

THE COMBAT STRESS TRAINING PROGRAMME FOR ORGANISATIONS TO IMPROVE VETERAN WELLBEING

Module 1: Understanding Wellbeing and Resilience and How to Foster It

Transcript of Module 1:

Welcome to module one, 'Understanding Wellbeing and Resilience and How to Foster It'.

Outline of module 1:

- What is wellbeing?
- How can we promote wellbeing and resilience?
- How do we foster wellbeing in the veterans who are participating in our projects?

Part 1: What is Wellbeing?

Initial Reflections:

Let's reflect on the concept of wellbeing. We all have personal experience of wellbeing – what does 'wellbeing' mean to you? Take a moment to reflect on your personal understanding of wellbeing. There's no right or wrong answer, this is a very personal reflection - consider the times in your life where you've really felt a sense of wellbeing – what was going on for you and what words would you use to describe the experience?

Definitions of Wellbeing:

One recent definition of wellbeing is: "A state of being comfortable, healthy or happy." Many definitions of wellbeing refer to the presence of positive feelings and the absence of negative feelings.

However, there's an important dimension to wellbeing, which is not about traditionally 'positive' or 'negative' feelings, rather instead a sense of living life in a full and deeply satisfying way. As part of living a full and satisfying life, it is likely you will encounter difficulty or challenge and therefore experience some so-called 'negative' feelings. These feelings were necessary to enable you to feel a sense of deep satisfaction, perhaps accomplishment at seeing a job well done.

Sometimes it's not about shying away from so-called negative feelings, but instead being able to tolerate and even embrace negative feelings in order to live a full and satisfying life.

If you're a parent, you are likely to have many experiences of this. You are likely to encounter some challenging learning moments as you raise your children, but tolerating the necessary discomfort is necessary in order to fulfil your role of parent and achieve a sense of wellbeing in your parent identity.

There are many ways to define wellbeing, and the literature identifies some key areas of wellbeing:

- Physical health
- Mental health
- Employment or meaningful activity
- Adequate housing
- Life skills / emotional resilience
- Positive cultural/social environment
- Social integration
- Financial security
- Spiritual wellbeing

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a well-established model of wellbeing. Wellbeing exists on a continuum, depicted in Maslow's model as a pyramid. We need to have our lower level needs met before we can start to move towards having our higher-level needs met.

Our basic needs are those that are essential for survival - adequate air, water, food, shelter, sleep, clothing. Once these needs are met, we start to seek out the next level of needs for safety - personal security, access to resources, a sense of good health, adequate housing. Once we've met these needs, we start to seek love and belonging needs, in the form of friendship, family, a sense of connection and intimacy with others.

When this level of needs are met, we move into the higher-level needs of Esteem. These are giving and receiving respect, enabling our self-esteem to flourish, having a sense of status or recognition and a sense of freedom when appropriate.

It's important to recognize that if these lower level needs aren't met – of physiological, safety or love and belonging, a person won't have the energy or emotional headspace to seek out these kind of esteem needs.

The ultimate level of needs is reaching a state of self-actualization. This is a sense of being the most that one can be. These are defined very individually. For some, this could mean to lead a country or create a new invention, but for many of us, self-actualisation may be a desire to be the best mum or dad that we can be, or a trusted employee in our workplace, or to master a skill such as cooking or a musical instrument. These are very personally defined, but the key takeaway is to recognize that we have layers of needs and we need the lower level needs to be met before we can move towards achieving higher order needs.

It's important to recognise that we can move between these levels at different stages in our lives, due to changes in circumstances and priorities. Some of the veterans we are working with are likely to have been operating at the top of Maslow's hierarchy throughout their service years, however for those who struggle with the transition from the military, they may have periods of struggling to meet their basic needs, and with meaningful relationships. You may want to keep this model in mind and reflect on where a veteran participant is at on this hierarchy, with the veterans you're supporting.

Part 2: How Can We Promote Veteran Wellbeing and Resilience?

Acknowledging and owning our own personal strengths is a key aspect of wellbeing. Let's look specifically, at the strengths that may be fostered through military experience:

- Commitment to excellence
- Teamwork and working together
- Having a community/global outlook
- Time keeping
- A desire to serve others and to think beyond themselves out into their team, into their community
- Ability to work very well within a hierarchy
- Can-do attitude

There are many more! Do add to that list from your own experiences.

When thinking about how to promote wellbeing, resilience is an important piece of the conversation.

What is Resilience?

Resilience has been defined as, “The capacity to recover quickly from difficulties”

- The ability to ‘bounce back’
- Thriving despite (or because of) challenges
- Adapting well under pressure
- Growing: being strengthened and improved by adversity.

Resilience is about being able to adapt successfully when facing adversity. It is not entirely about strength; it’s about being flexible and adaptable, bending and not breaking under stress.

Resilience is not something that people either have or do not have. It involves behaviours, thoughts and actions that can be learned and developed by anyone.

Meichenbaum (2012) investigated resilience specifically with the military and veteran population in mind and identified six ‘fitness’ areas to boost resilience:

- Physical Fitness
- Behavioural Fitness
- Emotional Fitness
- Interpersonal Fitness
- Thinking Fitness
- Spiritual Fitness

We can become ‘fitter’, and therefore more resilient, through daily activity.

Reflection Exercise:

Pause for a moment and consider any thoughts and reactions that you have to this concept of resilience and particularly these areas of resilience. All these areas familiar to you? Are there any that are surprising? Or any that you particularly want to learn more about?

Let’s look at each area of resilience in turn.

Physical Fitness.

Maintaining physical health is an important foundation for emotional wellbeing.

- Healthy eating, balanced food choices, eating three meals a day
- Exercise regularly; structured exercise as well as movement

- Sleep hygiene and regular rest
- Be mindful of caffeine and alcohol intake

Behavioural Fitness.

Behavioural fitness is about being flexible and adaptable in the face of change by making use of your abilities and resources. It is reflected in the willingness to try out new ways of doing things and learning from mistakes and setbacks.

- 1. Develop a safe regular Routine.** Routines provide the pattern for our daily lives and generally support us in being able to do the things we need to do, when we need to do them.
- 2. Break tasks into doable subtasks:** Set goals for what you would like to achieve and then break it into specific concrete attainable subtasks. Identify when, where and how of each action that will occur. Reduce procrastination and start with tasks as soon as possible.
- 3. Avoid avoidance:** Avoidance behaviour maintains some mental health problems such as anxiety disorders and PTSD. Avoidance behaviour may include avoiding situations (such as place, people and other reminders of traumatic events) or avoidance of bothersome thoughts and conversation topics. Although avoidance can be a coping strategy in the short term, it has an opposite effect in the long term and prolonged avoidance can become a negative downward spiral.

Emotional Fitness.

Emotional fitness is about having the ability to accept emotions, enhance 'positive' feelings and understand 'negative/unwanted' emotions. There is a link between activity, emotions, health and well-being Taking care of yourself emotionally will boost your resilience.

- 1. Identifying and Labelling Emotions.** Emotions can be overwhelming and confusing but identifying and labelling them is a good place to start. Make some time to stop and try to identify what you are feeling – anxious, depressed, sad, angry. If we can identify what we are feeling it is easier to choose the correct ways of dealing with it. Do I feel depressed and lethargic – doing something positive will help. If I feel anxious – doing something calming will help. Some breathing and mindfulness exercises might be helpful at this stage.
- 2. Intentionally Generate Positive Emotions.** Emotions change depending on what you do. Engaging in regular activities that have *meaning and purpose* to you as an individual can create opportunities to enhance positive emotions and improve your health and well-being. Make a list of the activities which energise and uplift you, and those which calm and relax you. Schedule at least one each into your day. Reflect

on which emotions you feel and how strongly, both during and after the activity. Seek opportunities for fun and laughter. Laughter triggers regulating brain chemicals. Plan some fun and enjoyment into your day – whatever works for you – movies, building a puzzle, reading a book, listening to music ... By doing activities that makes you feel better, you start to create an upward spiral of positive emotions, behaviours and thoughts

3. **Allow yourself to share your feelings.** Find somebody that you trust and share how you feel and your concerns.
4. **Positive self-talk.** Be careful about what you tell myself – including the words in your head. Use Positive Coping Self-Statements that you can say to yourself in place of unhelpful 'automatic thoughts' that may occur when feeling stressed or anxious.

Interpersonal Fitness.

Relationship fitness is essentially about having positive relationships to help manage in difficult times and to help grow afterwards. A resilient person can both ask for help and offer help. It is about building mutually caring relationships.

1. **Participate in a social community.** Find ways of getting involved in your community. Keep connected to your local community. Being part of a group can be beneficial, as group membership has shown to be 'curative'. Find a group that shares your interests – walking group, football club, model building, art, cooking, pottery, yoga, etc. Pets can also be used to maintain and develop relationships.
2. **Give back and help others.** Research tells us that there is a definite relationship between what we offer others in terms of kindness, compassion and offering our time for others and how that makes us feel happier, healthier and unbelievably helps us to live longer! Research also tells us that helping others helps us in turn have a different perspective on our own lives and it can have positive effects on mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. Can you offer mentorship, advice and kindness? Can your military experiences help others? Teams and groups are even more powerful to the veteran community. For those who can take on a volunteer role, it will not only help in the collective response, on an individual level, it will improve self-worth and feelings of membership.
3. **Lean on others and seek and accept help.** Remember that a resilient person can both as for help and offer help. Sharing your emotions with somebody that you trust can build mutually caring relationships. It is also okay to seek help from helplines or professional help if needed. Find ways to overcome the barriers to seeking help.
4. **Be Mindful of Communication Styles.** Use your communication (speaker/listener) skills and social problem-solving skills but remember that there is a cultural difference

between military and 'civvies' and be mindful and respectful of the difference in communication styles.

Thinking Fitness

Thinking fitness is about being psychologically flexible and mentally supple. It involves noticing and avoiding 'thinking traps', using your problem-solving skills and maintaining optimism. Resilience is as about the 'mindset' as the actions.

- 1. Make Time for Your Mind.** It can be easy to fall into thinking traps and ruminations. To some extent everyone ruminates or dwells on their problems. Thinking about our problems can be helpful: especially if we reach a solution and put it into action. Although Rumination is normal, excessive use of it can become problematic and make us feel more hopeless and anxious. If you can solve the problem, do so. Otherwise use distraction and activities to change your focus. Mindfulness has become universally accepted as being effective for improving mental health. Great apps include Headspace (currently free) and Calm. However, lots of people don't tolerate well a traditional 'still' meditation. Tai chi and yoga are another way, using movement mindfully to provide focus and help to be present and in the moment.
- 2. Set Concrete Measurable Goals.** If you write a goal down, it increases your commitment to it. Goals provide purpose, direction and a sense of achievement when they are reached. Seemingly small goals like completing household tasks can help keep you positive and motivated.
- 3. Keep Problem-Solving.** You will already have extensive problem-solving skills developed by overcoming challenges during your service...living and breathing the 7p's! Are there projects you can lend your expertise to? Making good use of your strengths and adaptability. You may find it second nature to view problems as a 'challenge' with many alternative solutions. Are there things you learned from others on deployment about how to overcome obstacles that you can share?
- 4. Learn.** Lifelong learning will help keep the brain active and help it to adapt. Even a fully developed adult brain is considered to be 'plastic', meaning it can develop new neurons, pathways and connections. Learning a new skill, practicing an instrument or doing an online course are great ways to keep the brain stimulated and promote resilience. Schedule time for these activities into your routine.

Spiritual Fitness

Spiritual Fitness is about searching and having meaning and purpose in life. It is about putting your core values and what is important to you into action. Spirituality provides a framework for meaning making and a sense of belongingness. For 'believers' in a faith it is a way to search for benefits in traumatic events. Spirituality helps individuals implement their core values into social actions. Individuals who have a 'why' to live for can bear with almost any traumatic events. (Meichenbaum, 2012).

It is strongly linked to identity and is shaped and expressed through our daily activities. Doing activities that fit with your values creates a sense of belonging.

- 1. Practice an alternative form of spiritual activity.** Practice a creative form of spirituality – such as painting or drawing, music (playing or listening to inspiring music) or writing/poetry. There is an excellent evidence base demonstrating the therapeutic value of creative activities. They can be a way to transform chaos into order, involve 'letting go', act as a way of self-expression and focus attention away from stress.
Or practice a physical form of spirituality such as walking, prayer, yoga or martial arts. Practice mindfulness. Embrace the outdoors – spending time in the outdoors is restorative, calming and helps to maintain perspective. Humans have an undeniable innate connection to the natural world. Go for walks, hikes, swims or runs to connect with the world around you
- 2. Participate in a spiritual or religious group.** Become part of group that practices or workshops together that works for you – this could be a meditation group, scriptural study group, a congregation, etc. It can help you to develop a sense of belonging and gain inspiration through connections with others. This can be a physical group that meets in person at a designated location or an online community.
- 3. Share with and Inspire Others.** Military personnel are practiced in dealing with adversity. Can your experiences and perspectives inspire others and give them hope now? Share thoughts and questions with others who have similar beliefs. Discuss the spiritual meaning of your difficult experiences with others who care about you.
- 4. Take Action: Daily action + passion = purposeful life.** Fine your purpose in life. Try doing and experiencing different things. Find your passion. Plan something every day that is purposeful, that takes you towards your purpose. Choose purposeful activities that you can engage in locally, or perhaps support from a distance.

Reflection Exercise:

So, take a moment to reflect on resilience. What are your thoughts about these areas of resilience? Are there any you would add? Which areas of wellbeing are relevant for your organisation / the veterans you support?

Part 3: How to Foster Veteran Wellbeing in Our Projects

Let's consider how we can use this knowledge of resilience to foster veteran wellbeing. Some of these ideas you will already be doing, others may not apply to the particular project you are involved in. The invitation is simply to keep an open mind and listen out for one or two areas you may like to consider as relevant for the support you provide.

Physical and behavioural resilience: It's important to start with the very basic ideas, which I'm sure you already doing - tending to physical needs, ensuring that there is adequate supply of food, water, hydration, regular breaks, appropriate equipment. If you're involved in a very active project, ensuring enough rest breaks are important, but equally if it's quite a sedentary project, you may want to ensure adequate opportunities for movement and the shift in energy that accompanies it.

Be aware that some veterans may need more regular breaks than others and allowing the flexibility for that is important. Aim for balance of activity. Many of your projects are focussed on social activities and working in teams, however some may be more individual focused. If so, do what you can to enable a team building aspect where those individuals can come together and perhaps reflects on the activity as a group.

I'm sure you already have recommendations in terms of alcohol use and smoking.

Consider the activities themselves. Are they bite size enough for a beginner who is lacking in confidence? Step by step, baby steps are helpful for those who may be struggling with confidence levels.

Consider how to embed encouragement and rewards, celebrating both achievements and participation and having opportunities for people to celebrate each other's involvement can be important.

Interpersonal fitness and peer support: Think about how you can foster a sense of support, even camaraderie amongst participants. We know that camaraderie is an important ingredient for getting through the challenges of military life. Some veterans leave the military and really

miss that sense of camaraderie with their peers. So, what can you do in your organization to promote that? It may be appropriate to have buddy system, particularly for veterans who may be shy or more isolated. Pairing up allows a special bond to be created, so they know they can really look out for their buddy in particular.

Do what you can to involve veterans in the decision making and provide options and choices where possible. Gather regular feedback from your veterans about their experiences and as a result of this feedback, consider adaptations to the projects where appropriate.

Consider ways that participants can help each other in a task, as we've explored, supporting each other can foster wellbeing and higher sense of self-esteem. It's human nature to get that good feeling when we've helped someone else out.

Make it easy for veterans to ask for help or to get things wrong without fear or judgment. Some participants may have anxiety about getting things wrong, especially when there's a skill building element. You may want to consider normalising this from the start, when you're welcoming and scene setting, sharing that its natural to find new skills challenging, and we all take varying amounts of time to gain confidence. Find ways to make it easy for participants to speak up if they need help.

Look for ways to signpost to other partner organisations. You're making connections with other grant holding organisations, how can you support veterans to make these connections and signpost to other projects and community groups to widen their social network?

Emotional and thinking fitness: In the current times of COVID-19, it's important to say a few words specifically about the huge array of emotions that are happening for all of us at different stages of this pandemic.

Emotions are important. They provide important information. They provide clues about what's going on for us and ALL emotions are important. Often the negative emotions get a bad reputation, but it's the negative emotions that act as powerful clues that we may need additional support. They're a sign that we've reached the limits of what we can cope with, and so it's important that we don't deny our negative feelings.

It's important to acknowledge that we all experience a range of emotions and feelings ebb and flow, hour by hour, moment to moment sometimes. It's OK not to be OK at any time, but even more so in the times of this pandemic. There's a tool we can utilise called the Feelings Wheel,

which is an attempt to highlight the range of emotions that we have. I believe that there are well over 100 feelings on this wheel, and this can be a simple tool to support people with the language of their emotions, if they're struggling to find the words.

The Stress Bottle is another way of helping us to understand our capacity to tolerate stress in our day-to-day lives. Just like a bottle of liquid has a finite capacity, a limit to how much it can hold, the same is true for us as humans and our ability to hold and tolerate emotions.

You can see in this image, the types of worries and concerns that we may carry around with us. Just dealing with the everyday ups and downs of life – paying the bills, dealing with stress at home or work, takes emotional energy. The veterans we support are often walking around with stress bottles that already half full because they've been through traumatic events, which may not be fully processed. They may have difficult memories, multiple experiences of loss and grief, perhaps mental health struggles to contend with. In the times of COVID19 particularly, we are all dealing with a range of additional stressors - health concerns, concerns about transmitting the virus, we may have financial difficulties, changes to the way that we're working and living with social restrictions.

When our stress bottles inevitably become full, it only takes a small droplet of everyday stress, the sort that we can usually take in our stride, it becomes too much, and our stress shows itself in predictable ways. Perhaps some of these signs are familiar to you, I know I've certainly experienced some of these over the months that have passed. A sense of being of lacking in motivation, feeling more irritable or snappy with people, feeling panicky or nervous, lacking in concentration or memory difficulties. You may have found it difficult to sleep or be waking up early in the morning with worries. You may have experienced changes in your appetite – eating more or less than usual.

If this sounds familiar, this is understandable. It's a natural response to unnatural circumstances. So, what we want to do really is think about how we can turn on the tap of our stress bottles and release some of these stress that were feeling and learn to manage it.

For COVID19 specific support, I'd like to direct you to the Combat Stress website where there is a whole library of self-help materials specifically focused at mental health support and practical ideas for coping during COVID-19: <https://www.combatstress.org.uk/mental-health-support-during-covid-19>

Signs of Emotional Distress:

What are the signs of emotional distress, both during the current times and in the future when the pandemic passes? Here are some of the signs that you might like to think of as flags that may indicate that emotional distress is present:

- Irritability/ Anger
- Anxiety/Seems 'On Edge'
- Withdrawn/ less interest in usual activities
- Low or sad in mood
- Tiredness, fatigue
- Trouble concentrating
- Using alcohol/substances to cope
- Self-criticism/a sense of hopelessness

Practical Examples:

Let's make this a bit more practical and think about how these signs may present themselves in an activity-based project, as a flag that there may be a wellbeing issue that could be explored.

Scenario 1:

You are running a project that requires participants to work in small groups. A veteran participant takes the lead and starts to give instructions to other group members. One group member is struggling with their part, and the veteran seems frustrated. He starts raising his voice and getting impatient and snapping at other group members.

Scenario 2:

You are running an activity project. In the instruction phase, a veteran is struggling to keep up with following the guidance provided. You can see she is getting frustrated and embarrassed she can't keep up with others in the group. You hear her say, "What's the point I can't do this" and exit the activity.

Scenario 3:

You are running a walking group. You are at the rear of the group and walking alongside a veteran who seems quite tired. He tells you he had a “few too many” last night but laughs it off and changes the subject.

Reflection Exercise:

Thinking about your own projects and teams, how could you approach these scenarios?

Starting a Wellbeing Conversation:

So, you've identified a wellbeing flag in one of these scenarios. What next? Here are some ideas of “conversation starters” to open up a conversation about wellbeing. These are just ideas, for you to adapt to your own conversational style:

- “Would you like to talk?”
- “May I ask about how you're feeling?”
- “Can I check in with you? Are you OK? How are things going for you?”
- Share what you notice: “I notice you seem [e.g. more frustrated than usual], how are you doing? / have I got that right?”

Whatever way the person responds, acknowledge it may have been quite difficult for them to be honest with you. It's a moment of vulnerability, so express empathy – make eye contact if you can and offer a reassuring statement such as “That sounds really tough, thank you for sharing this with me.” You could follow up with, “Have you been feeling this way more often than usual?”

A veteran may of course say, ‘I'm ok, I've just not slept well’ or ‘I'm just having a bad day’ and of course that's part of being human! Emotions ebb and flow and it's important to normalise this. Dispel feelings of failure, blame, shame, using the following ideas to guide you:

- “Show empathy: “What you're going through sounds really tough.”
- Normalise that expression of emotion is healthy: “You've been through such a lot, thank you for sharing this with me.”
- “I'm here to support you, we'll find a way through together”
- “How can I / we best support you?”
- What needs to happen for you to feel more at ease? What has helped in the past?”
- Consider and check in regarding confidentiality of information shared
- Consider your organisational needs regarding wellbeing and record keeping

Sadly, but perhaps understandably given the stigma that has historically been attached to mental health issues, many people do feel a sense of shame if they suspect they may need emotional or mental health support. Keep this in mind and find one or two 'sound-bites' that feel comfortable to you that you can 'pull out of your toolbox' at this stage in the conversation. It can be natural to feel a little paralyzed, perhaps worrying that you don't know what to say, but simply empathizing and showing that you're here for the person, you're doing your best to understand and you want to support them, goes a long way.

Asking a direct question, such as, "What needs to happen for you to feel more at ease?" can be an invitation for the person to reflect on what they need, perhaps recalling experiences of overcoming struggles in the past. It can activate a problem-solving part of their mind, perhaps the person might realise they need to get out more or spend more time with other people or talk to my loved ones because I'm worried about them. It can really invite that problem-solving approach.

Do consider the confidentiality of what's being shared and refer to your own organizational needs regarding record keeping.

Reflection Exercise:

Which of these strategies are you already doing? Thinking about your own projects and teams, have you heard any new ideas that may be possible to try, or experiment with trying out, in the weeks to come?

Signposting Veterans to Mental Health Support Services:

The final area is signposting veterans to mental health support and future modules are really going to explore mental health aspects in greater detail.

Combat Stress services include a 24/7 helpline where veterans can self-refer for services or can be signposted to other organizations for relevant support. Services from Combat Stress include interdisciplinary support from occupational therapists, nurses, psychologists, psychiatrists and peer and veteran buddy support. Support is also provided to families and partners.

In the current times of COVID-19, support is delivered via online video calls and telephone therapy. Combat Stress have a library of digital, online self-help support on a range of mental health subjects via our website: www.CombatStress.org.uk

Reflection Exercise:

What is your top take-away for yourself / your project? What are your 1-3 actions/next steps for yourself / your project?

I hope you've found this training session useful. There are three more modules to come, so we'll be building on these ideas in future training sessions. I'd like to invite you to provide your evaluation and feedback after the training, it will help us to continue to improve the training that we deliver.

Finally, a special acknowledgement to:

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Thank you so much for your attention and for all you are doing to support the veterans in your organisations.

References:

Please see the PowerPoint file of this module for the full list of references.