

Military OneSource Video — Stress Optimization: Help Make Stress Work for You Rather Than Against You

Program title: Military Community Support Programs

Video transcript:

Host:

Welcome to today's webinar titled "Stress Optimization: Help Make Stress Work for You Rather Than Against You. Everyone experiences stress, so how can we leverage this for good?

This presentation explores mild to moderate stress and discusses the total force fitness approach to utilize stress to optimize performance. During this presentation, we examine how your belief about stress can impact your ability to use stress to maximize performance, improve health and grow from challenges.

We're thrilled to have with us today Gabe Paoletti. Gabe is the mental fitness scientist at the Uniformed Services University Consortium for Health and Military Performance, also known as CHMP. He serves as a subject matter expert in mental skills, positive and performance psychology, resilience and leadership. Without further delay, I'll turn things over to Gabe.

Gabe Paoletti:

Hello and welcome. I'm excited to be here with you all. I'm just going to begin with a quick disclosure and then we will dive right into everything. So, the opinions and assertions expressed here are those of myself and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Uniformed Services University or the Department of Defense.

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Just wanted to introduce myself and say I'm really excited to be here with you all to talk about stress and to help you to reflect on what role stress plays in your life — and how can you use that energy that you gain from stress to better perform.

A few personal tidbits about myself, I currently live in Cocoa Beach, Florida. I'm originally from the Philadelphia area, Go Birds. So, I've been here for a while, but if any of you are familiar with the Cocoa Beach area or have any tips as to what to do or any military connections, please add that into the chat box.

I'm always looking forward to learn about that kind of stuff. So, I'm going to dive into a few logistics to get us started. And the first thing that I want to talk about is self-reflection and participation.

To really learn about stress, and this is deeply personal, being able to like think about what role stress plays in your life, it takes deep self-reflection and really trying to question maybe some of the ways that you think about stress or some of the ways that you react toward stress, and learning from one another is really important in being able to do that.

But obviously this is recorded, so I'm not going to have you share personal things throughout this thing, but I do want to do a few practice poll questions throughout this.

So I just want to start with one quick practice poll question. And the way we're going to do this, we're not able to do like a poll as normal, but you should see somewhere on your dashboard, if you go to webinar dashboard, a place where you can raise your hand.

So the first practice poll question we're going to do is: True or false, stress is harmful to my health, performance and growth. If you believe that's true, just click the raise your hand button to basically say yes on this one.

Host:

Gabe, it looks like you have quite a few hands raised so far.

Gabe Paoletti:

OK. All right. Good. So that's how we're going to be doing polls throughout this. So if you can just put your hands down, but as we're going through this, that's how we'll sort of do the polls as we adapt to this. All right. And then links, I'm going to drop some links into the chat box, and as we're going through this presentation, we'll be going to specific either surveys or activities on [hprc-online.org](https://www.hprc-online.org).

So this is the first link [additional text on screen lists: <https://www.hprc-online.org/mental-fitness/spiritual-fitness/create-stress-helps-me-mindset>].

This will take you to a worksheet that I will go through and give you an overview of it at the end of the presentation, and this is how you create a stress-helps-me mindset. I put that link into the chat box and then also there's a QR code there for those of you online that would like to just kind of use your phones to do that, and I'll put that in separately.

This next one is the first one that we're going to be using [additional text on screen lists: <https://www.hprc-online.org/mental-fitness/sleep-stress/make-stress-good-you>], and I highly suggest just having these up as we go through the presentation. To save time, I'll put this in as well.

And basically a lot of the information that we're going to be covering today is covered in this article. There is a survey that we're going to take midway through the presentation, but there's a lot of other stuff that we're not going to have time. We can do a week on stress to cover in this presentation, but all of that information is in this article. It's kind of like your go-to place for it.

So as we're going through this, if there's something that you want to learn more about, this is your article to go to, to be able to pull that up.

The other thing I'm going to do is put our Ask the Expert Portal in this. Again, stress is deeply personal, and you likely will have private questions or private — maybe things that you want to reflect on. A way to send those questions to us where myself or one of our other subject matter experts will be able to answer that is through our Ask the Expert Portal.

So I just put that link in there. Also, if you want to like learn more or attend one where like it's a little bit more interactive or where you are really able to get in depth, please feel free to request that and request either training like this or webinars, whatever it is you like. That's the area to go.

All right, so to begin I just kind of want to go through what is human performance optimization and total force fitness and then we'll tie that into how we're looking and approaching stress. So human performance optimization is the concept of ... our goal isn't just to help people to overcome illness or injury, not even to just be ready to perform, but how do we help individuals, communities, units perform at their best.

How do we help to get the best out of people so that they're able to perform their core task, what it is you do day in and day out. You're able to bring your best at that in everything that we do. So that's human performance optimization as a whole.

At CHAMP, our focus, or our strategy, is having a holistic approach. So there are eight domains of total force fitness, and we have subject matter experts in each of these domains. So when we look at something like stress, we're not just looking at it from a psychological perspective. We're also looking at it from a social perspective, a physical perspective, a financial perspective, nutritional perspective and what foods can help lower your stress response.

So we have subject matter experts in all of these different areas, and I really believe that this is so important because I come out of the field of positive psychology and working with a lot of experts in either optimism, gratitude, grit. And often what happens is as we go through the different presentations, it's kind of like optimism helps everything. It helps your relationships, your performance, your well-being, the whole gamut of things.

Each of these different things help everything, and it's true when it's all well and good. But the thing that I learned — and learned the hard way as I learned more about the total force fitness approach — is I can have all the optimism in the world but if I'm not getting sleep, if I'm not eating right, and I'm not exercising, that optimism is only going to get me so far. So what's really important to be able to be looking at each of these issues and each of these, basically concepts or tasks or what it is that we're trying to do, from this holistic total force fitness approach. So this training in itself is going to be psychological. It's a mental fitness training. But it's also a social fitness training.

And one of the things that we're going to learn as we go through this is stress is truly a team sport. And built within our brains and bodies, stress either leads us to find others that can help us when we're doing stress right, or we look at how can we help others in our community, in our lives.

So we're going to have a social fitness aspect to this. And then this is also a deeply ideological and spiritual presentation. Because when people can have their core beliefs about stress or core beliefs about the nature of human beings and what are we capable of and what we're set up to do and handle different things. So this truly will be a total-force-fitness approach at addressing stress.

And to begin with that, we're going to do another poll. If you could, if at the end of this presentation I could eliminate all stress from your life, just eliminate all stress from your life, would you like me to do that? Sort of living the Jimmy Buffett lifestyle, just on the beach, drinking beer, no stress, no worries. Would you want that? So it looks like only one person would like that. Anyone else like that stress-free lifestyle? Why wouldn't you want that stress-free lifestyle? Why would you hold on to stress? Stress isn't fun. It does not feel good. It's not enjoyable. No one says, "Man, I really hope tomorrow is stressful." Why wouldn't you want to remove all stress from your life?

How many people — you don't have to raise your hand, but if you have kids, if anyone on this call or on this training has kids, are your kids stressful? Yes. You would be wishing away your kids. I mean even when things are good. I have a 3-year-old, she just turned 4, 4-year-old daughter. Even when I'm playing with her and having fun, I'm still stressed during that time. And it's like all day, I'm stressed, and I kind of look forward to when she goes to bed, but then as soon as she goes to bed, I miss her and I miss that time for her. We'd be wishing away. If we wished away stress, we'd be wishing away our kids.

Any of you in a relationship? All relationships are stressful. You would be wishing away those relationships if you wanted no stress in your life. Any of you have accomplished anything meaningful in your life, you were not able to accomplish that if it was meaningful for you without stress. Stress at its core is related to meaning.

So, stress is the response of our body and brain when we believe something we care about is at stake. To wish away stress is to wish away anything meaningful, anything important in your life. Because if you didn't care, then you wouldn't be stressed about it. I mean like even just showing up this morning or waking up this morning to get to

work, when that alarm went off, if you didn't have stress and you didn't care about your job, you would still be in bed sleeping right now.

We need stress to accomplish meaningful things, to do our job well day in and day out and to take care of the people that we love, to live the values that we want to value.

But the thing is if we don't care, then there is no stress. And think about that feeling that you have when you're late. You know, you get that boost of energy when you're late to like get there for something. But there's a different level of energy that you might have if you're late for work, if you're late for picking up your kid at school, if you're late for a wedding or if you're late to get home to watch a basketball game.

Those are all your stress response system, but they're all at different levels. So making sure, and part of this is making sure, that when those meaningful things are there, that we have the right level of stress so that we can perform at our best at dealing with each of these different things that we are going through.

So where does stress fall on this HPO continuum? Basically it falls throughout it. But our goal isn't to eliminate or avoid or minimize stress. And many stress programs or stress management programs are mainly focused on how do you get rid of the stress or how do you calm down your stress or how do we avoid the stress or minimize it.

Our goal today is, how do we optimize it. How do we use that energy that our body and brain are giving us to enhance our performance, to enhance our relationships, to accomplish the meaningful things in our life and live the values that we want to live and be the people that we want to do.

So this is how stress is going to help us optimize our performance. But also a big part of this is our belief. So stress is the response of our body and brain when we believe, believe being the key word there, something you care about is at stake. And sometimes those beliefs are accurate.

Sometimes they're inaccurate. Sometimes maybe we put more into something than we need to have. If your stress response system is activated like you're in combat or a tiger is chasing you, why you're trying to give the birds and the bees talk to your son or daughter, that's not going to work out well. So part of this is looking at our beliefs, looking at our interpretations of events and making sure they're accurate and productive to giving us the right energy in the right way to be able to handle whatever that task gets.

So let's start with that practice poll question that we started with. The first belief that I basically had you answer throughout is "Is stress harmful to my health, performance and growth?" And it turns out that this belief is a self-fulfilling prophecy. So first off, about 85% of people from the 2014 Harvard study, about 85% of people believe that stress is bad. So that's the normal.

How you answered is how most people tend to answer when they look at that and for a good reason. If you type in stress for many people of Google search, if you type in stress

and you put ‘is *like* going to kill me” will pop up. And there’s plenty of news articles about how stress leads to death, how stress leads to basically aging. I’ve had doctors tell me, “Man, you really are way too stressed right now. You need to calm yourself down. You can’t see, but that’s where all my hair went,” and all of that kind of stuff.

So for good reason we believe that stress is harmful to our health, performance and growth because if we look on the media, if we look on TV, if we go wherever, even searching for research articles, we’re likely to see a lot of evidence that says that. And I’m not saying that’s false or not true, but part of it comes down to our beliefs. So it turns out that if we believe stress is harmful to our health, performance and growth, then it does hurt our performance.

It does drastically damage our health, and it can block our ability to learn and grow. But if you answered false to this question, if you believe that stress can actually help you, there’s a lot of evidence that shows us that when we have that belief, stress improves our performance, it can lead to health and longevity, and it helps us, and it’s built in within us to learn and grow.

So let’s go through a little bit of research here. One study I want to bring up was with Navy Seal candidates — this is a performance one — 174 of them, and basically what they did is prior to going into the BUD/S course, which is the basic underwater demolition course, it’s a pretty tough course, pretty stressful experience, they had them take a survey similar to the one that we’re going to take in a little bit to determine what is their mindset, what is their belief about stress. Do they believe that stress helps them, or do they believe that stress is something that blocks their performance? Then they just have them go through the course and kind of see how they went.

Those that believe that stress is helpful had faster obstacle time courses, lasted longer in the program, were rated higher by leaders, peers, received less demerits. And basically, they did better in the program as a whole. They controlled for all other factors, including other performance-based beliefs, but just believing that stress can help me led to these types of outcomes.

And we know that when people are experiencing stress, it can slow down our processing speed so that we’re able to think a little bit quicker. It helps increase memory and performance on tests. It increases our pain tolerance.

And just think about like kind of looking through the sports world if you’re into sports or the music world, just kind of performances as a whole. There’s people who are clutched, where they’re performing at their best when the pressure is on. And then there’s other people who sometimes fall apart during that time.

Part of what explains that is their beliefs about stress. If you believe stress is harmful to your health and then you feel that stress coming up — or harmful to your performance — and you feel that stress coming up, it makes sense that then, “Oh no, I’m going to blow this,” and then you wind up blowing it.

First is, if you feel that stress coming on, you feel that energy pumping because the game is on the line and you're able to channel that stress into your performance, it makes sense that you're able to use that because that's your body and brain trying to help you to accomplish whatever that task is.

I'm going to look a little bit more at the science of how that happens. Probably the most popular stress mindset study is around health, and this one was on 30,000 adults. This was done in 2012.

Basically what they did is they took 30,000 adults and had them say, how much stress do you have in your life, a lot or a little? And what are your general beliefs about stress? Do you believe stress is harmful to your health, performance and growth, or do you believe that's helpful and enhancing to your health, performance and growth? And then after eight years, they just saw who died.

So those who experience a lot of stress were 43% more likely to die. So that makes sense for a headline. Stress leads to death, right? There's one big caveat to that. It was only those that believe that stress was harmful to their health, performance and growth.

Those that believe that stress was helpful to their performance and growth and had a lot of stress on their way had actually the least. They were the least likely to die over that eight-year period even compared to those who — I don't even know who these people are — who have little stress in their life.

So think about that. It's not stress that was leading to poor health, it's the belief that stress is bad mixed with stress that was leading to poor health and longevity. And we'll talk a little bit more as to why this could be, how this could happen, how can this be the case.

The next one is learning and growth. So for this one I definitely want to slow down because — actually raise of hands. How many of you guys have heard of post-traumatic growth? So it doesn't look like many people have heard of post-traumatic growth. My guess is all of you have received training or heard about post-traumatic stress or PTSD.

So post-traumatic growth is actually as common, if not more common of an outcome than post-traumatic stress, and are not mutually exclusive

You can experience both of that. So post-traumatic growth is when you go through something really, really difficult, and it might be something that you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy. It's something that's hard, that's really, really tough. You're struggling with it. You have a tough time dealing with it. You're probably having flashbacks of it. You can't let it go when you're just thinking about it over and over and over again. And this might be a period of a month or it could be for years that you're going through this.

But as you're struggling with it and as you're reflecting on it and as you're having those flashbacks and thinking about it over and over and over again, you start to realize or you

may start to realize that you have increased personal strength. That you are stronger than you thought.

You have strength that you didn't even realize you may have. Or you're capable of things that you never realized you were capable. That how you saw yourself before and what you could handle and how you see yourself now is different. And you realize that you really are stronger in a way that you didn't see before.

Or you might have realized that you have increased personal and meaningful relationships. That the people who you thought — the relationships that you thought were important, you realize that they really weren't that important. And that the people who were truly there for you, those relationships, they become your priority.

Those relationships become stronger or perhaps you developed relationships through the struggle, and you realized that these relationships mean so much to you that it was so important to what you were facing. Or you might have realized that you have greater appreciation or gratitude for life.

You notice the small things. You appreciate the small things. You start noticing things like sunsets or maybe like smiles on people's faces a little bit more. You realize and you learn not to take life for granted, not to take the little things in life, the things that like really make life meaningful and make life special. You'd learn not take those things for granted and really appreciate them and really cherish them.

Or you might have had a stronger spiritual connection, and this can be to a higher power where your faith has grown to what you're going through and you feel a greater connection to a higher power or God, where that spiritual faith — or it could be a higher power in terms of a cause or a value, something that you want to fight for. But in living for that meaningful thing, living for that thing that stands more for you and is greater than yourself, gives you a source of strength and gives you a source of support that you didn't have before the situation.

Or you might have had a changed set of priorities, where the things you used to prioritize, the things that you used to think are really important, you realize, "You know what? I wasted too much time on that. That's not what's really important in life. These are the things that are really important in life." And with that, the last one, is new opportunities.

You embrace new opportunities and maybe you take on things that you wouldn't have even considered before going through this. So after and through going through the struggle, you come out of it on the other side, experiencing post-traumatic growth. Or who you are now is in some way different and then some way better than who you were before.

Now there's a number of things that I definitely want to make sure I point out. So one, and I really want to punctuate this, this is not mutually exclusive for post-traumatic stress. It's just as common, if not, more common that people go through post-traumatic

growth, but often what people experience is some experience of post-traumatic stress, where they go through that difficult time.

Whatever that event or whatever that thing that happened that kind of led to this process, if it didn't impact you in a way, like it wasn't that struggle, then you're more likely than not going to grow from it. So it's not mutually exclusive.

The other thing that I think is so powerful about this, especially if you only learned about PTS or PTSD, is that when you're going through that struggle, when you're going through that tough time, it doesn't mean that you're ruined. That often, that's really just your body and brain helping you to learn from that experience. And we'll talk about the part of your stress response is releasing this hormone DHEA, which is a neurosteroid. It basically sets you up to learn from that experience so that you can grow and become stronger from this.

So part of going through that struggle is part of your stress response, helping you to learn, helping you to grow, helping you to build on that situation so that you come out of it on the other side better. And there's no timeframe for this to happen. It's not like if you don't grow within a month that you're not going to experience post-traumatic growth. It could be 10, 14 years ago of whatever happened might lead to this.

The other thing that I think is really interesting about post-traumatic growth, especially in the times that we have been going through — Richard Tedeschi is one of the leading researchers in this. I was recently listening to a talk that he was giving. And he really said like often when people think of trauma, and even the DSM, like when they're looking at trauma, trauma is like defined as death, serious illness, experiences of violence.

Really, how they're defining it now is anything that shatters one's world view. Anything that shatters the way that you see yourself, others or the world. And basically what he says is, this is an opportunity when we go through something that shatters our world view to rebuild our world view to help us to perform better, to help us to be better in the world and to grow stronger from what's going on.

And I think that's really important because for many of us, we might have experienced trauma throughout the past year. But just even like beliefs about where am I safe, is it safe to hug people, is it safe to be in a crowded room with people. All of those things might have challenged and changed your world view and creates that opportune time to rebuild, to grow, to look at that. And some of the research is now calling it post-stress growth because it really is a part of our stress response system that helps us to learn and grow from these different things that we might be going through.

And I like this quote that's on the side right here. This is from Tedeschi and Calhoun, "Considering the ancient Greek and Roman concept of the hero as an ordinary person who experiences an extraordinary event, survives it and then returns to the everyday world to express an important truth about life."

As I was listening to a talk he was giving, I literally had to pull over and write this one quote down. He was talking about this is a universal concept that post-traumatic growth

as we look throughout time, sort of all religions, all cultures have a sense of this idea of growing through trauma, growing through adversity, growing through whatever and this quote gave me chills, and I did the best I could to get it down.

But basically what he said is, “Whether by God or a product of evolution, our brains and bodies evolved so that trauma leads to growth for self and for service to family, community and the world, that those who experience post-traumatic growth often have a next mission.” Yes, they grow from themselves and who they are now is better than who they were, but it doesn’t just stop at themselves.

That they take what they learn, they take what they had and use that strength and use that growth to help others, to make the world better, to lead toward a meaningful cause. And again, that brings us back to stress. Stress is about others. Stresses is a team sport. And stress is deeply about meaning. Because if we didn’t care, if it wasn’t meaningful for us, then stress wouldn’t be activated. Our stress response wouldn’t be activated and wouldn’t lead us there.

The other two last points that I want to make about post-traumatic growth before we move on, is one, it’s not necessarily happily ever after. It’s not like you go through this and then you kind of dance off in the sunset. You still might be a jerk. You still might struggle with what happened to you or what you did.

You still might have flashbacks. It’s not saying that everything about you is perfect now going forward. It’s just that who you are now in some way better than who you were. And you might go through something else that leads you from going a little bit more.

And the last point I want to make is that sometimes the trauma, the stress that leads to this can be self-inflicted. But it’s not necessarily something that happened to you, but perhaps something that you did, something that you’re struggling with, a time where maybe you didn’t live your values.

And that, again, when you’re struggling with that and trying to make sense of that and trying to rebuild yourself, that stress response system is helping you to learn and to grow, if we embrace it, to learn and to grow from that experience. And often what happens is if we don’t embrace it and try to run from it and distract ourselves either through alcohol, drugs or other processes, then it just leads to kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy going forward. So again, it’s not necessarily something that happened to you, but it also can be something where you self-inflicted it to yourself.

So this is how stress can help you, and these are three of the main ways that stress can enhance our performance, our health and our well-being to help us to learn and grow from the different things that we are facing. So we’re going to take a look at the power of mindsets. And if you’re skeptical at this point, you should be.

This sounds like positive thinking. This sounds kind of like, “If I dream it, then everything will work out well.” So, skepticism is welcome and pushback is welcome, and please push back throughout this either in the chat box or in the Q&A. I welcome that, I like it, and I love discussing this stuff. So, the more pushback you have, feel free to give.

But I'm going to go through a research study that's not directly related to stress, but I think it's critical in showing us like, "How can my belief actually make me healthier?" Like, "How does this make sense?" So, this is a study done by Alia Crum, and she does a lot of like literally amazing mindset studies around stress but just also in general.

But basically, this study has nothing to do with stress, and what they did is they had people come in, they hooked them up to an IV — I forget what they said the study was about — but as they were hooked up to the IV doing whatever they were doing, they gave them a milkshake. And the first time they gave the milkshake, on the left, which says "Indulgence, decadence you deserve." This is kind of like that fatty 620-calorie milkshake that's really, really good and that kind of stuff.

As they were doing it, they were checking their ghrelin levels. And ghrelin is a hormone secreted in your gut in proportion to the amount of calories you consume. So when ghrelin is low, you feel full. When it's high, "I'm hungry. I need to eat more." So, if you eat a big meal, ghrelin drops, signaling that you're full, that you don't need to eat anymore. So, they measured, it's a hormone, what were their ghrelin levels after they drank the Indulgence milkshake?

So, they went away. Thirty days later, they came back and then they gave them this milkshake with this label that says "Sensi-Shake." And Sensi-Shake is a guilt-free satisfaction. On the label it says "0% fat, zero added sugar, only 140 calories." And they did the same thing, they tracked what were their ghrelin levels and how did that drop and so forth.

So, ghrelin dropped three times as much when they were drinking the Indulgence milkshake than the Sensi-Shake. And that actually makes sense because the Indulgence one says 620 calories, where the Sensi-Shake says 140 calories. So it would make sense for that to be the case that it would be about a third as much that it changed. Here's the punchline though, it was the exact same milkshake. The exact same 380-calorie milkshake that they took the same both times. The only thing that was different was the label. So, think about this.

The amount of the hormone ghrelin that their body produced that lets them know if they're hungry or not supposed to be based on the amount of calories you actually consumed was not based on the reality of the calories that they were consuming but their belief about the calories that they were consuming.

I mean, this to me was mind-blowing, like I assumed our body is like a machine and like that's how much gas is in there and then my body lets me know that I'm full. I thought like literally I see the picture of my stomach filling up and it's like, "Nope, no more food for you." But it wasn't based on that. It's not based on the reality of the calories, but it's based on our belief about the reality of the calories.

And the other part about the study I think it's so important is that it was outside of their awareness. It wasn't like they were thinking about how full I am. To them, that was just

reality. That was their experience. When I drank the Sensi-Shake, I wasn't full, I wanted more food.

This wasn't like me being difficult to my wife when she gives me turkey bacon, feeling like this just doesn't do it for me, I need the real stuff. Like this was just their experience during that time that in their reality, after that, they needed to go for lunch after the Sensi-Shake. They were full, they were stuffed after the Indulgence one. That was just their experience, so it was completely outside of their awareness.

The other part that I think is important about the study, which is a little bit trickier, is that to me, it shows that it's not positive thinking. It's goal-directed thinking. So, my goal is to lose weight. It's not thinking thin. It's not convincing myself that what I'm eating is healthy for me that I'm eating the health-food shake and that this is a third of the calories that I'm actually consuming. It's actually thinking full. So, part of this helps us to know that we need to be off of autopilot and have goal-directed thinking.

Our body and brain are in it for us. When we thought we weren't getting the calories that we have, it's like, "Hey, you need more calories." But I need to channel. I need to get off of autopilot and channel my body and brain to do what it is that I need. And it's not just like our focus and the opportunities available, and I do a lot of mindset trainings, where it's part of like, well, you take more opportunities in that. These are the hormones that your body are producing based on what you believe, but we need to tell our body what we need.

So, the reason why I think that's so important is because in the same way, our stress mindset, our beliefs about stress are going to impact the hormones that our body secretes and how our body reacts based on our beliefs about stress in itself and the stressors that we are experiencing, are going towards.

So, this is just kind of a brief diagram of sort of how our sympathetic nervous system activates or our stress response system and basically, it starts in the brain and us interpreting that "Hey, something I care about is at stake," whether it's not getting a parking ticket, whether it's not showing up late, whether it's hockey play-offs, which is the most stressful thing I think I've ever experienced, like whatever it is, we interpret something as, "This is something I care about. It's at stake. Boom! Our body moves into action."

So, our body secretes hormones. And no matter what we believe, either stress is my ally, stress is here to help me or stress is my enemy, our body secretes the hormones, adrenaline and cortisol. Basically, cortisol helps us to turn sugar and fat into energy and improves the ability of our body and brain to use that energy. It also suppresses some of the biological functions that are less important during stress, such as digestion, reproduction and growth.

And it also can suppress our immune functioning because there is something at stake at the moment, like that's what I need to focus on, not sort of our long-term health. So, how do we see that in our body? When our stress system is activated, our heart starts

pumping a little bit faster, because it's trying to pump blood, energy and oxygen to our extremities and to the things that we need for survival.

Because it's shutting down our digestive system, you might notice how we get dry mouth or kind of feel butterflies in our stomach. Also, we might notice that we're a little more shaky as we're going through this, because we're getting a boost of energy in there. We might notice we're sweating, which is our body trying to cool ourselves down to keep up optimal temperature as we're going through this.

So, we experience all of these things as our stress response system gets picked up no matter what our beliefs are. And again, this is just our body and brain helping us to deal with whatever that challenge is, whatever that situation is that's at stake. But this is where the difference comes in. When I believe that stress is here to help me, that stress is my ally, that I should embrace the stress system, that my body is giving me the energy to succeed, two additional hormones get produced more. One of them is oxytocin. So, oxytocin promotes connection.

Oxytocin is known as the cuddle hormone. And basically what oxytocin does is it drives us to go to the people where we feel closest for, to go to the people or reach out to the people that we care about that we know that can be supporting to us. Versus, if we believe that stress is my enemy, it leads us to isolate ourselves, to have self-doubt and maybe feel shame that we're feeling this. And this is really important because when we're going through something tough, there's a big difference between going through it alone and going through it when other people are there.

Also, oxytocin drives us to reach out and protect the people that we care about the most. It's kind of like, I'm not that strong. But if it was to save my daughter, I get that Hulk strength, right? But when someone that we care about is at stake when we go out to help others, oxytocin also leads us to reach out to help others to be there for others and to focus on the things that are more important to others. Stress is a team sport. It's not an isolation sport.

But if I believe stress is my enemy, I believe that stress is going to kill me. It's going to hurt my performance. It's going to hurt my learning and growth. It makes sense that I'm going to isolate myself.

Think about it. If stress is a bad thing, why would I want to spread that to my wife or my kid? If stress is something that, why would I want to damage them, the people that I care about? Further, if someone else has stress and they're a lot, why am I going to try to bring that stress along to myself and lead to my death and all that kind of stuff? So, that's one way in which believing stress is my ally. It creates more of that hormone oxytocin.

The other hormone that it builds more or secretes more is DHEAs. And DHEAs is a really important hormone because again, it's a neurotransmitter. It is that level of growth that helps us to learn and grow from the different things that we might be facing or different things that we might be going on.

And it's exactly what it sounds like. It's a hormone that helps our brain to grow stronger from stressful experiences. But the reason why — another reason why this is so important is that it counters some of the effects of cortisol. So, it speeds up our wound repair. It helps enhance our immune functioning. It helps our heart. I mean, literally, it helps our heart.

So, the DHEA-to-cortisol ratio is known as like a growth index of a stress response, and there's a number of studies that by looking at that growth index of a stress response, looking at the hormones, if you have higher DHEA-to-cortisol ratio, not higher, but a higher level, academic persistence leads, resilience is increased and GPA in college students. Also in military survival training, better focus, less dissociation, better problem solving and less PTS symptoms by secreting more of that hormone.

So, again, it makes sense that by doing this that would lead to the benefits that we see that we talked about before. Whereas if I believe stress is bad, then I need to avoid, distract, challenges, right? I need to get rid of that stress. And that's when we turn to alcohol, drugs, other forms of addiction or escape.

I think part of often what we turn to today, which then just compounds more stress is like things like social media, or just kind of binge-watching TV, where it's an escape from everything that were going on. And we can talk about it at the end of this if there's time, there's a time and place where that can be helpful, but often it's not there in the way that we want.

So, how does this show up? So, it leads to more relaxation. When we believe that stress is my ally, having these hormones produced, there's more relaxation and less inflammation in my blood vessels. My heart mimics pumping and exercise. Whereas on the other end, you're seeing increased constriction, inflammation of blood vessels and increased heart pumping that causes damage.

And this makes sense. If we believe that there is a threat, something that can challenge our life and challenge the things that we have, it makes sense that our body would constrict its blood vessels, because it doesn't want us to bleed out. If we get bitten by a tiger, well then, we need to constrict those blood vessels for our survival.

So, when it's life and death, when we think it's like that, if it's like a fight or something like that, it makes sense that our body will constrict the blood vessels. But if I believe stress is my ally, then we're getting the benefits of exercise, because our blood vessels expand, and we're able to better perform there.

So, our impulses are different. We're more likely to engage, problem-solve, reach out to others and learn and grow versus if we believe stress is my enemy, we fight, flight or freeze.

So now what I would like to do is just go through a few resources that you can use to help you to take stock of what is your stress response and then how can you improve your stress response. So, I'm going to put these links in the chat box again, but the first one is the Make Stress Good for You article.

And if you look on the screen, there is a survey that you can take that helps you to reflect on your general beliefs and behaviors, help you to reflect on the specific types of stressors or relationships that you might have and how do you respond to those, but also take that TFF focus. How are things like sleep, exercise, schedule or diet impacting you and your ability to handle stress.

So, this is a really great tool, and it provides a ton of resources for you to go to in terms of like, "All right, you know what, I'm really struggling in my relationships when I'm stressed." What are resources for that there? This website make stress good for you, can really help you to be able to handle that and learn tools and resources there. So, that's the first tool that I want to give you.

Part of that is understanding what is your sweet spot. So, I do want to make clear, chronic stress, if you're not helping yourself or giving yourself the opportunity to relax, to take a breath, to find some positive emotion in your life, you're stressed all the time, that can have a long-term health outcome. That can lead to burnout, breakdown, all of that type of stuff, and in any certain situation, there's a sweet spot in terms of what's going to enable you to have peak performance.

So, one of the tools in that article that I just sent you is helping yourselves to reinterpret the stress response as you move forward. And part of that is just now when you notice that shake in your hands or your heart rate pumping up, reinterpreting it in the moment, "This is just my body giving me the energy I need to perform."

My body and brain are in it with me, that's goal-directed learning to help your body and brain get it in with you so that you can perform at your best. "I'm excited to take on this challenge." Reframing that anxiety as excitement has been shown to be able to do that.

Or "I feel like this because this is important to me, and my body is in it." So, part of the goal of being good at stress is noticing when your stress response gets activated and, in the moment, just naming it. "Hey, this is what I'm experiencing," and then reframing it. "This is my body and brain helping me to perform at this task."

The last activity and thing that I want to make you aware of, and I'll put this one in the chat box is the, "create a stress helps me" mindset.

So, it's one thing and there's some research that we're just kind of learning about it and looking at examples can channel change or stress mindset in the short term, but there's a big difference between answering this question, "Stress is harmful to my health, performance and growth," as false in the moment and knowing that versus truly believing, and doing it because I had tons of experiences of things that I grew in because of stress.

Speaking in front of people, calling someone that I wanted to date for the first time, like going on a first date for the first time, there are tons of things. My best man's speech at my brother's wedding. I completely blew it. It was a disaster because stress got the best of me before I learned this. Those are vivid memories that I had that help form my world

view and my beliefs about stress. So, that's a big difference from actually believing it and actually changing your beliefs.

So the last activity that I want to send you and this is supposed to be a group discussion, a group intervention. I mean, you can do it yourself and answer these on your own, and really go in depth in terms of like "How has stress helped me in the past? How has stress helped me live my values in the past?"

Like, you know, I'm about to be disloyal, and I feel like that feeling in my gut that something's up and that's kind of my body and brain signal me I'm not living out my values. Or in terms of like our relationships, how does it help you to be attentive to your kids, or be attentive to your work, or be attentive and actually work hard to prepare for an important presentation or work thing that you might have.

So, this helps you to go through your experiences in the past where you might have really struggled. I mean, when stress has helped you to perform. But the reason why this is meant to be a group thing is your experiences are important, but sharing those with other people and sort of testimony, like, "Hey, this is how stress has helped me," and hearing how other people do it, that helps us to build that evidence. Having that social connection helps us to build that evidence that literally changes our beliefs.

So, these are all the questions that you would be answering throughout this activity, and after you do that and do this with other people, it's a great activity to do with others to help you to reflect, and this will help you to build it. The last tool that I want to highlight is basically sort of pre-gaming.

Preparing before each day. So, going into this day. What's a value that I want to live out today and really reflecting on how stress is going to help me do that, or just looking at your tasks like "What are the goals that I need to do today? All right, I got a big report I got to put together, I really need to focus on this. I need my body and brain to help me from, say, being distracted, and to get me zeroed in on this so that I can really dedicate time to this."

Or "You know what, it's my daughter's birthday, and I'm going to be stressed with all the different things coming on, I really need my body and brain in it to stay focused on my daughter and make sure I make this a special moment for her." So, thinking through, what are the things I might be facing today and being goal-directed, body and brain, this is what I need you to do, this is what I need to focus on. This helps you to prepare for what's going on.

So, just to reframe, and this is kind of summarizing a lot of research, some of which we were able to cover, others that we haven't. So, how can we be good at stress? Part of it is challenging. Having a challenge mindset. Reframe things that you're seeing as a threat, to "This is a challenge I can take on. I have the ability to do this and my body and brain are in it with me." So, reframing the threats that we have to a challenge, reframing the way that we see stress to helping us rather than harming us.

The next one is connecting. Reaching out for help and looking at how we can help others, trying to grow, what can I learn, how can I improve, embracing that feeling of like, “Why can’t I let this go? What’s going on?” and then prepare. “What are the values and goals I want to strive for today, and how can my stress response system help me to accomplish that?”

So, again, all of these resources are on hprc-online.org. I am also again going to put that Ask the Expert portal.

If you have any personal questions you don’t want to ask now, but would like help for, please use that. Also, if you would like to request a webinar like this or training like this, or attend one of our ones where it’s more like small-group-like, feel free to request that there as well.

And finally, that’s our Ask the Expert feature. We have a short survey that if you’re interested in, I’m just going to ask feedback as to how this presentation went. Anything that you learned or any feedback on HPRC. I’m putting that in the chat box as well. Please feel free to fill that out and then we can go the last slide and answer any questions.

Host:

And while we wait for those, I just want to take the minute, Gabe, and thank you so much for sharing your invaluable expertise and experience with us. And I also want to thank our attendees for participating in today’s webinar.

If you have questions after the webinar is over, you can always email us at moswebinars@militaryonesource.com, where we can forward them over to Gabe and his team for review. I’ll put the link on here to the Military OneSource website.

And just to remind you again, you can download a copy of this presentation in the handout section, and one was also emailed out this morning to all participants. All right, here’s a question: How do you respond to stress if it’s caused by toxic people in your life?

Gabe Paoletti:

That’s a really good question. I mean, part of it is, trying to manage your interactions with them and how much it is that they are going to be impacting you. One of the tough things about sort of all the mental fitness stuff is, there’s only so much that we can control and part of what we can’t control is those people and the other people.

One of the strategies that I do is tapping into that learning and growing. So, anyone who is difficult, there’s toxic people in our lives, we’re going to deal with other people that are going to be like them or maybe similar challenges that we have that are like them.

So, often, what I — at least, this is just me talking, what I try to do is like, all right, this is a learning moment, and how am I going to handle this situation? Then when I learn from this, then the next time that I handle an inappropriate comment or that kind of like passive aggressive dig, how I can handle that better in the future, is one way to go about it.

But the one thing I want to emphasize is, making sure you get time away, making sure that you have that time to calm down and have times that you enjoy. So, depending on who that toxic person is, sometimes that's easier said than done, but making sure that you're not constantly learning in dealing with that.

And then maybe there's conversations that you need to have if it's a work relationship or a personal relationship that stress can help you really zero in on.

Host:

Thank you. With that, there are no other questions. So, that concludes today's webinar on "Stress Optimization: Helping Make Stress Work for You Rather Than Against You." Thank you so much for attending.

Gabe Paoletti:

Thank you, everyone.