

Performance Psychology for Tactical Professionals

by

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Chair: Exercise / Sport Psychology SIG

Peak Performance in professions that require tactical prowess needs individuals who possess physical stamina, skill, specific training, and talent. However, perhaps equally, if not more important are superior cognitive and emotional skills that often make the difference between life and death. Military personnel, police officers, firefighters, paramedics and all first responders must make split second decisions every day in order to best respond to life threatening situations. Doubt is not an option. In these very important professions that most Americans take for granted, finding a better way to perform is a key factor in performance. Psychological Skills Training (PST) has become the new standard for Tactical Peak Performance. The term “tactical athletes” was coined by the former chief of staff of the Army George Casey (Army Times, April 2, 2011). Training comes primarily from the field of Applied Sport Psychology (Zinsser, Perkins, Gervais, Burbelo, 2004). This article provides only a very brief introduction to the field of Applied Sport Psychology in the many important tactical based professions.

Atomic sized stress levels are the norm rather than the exception for those who engage in the tactical professions. Recognition, understanding and awareness of one’s own increased psychophysiological levels of stress are absolutely imperative for the best rapid response in any given situation (Taylor, Mujica-Parodi, Padilla, Markham, Potterat, Momen, Sander, & Larson, 2009). Changes in physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses appear to react simultaneously in dangerous situations. These are mind-body interactive biological and neurological changes affecting the individuals thought process, attitudes, feelings, and resulting behaviors. Being able to stay focused, emotionally stable, and make the right decisions during a mission on the battlefield with bullets flying and IEDS exploding, facing criminals with a loaded gun, saving a child in a burning building, or providing emergency medical service in a critical auto accident on a freeway are skills which can be and are taught through various stress management courses and performance enhancement training programs (Tillman, Rvizza, & Statler, 2011).

Psychological hardiness or often referred to as Mental Toughness is viewed as one of the most important factors related to the ability to successfully perform under a multitude of extreme circumstances among the special forces (Bartone, Roland, Picano, & Williams, 2008). The ability to remain calm, focused, confident, and in control of one’s emotions under extreme duress are key mental skills that are often equated with mental toughness (Jones, Hanton & Connaughton, 2007; 2002 as cited in Center for Performance Psychology).

The United States Military Forces are leading the way in instituting “Performance Psychology” training for soldiers at all levels. The Army Center for Enhanced Performance (ACEP) trains soldiers using their version of Mental Skills Training (MST). Training comes primarily from the field of Applied Sport Psychology. The focus of this training is increasing the mind – body connection enhancing soldier’s performance. Increased confidence, attention, and managing one’s emotions and corresponding energy levels are key components in these training programs. In addition, speedy learning facilitation is also emphasized during the training (Hite, 2008). Applied training in military drills using these new mind – body skills are integrated into combat drills practice in order to gain the automatic use of these skills before being deployed in real missions. The Navy Seals are no strangers when it comes to mental toughness while engaging in top - secret high performance missions. Lieutenant Commander Mike H of executive officer of SEAL Team 10, says, “Today, our primary weapons systems are our people’s heads. You want to excel in all the physical areas, but the physical is just a prerequisite to be a SEAL. Mental weakness is what actually screens you out.” (Fear and mental toughness, n.d.)

A brief history of these programs began at The United States Military Academy (USMA) at West Point, NY. This was the focal point of creating the first official military Center for Performance Enhancement (CEP) psychology training programs in 1993. The purpose was to train its cadets to excel in the classroom, sports, and military training. The curriculum was created using a combination of sport psychology and academic applied techniques. Training soldiers in the field using Mobile Training Teams (MTT) became popular from 1999 – 2004. The demand to sustain this type of training became overwhelming to continue in this manner. Therefore, ACEP training sites were added starting in 2006 at Ft. Bragg, NC. Subsequently, twelve more sites have since been added to locations throughout the country. The ACEP program was integrated into the CSF Performance and Resilience Enhancement Program (CSF-PREP) in 2010, which is run from the Pentagon.

Performance Psychology / Mental Skills Training (MST) Programs frequently include: Goal Setting, Imagery, Visualization, Confidence Building, Attention Control, Energy Management, Breathing Techniques, Bio-Feedback, and Neurofeedback Training to name a few (Hite, 2008). Training is provided systematically in each area building from learning the basic skills to more advanced skills. The USMA program begins with the foundations of Cognitive processing. Soldiers gain knowledge as well as applied psychology training for specific skills and tasks. This course involves a basic foundation of cognitive processes and restructuring. These skills address self-talk, maladaptive beliefs, self-confidence, and self-image. The remaining four parts of the program focus on the other components regarding goal setting, attention control, stress management, and imagery skills (Zinsser, Perkins, Gervais, & Burbelo, 2004). The Navy Seals also implement a similar training program applying these training concepts and testing under vigorous and extreme situations in order to prepare them for missions as well as rule out potential candidates (Akil II, 2009).

There are full-time positions for employment available as a Performance Enhancement Specialists working for companies like SAIC who are contracted with the military to provide mental skills training and applied sport psychology. More recently, Athletic Performance Training Centers around the U.S. are now getting into the game hiring Sport Psychology Consultants as Mental Conditioning and / or Tactical Trainers for military training. Athlete's Performance and IMG are two of the larger centers now searching for qualified professionals. Credentials and experience for obtaining employment Techniques usually require a Master's or Doctoral degree in Sport Psychology or a human performance related degree. These companies also prefer AASP Certification as well. They also look for professionals with previous performance enhancement skills training experience as well as working with the military are also desirable (SAIC, 2013).

There is much more to be read, researched, and discussed regarding how applied Sport Psychology and Mental Skills Training can make a positive impact for all professionals who everyday must perform at their peak to save lives and protect our nation.

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