

Common Responses to Combat Stress and Suggestions for Getting Back in Balance

| | 1. Common Automatic Responses | 2. Power of These Responses | 3. Possible Impact Afterwards | 4. Suggestions for Restoring Balance |
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| The Body | Powerful chemicals go into “overdrive”—heart racing, “super-human” strength, “freeze” responses, tensing protective front core muscles. | In combat, speed and strength help you feel confident, react quickly and decisively, fight, save lives, escape harm. “Freezing” can save lives. | After these chemicals go into overdrive, the body has some unfinished business. It may be shaky, “jumpy,” or very tired or weak (feeling “paralyzed”) for a while. | Patience with the time it takes to “normalize.” Exercises to relax the front core muscles. Good diet (whether or not you feel hungry), rest, exercise, vitamins and minerals, and medical care to help the body handle stress and learn to make stress chemicals again. |
| | In constant threat, these systems can stay on overdrive for a long time. | You can stay ready for battle at all times, for long periods of time. | Constant stress makes the body jumpy, weak, vulnerable to chronic illness. | |
| The Brain | Some chemicals speed up thoughts, raise feelings of alarm and fear. | Speedy thoughts help you take action Alarm and fear help you judge threat. | “Speedy” chemicals cause jittery nerves, anger, feeling threatened, sleep trouble. | Understand that these are normal chemical reactions to sometimes unimaginable events. Become an observer of your own reactions. Watch your reactions to things that seem like threats or insults, and question whether they really are, or if it’s just your brain chemicals talking. Avoid alcohol, drugs, and caffeine, and get tested if you think you might need help. Get help for depression and other reactions that last more than a month. |
| | Some chemicals calm you down, help you control your actions/reactions, and keep your moods stable, even in unstable situations like combat. | These calming chemicals help you think more clearly, make better decisions, react in more effective ways, cooperate better, be a better leader. | Calming chemicals can “wear out” after they’ve been needed too much, causing anxiety, depression, urges to drink or use drugs, higher risk of getting addicted. | |
| | Some chemicals relieve pain and sometimes help you forget what you experienced under intense stress. | Pain relief during the crisis—and forgetting the pain afterwards—helps you keep going in spite of the pain. | You might lose important memories later, or memories might “come at you out of nowhere,” even long after combat is over. | |
| Thoughts | “This isn’t happening. It isn’t so bad.” | Makes it easier to cope and function. | You might neglect signs you need help. | Talk about what happened, how it really was. Balance helping others with getting the support or professional help you need. Let trust grow back slowly. Question blame, and put it in context. Talk about responsibility. |
| | “I’m strong; other people need me.” | Brings more hope, courage, action. | You might see needs as weaknesses. | |
| | “I can’t trust anyone outside the Unit.” | Helps you spot danger and react to it. | You might not trust anyone outside Unit. | |
| | “This is all happening for a reason.” | Helps you accept pain and move on. | You might blame yourself or others. | |
| Feelings | Not feeling emotions (numbing them). | Less pain/fear, more decisive action. | You might not grieve important losses. | Let the grieving happen in whatever form or timetable it seems to want to take. Practice feeling whatever you feel. Remember: It takes great courage to feel. Learn and practice skills in managing your feelings. |
| | Feeling only “safe” emotions (anger). | Helps you focus on fighting and winning. | You might take feelings for weakness. | |
| | “Projecting” your feelings onto others. | Helps you not notice/feel your feelings. | You might resent, damage relationships. | |
| | Giving in to just feeling overwhelmed. | Lets people know you need help. | You might ignore real strength/courage. | |
| The Spirit | Connecting with your spiritual beliefs. | Strength in safety, connection, meaning. | You might reject others’ help or beliefs. | Know that there’s plenty of room for your beliefs, others’ beliefs, and human help. Use questioning to strengthen your beliefs and get closer to what you really believe. Balance acceptance with need for action. |
| | Questioning or rejecting your beliefs. | Helps explain painful and unfair things. | You might lose connection, meaning. | |
| | Finding new spiritual feelings/beliefs. | Brings in new spiritual strength/hope. | Might lose beliefs when crisis is over. | |
| | Accepting and transcending events. | More clarity, calm, sense of purpose. | Might accept things you should change. | |
| The Unit | Military discipline, high expectations. | Standards promote strength, discipline | Might be ashamed of reactions to stress. | Know that it’s not weak or disloyal to get help for the body’s and brain’s reactions to war-zone stress. Make and keep deep friendships with others who have served. |
| | Staying alert for danger at all times. | You’re ready to react to any emergency. | Toll on body and brain (see above). | |
| | Sense of unity within the Unit. | Cooperation saves lives, wins battles. | Might feel lost/alone after deployment. | |
| Home | Keeping in contact (emails, phone). | Sense of connection brings strength. | Stronger feelings of loss, homesickness. | Accept that you’ve changed, and those at home have changed, too. Learn who you all are now. Use resources for re-learning trust, communication, and relationships. |
| | Not talking about bad experiences. | Protects loved ones from pain and fear. | You might feel disconnected from home. | |
| | Remembering your home as ideal. | Reminds you what you’re fighting for. | Nobody can live up to an ideal in real life. | |

From *Finding Balance After the War Zone*, developed by Pamela Woll, MA, CADP for the Great Lakes Addiction Technology Transfer Center and Human Priorities.