragement linked to job expectations

“I’m not satisfied at all. I don’t like my job. It’s not rewarding to me. If I stay in the army I’m going to be changing my MOS (career field). If I’m going to do something, I just want to like to do it. I’m not sure the Army has what I want.” *Junior Enlisted*

“Soldiers are stressed because this unit is not providing them with any of the excitement they thought the army would provide them - jumping out of a tank, falling out of an airplane, sliding down a rope, something, some mission that was going to satisfy them. Here they don't get that, so I think that creates a little bit of stress.” *NCO*

Quality of life

“My spouse is unhappy with the living conditions.” *Junior Enlisted*

Family issues

“I'm kind of stressed because my wife told me she's pregnant. I'm dealing with a lot right now. The baby is due next month and my wife is in the States. She flew back two months ago because it's easier to have a baby in the States.” *Junior Enlisted*



Effects of stress: Physical and Mental Health

Physical health

"It's hard to maintain yourself as a soldier down here. Working 16-17 hour days, it's hard to do PT (exercise). Same with meals, I don't always get time to eat either." *Junior Enlisted*

"Lights out is at 2230. I go to bed about that time, but I get up every night; once, twice, three times a night. Speaking for me, during the weekday, I can't sleep because I'm always thinking I've got to get to work. I look at my watch, I look at my clock because I don't want to be late. I get about four or five hours of sleep each day." *Leader*

Psychological health

"In my opinion, why would you put a soldier in that can't handle stress? That puts my life and his life in danger. What if that soldier decides to panic and he shoots somebody?" *NCO*

"Some days are better than others. Everybody gets snappy. It's hard to be happy here. Every time you get happy something brings you down, or someone says something to you, or this is happening. It's very hard." *Junior Enlisted*

"A mild, mannered guy recently had his buttons pushed and hit someone. Everybody reaches a level, if you don't let that off someplace it's going to happen like that. You're going to be pushed too far. It does happen to the soldiers. What I tell my NCOs is to remember to keep an eye out for that stuff." *Leader*



Effects of stress: Soldier issues

Morale

“Maybe because my morale is so low, but I’m just not motivated to do anything anymore. My morale is low because I’m exhausted from the long hours and the type of work I do.” *Junior Enlisted*

“People just see this as a never-ending-giving-trip. You're always being asked to give a little more, give a little more, and you're never given anything back.” *Leader*

Family

“Separations and long hours are starting to catch up with some new younger families who do not have a stronger base.” *Leader*

“Some soldiers are having a hard time adjusting. The married soldiers, we had a couple that are having marital problems - one right now is already separated.” *Leader*

Retention

“Stress is high, morale is low, I'm ready to go!” *Junior Enlisted*

“My MOS (career field) has zero percent retention. Soldiers complete their commitment and they're gone. It's the frequent deployments and high workload.” *Junior Enlisted*



Coping: Positive behaviors

Exercise and fitness

"I work out, go to the gym, take my frustrations out there." *NCO*

"PT (exercise) is the best way to relieve stress. It conditions their mind and their body and it relieves a lot of stress. The more you do, the better off you feel and that's the best stress relief right there." *Leader*

Activities, interests

"I just do things at night that take my mind away from work, like play video games, watch a movie." *Junior Enlisted*

"I go to a club. I dance, you know, try to anyway!" *Junior Enlisted*

"I go home with the family and I cook, and that's what I do. A lot of my soldiers like to travel." *Leader*

Seeking social support

"You have your friends to keep you going. Sometimes I feel like if I didn't have certain people to talk to I would go crazy. I really would! It would be really hard to be here and not have any friends because it is so stressful. You at least got to have one person that you can talk to, or I don't think anyone would be able to make it." *Junior Enlisted*

"I would say I handle my stress talking with my wife. My wife is great. That helps me focus. I think I am fortunate in that I have that support, she understands that it can be a long day, long week or month. It helps tremendously. Probably more than anything else." *Leader*



Coping : Positive attitudes

Positive attitude

"I'm Teflon coated, nothing sticks to me. I just let it roll off me. I can't afford to let that happen. Somebody's got to keep a cool head." *Leader*

"The key to happiness in the Army is flexibility. If they told me right now you are going to Bosnia, okay, I start packing. As long as you are flexible and can do anything anywhere and anytime you are okay. Getting upset doesn't do anything, you bring down your motivation and maybe the people around you." *Junior Enlisted*

"I don't stress. I think a lot of people take things too personally and that's why they get stressed out. If I can't change it, I don't worry about it." *Junior Enlisted*

Taking responsibility

"If I see something in my leaders that they are not doing for me, that they are doing something wrong...I am not going to use that as an excuse for not performing to my fullest. ...I am a separate entity. I am not going to use anyone as an excuse... not to be the best." *Junior Enlisted*

"Everyone is responsible for themselves to some degree. You cannot blame everything on the Army." *Junior Enlisted*

Humor

"We try to maintain a relaxed attitude. We try to have fun while we work." *NCO*

Distancing

"I just do things at night that take my mind away from work, like play video games, watch a movie, or do something other than be around a phone where somebody can call me [in to work]." *NCO*



Coping : Negative behaviors

Alcohol use

"I think that you get so tired of cockamamie ideas and being a standard so much that you just go and start drinking and you blow off so much steam that you just don't know how to handle yourself. You lose control, and especially under the influence you are not really there. When I drink, Dr. Jeckyl and Mr. Hyde - I'm completely different." *Junior Enlisted*

"It's like people look forward to drinking now. I'll be looking forward to it. I can't wait! It takes you away, just for that little minute." *Junior Enlisted*

"I see most people, they get stressed over some things and they drink themselves to death, 'til they pass out." *Junior Enlisted*

Smoking

"We have a very high number of smokers, I think, the most I've seen in any unit in a long time." *NCO*

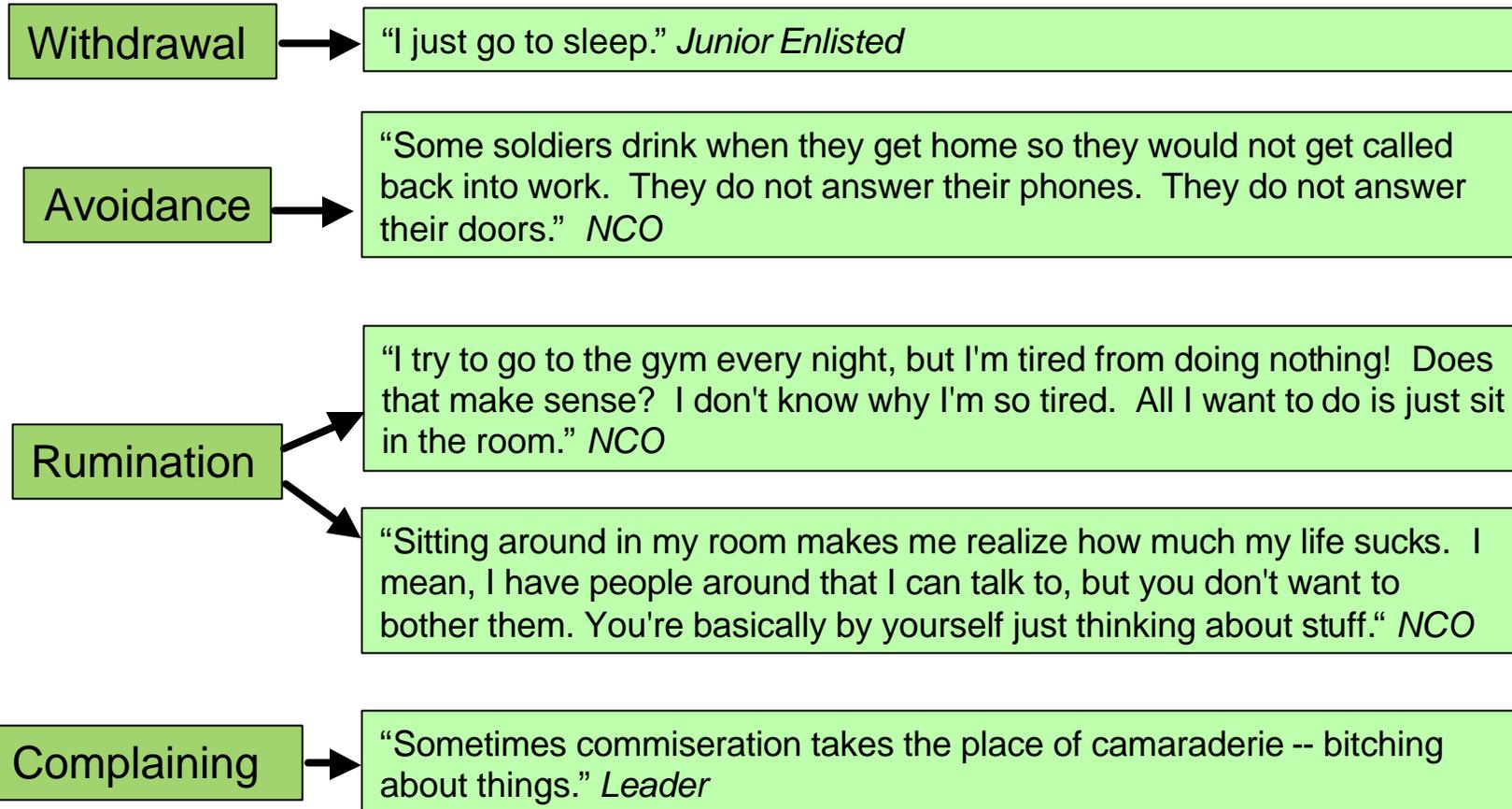
"Chain smoker! Four cartons of cigarettes don't cut it for a month. My wife knows not to mess with me when I'm stressed because I will hit the roof." *Junior Enlisted*

Violence

"You don't wanna take your stress out on your family 'cuz they didn't do nuthin' . I know several soldiers who do take their stress home with them and start hitting the kids." *Junior Enlisted*



Coping: Negative behaviors & cognitions





Leaders' views: Soldier stress

Soldier workload

"The whole 'more with less' attitude is really just flat killing us." *Leader*

"How much thinner can we spread people?" *Leader*

Leadership

"Goes back to prior planning. If you don't plan accordingly that's putting more stress on yourself." *Leader*

"The recent training was totally asinine from our perspective...burning people out by having them spend more time away from their families and jerking them around as opposed to saying, do this and get quality training." *Leader*

Effects on soldiers

"Soldiers need some down time to get rid of stress." *Leader*

"You have some soldiers that delve into weird lifestyles, you have soldiers that have some emotional problems. You have to remember that we are dealing with some pretty young soldiers; some of the soldiers are straight out of high school. Some of them deal with stress in immature ways and that's what, as leaders, we have to watch out for." *Leader*



Leaders' views: Organizational response

Services

"There is always an open door policy. Sometimes we send them over to the Chaplain if it is really bad. I try to check up on my soldiers regularly and I feel I am pretty liberal." *Leader*

"The chaplain is pretty active. They can talk to him and he's mentioned that he's running a pretty good business here. So they can talk to him." *Leader*

Communication

"I try to keep the soldiers better informed and try to make life a little more predictable." *Leader*

"True, no one likes things to go too fast. So I try to prepare them for the run by communicating future plans. We try to give them enough information to make it predictable for them. We also keep the spouses informed enough to give the soldier leeway to do his job." *Leader*

Time off

"Giving the time off and letting them unwind in their own ways, is probably the best thing we can do for them, within our means.... when they have some free time." *Leader*

"We kind of mediate a lot of the effects of the stress by what we do for our folks during the down times. You try to do as many things as you can for your folks. We haven't seen any severe stress-related problems." *Leader*



Results: Themes (1 of 2)

1. Work itself and the pace of work are not necessarily the stressors

Not using skills soldier trained for, tedious tasks, lack of communication about schedule

2. Individual's expectations not being met: Developmental issues

Soldiers expectations about the Army not met, soldiers not ready for the serious work required by military lifestyle

3. Ambivalence about alcohol

Alcohol is viewed in some cases as an acceptable way to relieve stress and avoid work, yet is also viewed as a potential substance abuse issue

4. While many soldiers can and do use effective coping strategies, many adopt less effective ones

"You have to remember that we are dealing with some pretty young soldiers; some are straight out of high school. Some of them deal with stress in immature ways and that's what, as leaders, we have to watch out for." *Leader*



Results: Themes (2 of 2)

5. Exercise is a preferred wellness behavior, yet often soldiers feel their workload preempts the time and/or inclination to work out

Soldiers are required to participate in an exercise program and must pass regular fitness tests, yet often have no time to exercise.

6. While many soldiers use social support as a coping strategy, there is a striking lack of trust in the people with whom they can confide

Soldiers believe that their careers are in jeopardy if they seek help from organizational counseling services, that they cannot seek help and expect confidentiality.

7. Perceptions that leaders don't care, that they can't or won't protect soldiers from many institutional sources of stress

While many leaders are extremely concerned with the welfare of their soldiers, several hold an attitude that says, "This is the Army – if you can't take it, get out!"



Conclusions

- Sources of stress
- Common coping strategies
 - Exercise viewed as an active behavioral coping strategy
 - Attitude management
 - Alcohol providing relief, causing problems
- Effects of stress on health and well-being of soldiers
- Comparison of perceptions of soldiers with the views of their leaders
- Identified underlying themes in the data



Strengths and Limitations

- (-) Small sample size, not randomly selected
- (-) Questions may not have been systematically applied
- (+) Homogeneity
 - Within sample
 - Within context
 - Within method
- (+) Increased understanding of stress-appraisal-coping process among soldiers and leaders



Recommendations:

Enhance active coping

Leaders

- Train active coping skills
- Provide information about work schedules, duties
- Ensure adequate time for stress-relieving activities
- Encourage exercise
- Increase opportunities for social involvement
- Alcohol awareness training

Soldiers

- Learn active coping skills
- Learn about stress and its effects
- Participate in outside work activities
- Engage in regular exercise
- Become more socially involved
- Drink in moderation



Point of Contact

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Soldier OPTEMPO Survey

U.S. Army Medical Research Unit-Europe, Walter Reed Army Institute of Research
U.S. Army Medical Research and Materiel Command



Privacy Act/Informed Consent Information

ver: 29 Nov 1999

OPTEMPO Survey

- Authority:** 10 U.S.C. Sections 136 and 5 U.S.C. 552a; Executive Order 9397
- Purpose:** USAMRU-E/WRAIR is conducting a study of soldiers' responses to OPTEMPO and PERSTEMPO.
- Uses:** I understand the purpose of this survey is to develop information to benefit soldiers and units, and that I may not directly benefit from this survey.
- Disclosure:** Disclosure of your Social Security Number is voluntary. I consent to the use of my answers by staff of the U.S. Army Medical Research-Europe, Walter Reed Army Institute of Research (USAMRU-E/WRAIR), to compile statistics of group data.
I understand my name or any other data from which I could be recognized will not be available to anyone beyond the professional staff conducting the study.
I understand I have the right to withdraw my consent to participate in the study at any time.
I understand USAMRU-E/WRAIR may access other military records identified by, or filed under, my social security number in conjunction with this survey.

RESULTS ARE CONFIDENTIAL!

Instructions:

- Use a #2 pencil
- Mark your answer by filling in the bubble completely like this:



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GENDER: Female <input type="radio"/> Male <input type="radio"/>	CURRENT MARITAL STATUS: Single (Never Married) <input type="radio"/> Married <input type="radio"/> Separated <input type="radio"/> Divorced <input type="radio"/> Widowed <input type="radio"/>	Indicate Highest Level of Education obtained: Some High School <input type="radio"/> High School <input type="radio"/> Diploma/ GED <input type="radio"/> Some College <input type="radio"/> Bachelor's Degree <input type="radio"/> Graduate Degree <input type="radio"/>	Number of children living at home: 0 <input type="radio"/> 1 <input type="radio"/> 2 <input type="radio"/> 3 <input type="radio"/> 4 <input type="radio"/> 5 <input type="radio"/> 6 or more <input type="radio"/>	ETHNICITY: African-Am/Black <input type="radio"/> Asian <input type="radio"/> Hispanic <input type="radio"/> White <input type="radio"/> Other <input type="radio"/>			
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Do you have a **family member** enrolled in the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP)?

Yes No

Is your **spouse** in the military?

Yes No

Not Married

How many **years** have you been **in the military**?

Example: If you've been in 9 years, you should write in and bubble in "0" and then "9".

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How many **hours** of work have you averaged **per day** in the past week?

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Think about your "days off" during the past week. On average, how many **hours** did you perform duty-related work during a "day off"?

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How many **days** have you been on a **training exercise** in the past 6 months?

Example: If it is 19, you should write and bubble in "0" and then "1," and "9".

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2 <input type="radio"/>	2 <input type="radio"/>	2 <input type="radio"/>
3 <input type="radio"/>	3 <input type="radio"/>	3 <input type="radio"/>
4 <input type="radio"/>	4 <input type="radio"/>	4 <input type="radio"/>
5 <input type="radio"/>	5 <input type="radio"/>	5 <input type="radio"/>
6 <input type="radio"/>	6 <input type="radio"/>	6 <input type="radio"/>
7 <input type="radio"/>	7 <input type="radio"/>	7 <input type="radio"/>
8 <input type="radio"/>	8 <input type="radio"/>	8 <input type="radio"/>
9 <input type="radio"/>	9 <input type="radio"/>	9 <input type="radio"/>

In the past week, how many **days** have you performed military related work?

<input type="text"/>
0 <input type="radio"/>
1 <input type="radio"/>
2 <input type="radio"/>
3 <input type="radio"/>
4 <input type="radio"/>
5 <input type="radio"/>
6 <input type="radio"/>
7 <input type="radio"/>

How many days of leave and/or passes have you **taken** in the past 12 months?

<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
0 <input type="radio"/>	0 <input type="radio"/>	0 <input type="radio"/>
1 <input type="radio"/>	1 <input type="radio"/>	1 <input type="radio"/>
2 <input type="radio"/>	2 <input type="radio"/>	2 <input type="radio"/>
3 <input type="radio"/>	3 <input type="radio"/>	3 <input type="radio"/>
4 <input type="radio"/>	4 <input type="radio"/>	4 <input type="radio"/>
5 <input type="radio"/>	5 <input type="radio"/>	5 <input type="radio"/>
6 <input type="radio"/>	6 <input type="radio"/>	6 <input type="radio"/>
7 <input type="radio"/>	7 <input type="radio"/>	7 <input type="radio"/>

How many days of leave and/or passes have you **lost** in the past 12 months?

<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
0 <input type="radio"/>	0 <input type="radio"/>
1 <input type="radio"/>	1 <input type="radio"/>
2 <input type="radio"/>	2 <input type="radio"/>
3 <input type="radio"/>	3 <input type="radio"/>
	4 <input type="radio"/>
	5 <input type="radio"/>
	6 <input type="radio"/>
	7 <input type="radio"/>
	8 <input type="radio"/>
	9 <input type="radio"/>

How many **days** have you been **TDY** in the past 6 months?

<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
0 <input type="radio"/>	0 <input type="radio"/>	0 <input type="radio"/>
1 <input type="radio"/>	1 <input type="radio"/>	1 <input type="radio"/>
2 <input type="radio"/>	2 <input type="radio"/>	2 <input type="radio"/>
3 <input type="radio"/>	3 <input type="radio"/>	3 <input type="radio"/>
4 <input type="radio"/>	4 <input type="radio"/>	4 <input type="radio"/>
5 <input type="radio"/>	5 <input type="radio"/>	5 <input type="radio"/>
6 <input type="radio"/>	6 <input type="radio"/>	6 <input type="radio"/>
7 <input type="radio"/>	7 <input type="radio"/>	7 <input type="radio"/>
8 <input type="radio"/>	8 <input type="radio"/>	8 <input type="radio"/>
9 <input type="radio"/>	9 <input type="radio"/>	9 <input type="radio"/>

How many **hours of sleep** have you averaged **per night** in the past week?

<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
0 <input type="radio"/>	0 <input type="radio"/>
1 <input type="radio"/>	1 <input type="radio"/>
2 <input type="radio"/>	2 <input type="radio"/>
	3 <input type="radio"/>
	4 <input type="radio"/>
	5 <input type="radio"/>
	6 <input type="radio"/>
	7 <input type="radio"/>
	8 <input type="radio"/>
	9 <input type="radio"/>

Have you ever served in **combat**? (e.g., Vietnam, Persian Gulf, Grenada, Panama, Somalia)

Yes No

Have you ever served on a **peacekeeping or humanitarian mission**?

Yes No

How many **months** in total, have you served in the **Balkan Region** (e.g. Kosovo, Albania, Bosnia, Croatia, Macedonia, Hungary)?

<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
0 <input type="radio"/>	0 <input type="radio"/>
1 <input type="radio"/>	1 <input type="radio"/>
2 <input type="radio"/>	2 <input type="radio"/>
3 <input type="radio"/>	3 <input type="radio"/>
4 <input type="radio"/>	4 <input type="radio"/>
5 <input type="radio"/>	5 <input type="radio"/>
6 <input type="radio"/>	6 <input type="radio"/>
7 <input type="radio"/>	7 <input type="radio"/>
8 <input type="radio"/>	8 <input type="radio"/>
9 <input type="radio"/>	9 <input type="radio"/>

In total, how many **deployments** have you completed that lasted more than 30 days? (not including training exercises or unaccompanied tours)

<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
0 <input type="radio"/>	0 <input type="radio"/>
1 <input type="radio"/>	1 <input type="radio"/>
2 <input type="radio"/>	2 <input type="radio"/>
3 <input type="radio"/>	3 <input type="radio"/>
	4 <input type="radio"/>
	5 <input type="radio"/>
	6 <input type="radio"/>
	7 <input type="radio"/>
	8 <input type="radio"/>
	9 <input type="radio"/>

