

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF SERVICE

By

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Human beings have a natural resistance to killing their own kind. In fact, it has been identified that only 15-20% of American rifleman in combat during World War II fired at the enemy (Grossman, 2005). Consequently, military training has been adapted over the years to ensure that soldiers are properly equipped (physically and psychologically) to perform their job and complete the required tasks of a Soldier. This occurs through a conditioning process, which is commenced at recruit training.

From the moment recruit training starts, all individuality, prior identity and sense of self is stripped and discarded, so that there is a clean slate for the military to build a soldier who can perform the set tasks required by the organisation. Each soldier is slowly equipped with the skills and resources required to perform their job. This forced, structured process of socialising people to the military ensures that the Soldier identity is formed and secured, and that the military values are internalised, so that there is conformity to the military culture and separation from civilians (Cooper et al., 2018 and Binks and Cambridge, 2018). This indoctrination process appropriately hardens the individual and strengthens them with masculine attributes (e.g. stoicism, self-reliance, aggressiveness) in order to condition a fight stress response, required for combat.



To overcome the natural human resistance to killing and a human's natural fear response, soldiers are conditioned through repetitive drills, reinforced by fear and shame tactics (such as scolding when standards are not met and threatening rejection), in order to ensure that any required military action can be completed without conscious thought when required. This conditioning process is imperative in operational environments and has resulted in the firing rate in combat increasing from 15% in WWII to 90% in Vietnam (Grossman, 2005). The military has successfully developed the capacity to create an effective soldier that will perform the required tasks for the organisation.

Just as this conditioning process is important for the organisation, it is also important and serves many functions for the Soldier. This process offers security, stability, safety, acceptance, identity and a sense of



belonging to the individual. For some, this can be the first time that the person has experienced some or even all of these core needs. The military becomes a place where the individual can find mates, work, their hobbies, their career, family and fun. A place where the individual develops a sense of competence, meaning and purpose in their life. After years of service and operational deployments the person comes to only identify themselves as a Soldier and has lost their ability to have an independent sense of self. This process works and operates well whilst a Soldier is fit, healthy, well and able to perform their duty and remain within the military. However, it is not sustainable.

Once a Soldier is no longer able to perform their duty (physically, psychologically or in the way demanded by the organisation) in the manner expected, for many people things can start to derail. Once transitioned from the military, the individual is faced with many challenges, which poses significant risks for the individual. Transition from the military is now widely acknowledged as a significant and important issue to be addressed worldwide because of the challenges ex-serving military personnel face, such as changes in identity, occupation, finances, social support, relationships, routines, and residence. This was highlighted in a research study (Mental Health Prevalence and Pathways to Care Summary Report, Mental Health and Well-being Transition Study) published by the Department of Veteran Affairs in 2018. It has been suggested that those who internalize the military identity, beliefs and values the most, find transition more difficult (Binks and Cambridge, 2018).

Due to the disconnection and alienation that can occur at transition for a Soldier, they can get stuck between the two worlds they have existed: the military and the community. They no longer belong in the military and they don't know how or don't want to belong in the community. This causes psychological distress and contributes to a large proportion of ex-serving military

“Man is not by nature a killer”

*Lt. Col. Dave Grossman from his book
“On Killing: The Psychological Cost of
Learning to Kill in War and Society” (2005)*



personnel experiencing mental health problems and some ultimately taking their own life. Often the safest and best option for the ex-serving personnel is to find ways for the Soldier to 'fit in'. There are many ways this can be achieved, but generally it is by sticking with other veterans or veteran organisations. This can be protective and sustainable; however, it is limited.



The cultural adjustment and identity issues evident at transition require attention. In my opinion, it is these cultural adjustment and identity issues which need to be addressed post-transition and that this is far more important, valid and effective than a narrow focus on mental conditions, such as PTSD. Whilst a distressing and difficult process, in my clinical practice I find that when the person can learn to have the Soldier step back and they can find themselves and their own identity again, within the community, they can find contentment, connection and belonging again. ■

Megan is a Clinical Psychologist who owns and operates her own private practice at Bald Hills, Brisbane QLD. As an ex-serving soldier (RACT 1999 – 2004) and Military Psychologist, Megan has spent a large proportion of her career working with military personnel.

From 2008 to 2012, Megan worked as a contracted psychologist at Tobruk Lines Health Centre, supporting 2 CDO REGT, SOER and SOLS, whilst also working as an Army Reserve Psychology Officer for 1 CDO REGT.

In recent years, Megan has enjoyed combining her two passions: Schema Therapy and veteran mental health. Megan has recently commenced a Master of Philosophy in the School of Applied Psychology at Griffith University QLD to investigate the potential of a schema focussed group intervention to assist military personnel transitioning from the military by modifying the "soldier identity". She hopes to start recruitment for this project later this year.

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