

# Life Challenges for Leaders\*

## I. Overview

### ■ Life Challenges are Both Positive and Negative

People face challenging life situations every day. Often, life circumstances create positive challenges and serve to help motivate marines and sailors to push themselves to meet the challenge! However, when a marine/sailor perceives an event to be a threat to their physical and emotional well being, they are likely to have a negative reaction to it.

A marine/sailor's response to difficult life circumstances depends on a number of factors. These factors may include- support from friends and family, whether they view the situation as a "challenge to be overcome" versus a "threat," the degree to which they feel in control of the situation, and how committed they are to friends, family, and work.

### ■ Role of Leadership in Meeting Life Challenges--General Measures

In the military environment, it is important that leaders recognize the potential impact of life stressors on marines/sailors in order to optimize mission readiness. Leaders should collaborate with base helping resources to ensure that members have the support they need to meet life's challenges. Additionally, leaders should emphasize and support self-care strategies, including time off for leisure and exercise, and collaborate with the marine's/sailor's family and other community support when needed.

### ■ Keys to Remember in Helping People Deal with Life Stressors

- Everyone has stress in his or her life.
- Most personal reactions to significant life events are normal.
- Negative reactions need to be dealt with to avoid disruption of the ability to perform and the development of physical and psychological illnesses.
- In many cases, there are simple and effective strategies for marine's/sailor's to deal with life stressors.

### ■ More Severe Stressors Following a Traumatic Event

Severe life stressors may have an enduring and profound impact on a marine's/sailor's life. Examples of immediate potential and long-term negative consequences of severe stressors are:

- Withdrawal
- Impulsive Behaviors
- Suicidal Behaviors

- Violent Behavior
- Depression
- Interpersonal problems

Severe stressors also provide marines and sailors with opportunities for **growth**, for example they can help:

- Strengthen coping skills.
- Develop problem-solving skills.
- Develop increased confidence when faced with life challenges.

Constructive strategies for coping with severe life stressors include:

- Understanding the facts of the situation and piecing together all bits of information.
- Managing one's personal level of distress and understanding that distress is normal.
- Using social networks and military resources for support.
- Problem-solving.

Seeking help early may prevent the build up of troubling symptoms, including depression and suicidal behaviors. When help is needed, it is okay to refer sailor's to Mental Health, Fleet and Family Support Center, Marine Corps Community Services or the Chaplain. The main goals of early intervention include:

- Relieving symptoms such as worry or sadness.
- Restoration to previous level of functioning.
- Identify factors that would prevent future stress reactions.
- Teach adaptive life skills, so that the marine or sailor is better able to cope with future pressures and difficulties.

### ■ **Community Resources for Sailors Experiencing Life Stressors**

Leaders can assist marines/sailors experiencing life stressors through military resources. The following are suggested:

- Recommend a self-referral to the MTF Mental Health Clinic for a routine appointment.
- A referral to the Fleet and Family Support Center (FFSC), Marine Corps Community Services (MCCS) may also be helpful.

## ■ Potential Barriers to Support

If you are considering referring someone for counseling to help them cope with a significant life stressor, be aware of several potential barriers:

- Some members hold the mistaken belief that visits to Fleet and Family Support Center or Marine Corps Community Services (MCCS) will be part of the unit record. FSSC/MCCS documentation is not put in their Medical Record. However reports to the Commanding Officer are made if it is a serious concern such as being suicidal or homicidal, or if someone admits to a crime.
- Some marines and sailors view mental health problems as a sign of weakness. Remember that **seeking help is a sign of strength!**
- Some marines or sailors may fear that coworkers or supervisors may find out they are in treatment and may feel some shame or embarrassment.
- Some fear that being in counseling will be detrimental to their career. *The process of selecting marines and sailors for assignments, schools, and promotions does not include review of the medical record unless there is a duty-limiting profile.*

## ■ Resilience--Meeting the Challenges of Stressful Life Events

Resilience is the ability to cope effectively with life challenges. Having supportive relationships, maintaining an optimistic outlook, self-confidence and keeping things in perspective assist in building resilience. A crucial step in building resilience is seeking assistance when needed. Help can come from family members, friends or peers, support groups, books, and helping professionals. Strategies to build resilience include stress management, time management, and enhancing one's problem-solving capability:

**Stress management** begins with the marine/sailor learning to recognize their personal signs of stress and to identify personal stressors. Plans can then be developed to either minimize the stressors or the adverse effects of the stressors. Stress management teaches that change is a part of living and most crises are not insurmountable problems. These programs also emphasize maintaining a health lifestyle that includes adequate sleep, good nutrition, regular exercise, and limited alcohol use.

**Time management** can be one of the skills developed to manage stress that involves identifying and prioritizing tasks. Tactics are then developed to efficiently complete high priority tasks, limiting distractions and overcoming procrastination. Some tactics might include the following:

- Say no to time-wasting demands.
- Pace yourself.
- Build safety zones into schedules that are dedicated to priority activities that take longer than expected.
- See a task through to completion using a well thought out plan.

**Problem-solving skills** can be enhanced through a methodical approach to addressing problems. This method involves the following steps:

- Defining the problem and breaking it into realistic and manageable elements.
- Think of several solutions and evaluate the appropriateness of each solution.
- Weigh potential costs and benefits for the different proposed solutions.
- Put the solution into practice and evaluate the outcomes.

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### III. References

- From *Leader's Guide to Managing Personnel in Distress U.S. Air Force*  
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