

Resilience 101

Understanding and Optimizing
Your Stress System



Quick Guide
for Service Members and Veterans

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A Few Questions for Tense Times

1. **Where am I right now, at this moment?** Who or what do I see or hear around me?
2. **How much are my body chemicals affecting my reaction to this situation?** Do I have:
 - “Adrenaline overload”—heart pounding, mind racing, tense muscles, can’t sit still, intense energy, anger, guilt, fear, or anxiety?
 - Too much cortisol—feeling tense, tired, and “shut down” or “numbed out”?
3. **What can I do to get my body in balance?** Do I need exercise (to burn off the adrenaline)? Sleep? Food? Less caffeine? Less alcohol? Less drugs? A few slow, deep breaths?
4. **What do I really know about this situation?**
5. **What’s going right in my life?** Even though some things are wrong, what’s going okay?
6. **Who do I know who can help me work through this—or just listen and understand**

Resilience 101

This “quick guide” is part of a series of materials for service members, returning veterans, families, and others who want to understand deployment stress effects. The booklet starts with a resilience list (Page 2), followed by six short chapters:

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There's also a *Resilience 101* workbook for service members and veterans, for free download at:

<https://sites.google.com/site/humanprioritiesorg/home/resilience-101>

The workbook has information and tools to help you understand deployment stress effects and build resilience skills that can get your stress system in balance. You can use it alone, with a buddy or mentor, or with a trainer or therapist. These materials were written by Pam Woll of Human Priorities (<http://xrl.us/humanpriorities>).

Got Resilience?

That's easy: Everybody has resilience—the ability to meet challenges and bounce back after adversity. Not everybody is aware of their own resilience, but the people who aren't aware of it often have more of it than those who are. You can use this page to list ten of the many ways you're resilient.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

The Body

If you've been affected by deployment stress, all the things that are going on in your body and mind right now—even the most troubling things—actually make sense if you understand the way the body works.

Human beings are “wired” to survive and keep going. The body, brain, and mind do amazing things to make this possible. At many times in our lives, our bodies react automatically to intense life experiences, including stress and threat, by:

- Pumping out chemicals that keep us going
- Speeding up and slowing down body functions
- Tightening muscles to protect vital organs
- Storing powerful memories of these events
- Getting ready to react the same way next time

Our minds react automatically, too, to help us protect ourselves and others. They might:

- Organize our thoughts to keep us functioning
- Keep us from feeling more than we can handle
- Affect the way we relate to other people

- Affect our belief systems, to help us make sense of what's happening to us and around us

We all face experiences intense enough to trigger some of these automatic stress and survival reactions. We don't choose how our bodies react. Our stress systems and other organs respond for us, and our bodies store all our responses—and strong memories of the events that triggered them.

In a war zone like Iraq or Afghanistan, many service members have lived through months or years of blistering heat, constant vigilance, surprise attacks, combat, injury, loss of true friends, and the sights and sounds of injury and death. In these conditions, all of the body's automatic survival systems kick in over and over again. Many service members have stayed on the alert all the time, every day, for months, over several deployments.

The many ways your body keeps you going are signs of your incredible strength as a human being. Military training kicks in—and so do the body's powerful stress and survival systems.

The Impact

Your body was built to respond to short-term threats, then “rest and reset” when the threat dies down. But if the threat continues over time:

- The powerful chemicals that kept you going can keep surging long after the threat is gone
- The systems that were supposed to keep these chemicals in balance can stop working
- Your body can hold onto the intense energy of automatic “fight, flight, and freeze” responses
- Your brain can “hide” memories and pull them up later, as if they were happening right now

On the outside, some of these natural reactions can look—and even feel—like they’re “just emotional problems.” **They’re not.** They’re normal, natural, physical responses to intense experiences. They’re happening in a human being, so of course they’ll trigger some emotions, but their roots are physical.

With the right help, you can re-train and manage your stress system, and start to bring your body—and your life—back into balance.

Kevin's Story

Kevin went to Iraq as a medic, with a history of police and paramedic work. In spite of the grounding his history gave him, Kevin came back feeling let down, shut down, short tempered, and withdrawn. It wasn't the nightmares or sleep problems that troubled him so much as his desire to go back. He feared that people might think he was crazy, or his wife might question his love. They couldn't understand the intense sense of meaning and purpose he'd found in his work there.

Kevin's breakthrough came when he started talking to his National Guard buddies and found out they all felt the same way. "You come to accept the feelings you have," he said. "It doesn't mean you're a bad person, or a 'warmonger.' You're not crazy. You start giving yourself some peace with the whole idea." When he talked to his wife about it, she understood. He also started teaching medical staff about veterans' needs, and he keeps tabs on buddies who are having a hard time. "Sometimes it just takes time," he said. "You realize some of this stuff's going on, you talk to your friends, and that's how it starts to get better."

Stress Chemicals

Under stress and threat, our bodies help us keep functioning by pumping out stress chemicals. But under prolonged stress, the natural processes that keep these chemicals in line can stop working.

- Chemicals like *adrenaline* and *dopamine* speed us up so we can take action. But the systems that regulate adrenaline can stop working. We can end up with adrenaline overload—too much anger, anxiety, etc.—or not enough adrenaline.
- The chemical *cortisol* slows our bodies down when we get too much adrenaline, but two things can go wrong: 1) the adrenaline can overpower the cortisol, so we **can't** slow down, and 2) cortisol can build up and make us both tense and shut down or numbed out.
- Chemicals like *serotonin* calm us down and help us make better decisions. But stress can wear down our ability to use serotonin, making it hard to feel hope or happiness; hard to cooperate; and hard to control our urges to drink, fight, etc.
- Chemicals called *endorphins* blur the pain and the memories, so we can keep going. Later,

past memories and feelings can invade the present, and we can get powerful cravings to drink or do anything that will numb us out.

Different people's bodies react to war-zone stress with more or less power, and they take more or less work and help to get back in balance. But when these stress effects cause other life problems, it's each person's responsibility to get help.

Because you're human, you have feelings—happiness, sadness, guilt, fear, anger, hope, despair—you name it. Your feelings are not problems or symptoms. They're not the reason your body is doing painful or frightening things, though their intensity might point out things you'll want to work on in your life. Feelings are tools to help you find balance on all levels—body, mind, and spirit.

You know better than anyone that everyone who experiences war is changed by it. These changes can turn out to be positive in powerful ways. Many people who have lived through war end up with a strong sense of honor and mission. And the process of getting back in balance can make you stronger, wiser—a powerful force for good in this world.

Balance

The power that helped you keep going in battle is still there, still inside you. You can use that power to help you bring your body, brain, and life back into balance, and back into the present.

Preparing your body, brain, and mind for war included a process of learning and training. Preparing to live in peace back home will also include a process of learning and training, and there are many resources that can help.

Getting back in balance gives you the power to:

- Recognize your body's stress/survival reactions
- Choose whether or not to act on them
- Notice when the past is "invading" the present
- Choose to separate the past from the present
- Do things to regulate your stress system
- Choose responses that make things better
- Make choices that support your true values

The *Resilience 101* workbook— for free download at <https://sites.google.com/site/humanprioritiesorg/home/resilience-101> —can help you get started.

Laura's Story

Laura grew up strong, raised in a family full of boys, and the Army toughened her up even more. It was a year after her return from Iraq, her first day of simulation, that Laura first experienced violent PTSD symptoms. She managed to finish, but the symptoms got worse—flashbacks, nightmares, panic attacks, depression, everything. Even fireworks at a baseball game had her in tears.

Unable to come out of it on her own, Laura went to the VA for therapy and medication. She also got in touch with Army buddies who had been there. Over the next year, as her symptoms faded, she worked with her therapist to decide how long to stay in treatment. She even wrote a book about her experiences and started giving presentations at local schools and community groups. These efforts have helped her transform her challenges into something that can build understanding.

Laura's stress system is finally getting back in balance. "A year ago at Fourth of July, I didn't want anything to do with fireworks," she says. "Now I'm kind of looking forward to it."

Training

The aim of training is to strengthen the resilience skills that will help you re-balance the parts of your body that still operate as if you're in a war zone. There are many approaches, but we'll look at three here: relationships, getting your stress system in balance, and following your mission and purpose.

Relationships

In the war zone, a strong bond within the unit is one of the best ways to help your stress system stay in balance. Back home, a strong bond with other service members/veterans is also an important part of getting your body and your life back in balance.

It's important to keep in touch with people in your unit, wherever they are, but you'll want face-to-face contact with others who have been there, too. If you don't know anyone in your area, you might try a local Vet Center (directory: <http://www2.va.gov/directory/guide/vetcenter.asp>). There are also online organizations that bring service members and veterans together (see Page 15 for a beginning list).

Connecting with other people back home is also an important way to get in balance. This can be hard if the combat experience has left you feeling separate and distant from people who haven't been to war. You and your family might also have built up some expectations of one another that none of you can live up to right now. That's normal. You can all work on examining your own expectations, learning to accept one another as you are right now, and taking steps to change in the ways you want to change.

It's important to look for and find people you can trust, and work on letting them in. These can be family members, friends, clergy, counselors, doctors, etc. Our bonds with other people actually affect our ability to bring our stress systems back in balance.

Your stress system will also do better when you're truly connected with a trustworthy family or community. This is especially important when you've come back from an experience that was worlds away from community life, and seen things you can't begin to describe. You'll want to find a community you can trust—maybe your family, a community of service members or veterans, a faith community, a group of friends, a support group, etc.

A few more things that can help balance your stress system:

- Breathing slowly and deeply
- Walking, running, sports, or riding horseback
- Exercises, especially stretching core muscles
- Letting your body release its stored energy
- Getting a good night's sleep (7 hrs. or more)
- Prayer, meditation, yoga, affirmations, etc.
- Any kind of positive ritual or ceremony
- Dancing, music, singing, artistic expression
- Looking into the eyes of someone you trust
- Telling your story to someone you trust
- Being an "outside observer" of your feelings
- Separating the past from the present

A few things that put you more off balance:

- Too much caffeine
- Drinking too much, doing street drugs
- "Stuffing" your thoughts and feelings inside
- Doing things that speed or "pump" you up
- "Ranting," yelling at people, etc.
- Getting into heated arguments or fights

Getting Your Stress System in Balance

The first step is to get a better understanding of how and why your body's stress system does what it does. For example, you might find out:

- Why you feel bored, numb, or disconnected
- Why you feel edgy and flare up or get upset over things that turn out to be unimportant
- Why it sometimes feels like you've got one foot on the accelerator and one foot on the brake

Once you understand the physical reasons, it's easier to do *overwatch* of your own experience. Like a unit doing overwatch from a distance, you can learn to notice things about your own experience—without judging it—even while you're living through it. It helps you get balanced and think more clearly.

You can also learn techniques—thoughts, actions, affirmations—that can help you manage your stress system and make more helpful choices. A mentor, trainer, or counselor who understands deployment stress effects can train you in recognizing and managing your body's reactions and questioning the thoughts that are causing trouble for you.

Another thing you'll learn when you learn about your stress system is how the effects of some of your experiences in country have been stored in your brain and its connections with your body.

In a situation that combines extreme threat with helplessness, your brain can send out combinations of chemicals that tell your body to "freeze"—shut down important functions. Because of military training, the freeze might just last a second, but that response can get stored in your body. Training might include exercises to relax the muscles that were affected by the freeze, and ways of helping your body get rid of the energy the freeze left there.

With the help of a counselor, you can also teach your body to handle memories in ways that don't throw you off balance. There are many kinds of counseling that use physical techniques to help you deal with memories and re-balance your stress system. One example is EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing), if it's done by a counselor who's trained and skilled in it. Counseling can be an important part of training and re-balancing. (A beginning list of web sites with more information and help is shown on Page 15.)

Mission and Purpose

No matter how powerful your brain and body are, they're still connected to the rest of you—your mind, your heart, your spirit. The journey back to balance may lead through rocky terrain, but those who make this journey grow stronger, wiser, more honorable.

During deployment, the clearer your sense of mission and purpose is, the more your stress system stays in balance. Back home, you might feel like you've lost that clear mission and purpose. It's time to understand that you **will** find mission and purpose back home, even if it's not clear to you now. Just stay open to what it might be. Keep looking for it. Someone you trust—a true friend, a chaplain, a good counselor—might help you explore this. But it's not theirs to tell you. It's the meaning, mission, and purpose **you** find in your life and experience.

You've discovered in yourself the strength and the willingness to give the highest gift: your life. That life is still with you, to do with as you choose. As you return to balance, you come to live more and more in the present moment. May you find there a sense of mission, purpose, peace of mind, and joy.

After Deployment (lots of interactive web self-help tools)
<http://www.afterdeployment.org>

American Veterans With Brain Injuries
<http://www.avbi.org/>

Army Wounded Warrior Program (help and advocacy)
<http://www.aw2.army.mil/index.html>

Give an Hour (network with free mental health services)
<http://www.giveanhour.org>

Grace After Fire (for female veterans)
<http://www.graceafterfire.org/>

Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America
<http://iava.org>

Military Home Front (for troops and families, from DOD)
<http://www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil/>

Military OneSource (lots of materials, services, referrals)
<http://www.militaryonesource.com>

National Center for PTSD (lots of resources, from VA)
<http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/veterans/>

National Organization on Disability (lots of resources)
<http://www.nod.org/>

Not Alone (programs and services)
<http://notalone.com>

Real Warriors Campaign (resources for resilience)
<http://www.realwarriors.net/>

Vet Centers (community based, informal, run by the VA)
<http://www.vetcenter.va.gov/>

VA Veteran Recovery
www.veteranrecovery.med.va.gov

Vets4Vets (support and training for vets, by vets)
<http://www.vets4vets.us/>

Wounded Warrior Project
<https://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/>

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Thank you for your service.

Cover Photo: National Guard SSG Joel Dalton cradles his seven-week old daughter Camden before boarding a plane to deploy to Iraq from Pope Air Force Base, N.C., on Oct. 6, 2004. Dalton serves with the 105th Military Police Battalion, North Carolina National Guard. DoD photo by TSgt. Brian Christiansen, U.S. Air Force. (Released)