

International Journal of Policy Sciences and Law
Volume 1, Issue 2

Mental Health of the Army Personnel:
Impact of Training and Lifestyle

Alankrita Kumar¹

This Article is brought to you for “free” and “open access” by the International Journal of Policy Sciences and Law. For more, visit <http://ijpsl.in/>

To submit your manuscript, email it to us at editorial.ijpsl@gmail.com or click here.

1 BA Programme, Psychology and Philosophy, Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi

Abstract

The armed forces as a profession is a physically and emotionally demanding one and requires an arduous level of resilience and mental robustness. This paper aims to understand the aspects and consequent impact of training and lifestyle, exclusively on defence personnel's mental health, given their need to deal with situations of unusual nature and requirements. It also aims to explore the level of susceptibility to mental distress and illnesses of the soldiers, owing to their peculiar job profiles. Through a survey of 25 serving and retired soldiers in the tri-service in India, it was found that even though a distinct need for professional, psychological intervention is considered important, help-seeking behaviour is very low, owing to both stigma and little provision available. SWOT Analysis was done to understand the current structure and which aspects need to be improved upon or amended. Findings also suggested that despite the stress of the academy training and traumatic experiences, there has been more positive impact than negative, including increased resilience, self-reliance, motivation, agility and self-esteem. However, setbacks, losses, sense of alienation from society and the constant pressure of performance does render them vulnerable to mental health issues including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), burnouts, etc. Therefore, an improved and more efficient structure to cater to the mental health of defence personnel is indeed required, to ensure happy and healthy lives of the servers of our nation, both on and off duty.

Keywords: *Mental health, Indian soldiers, Impact of training and academy life, Impact of job profile and lifestyle, Mental robustness, Susceptibility to mental distress/illness*

1.0 Introduction

“We live by chance, we love by choice, we kill by profession” – Officers Training Academy, Chennai.

The armed forces happen to be one such community where the *josh* is never low. They serve the country, they protect us and sacrifice everything, including their lives, but what does it take to become a soldier this brave and solid? Surely, they are not immune to pain, emotions, love, joy, etc. like the rest of us and hence, it is time to question if we take care of our men and women in uniform, as they do us.

For years now, mental health has been a taboo subject in India and it is only very recently that occupational stress, its relevance in personal lives and need for intervention has come to the forefront. There is a need to explore and attempt to understand the nuances of the same by categorizing professions, job profiles and kinds of training for various occupations, and their varying consequences on the workers. Our nation's pride, the armed forces, have always been appreciated doing all that they do for the people of our country. However, in the ambit of mental health, very little information is available on how the adverse weather conditions, traumatic experiences, constant change of job profiles and seniors, and the atypical training that they are put through at such a young age affect their emotional state and personal life. This paper aims to explore how life in the armed forces, right from training to lifestyle and job profiles, impacts the mental health of army personnel. Touching upon aspects such as the nature of the said impact, its potential to render our soldiers vulnerable to psychological distress and mental illnesses and the need for early intervention, should be a start towards delving into the depths of the scenario.

2.0 Background

After a written examination and Service Selection Board (SSB) that includes physical tests, psychological assessment and personal interviews, cadets are recruited to be a part of the Nation Defence Academy (or Indian Military Academy, after graduation). In the academy, they go through rigorous training, both physical and mental, to prepare them thoroughly for administrative as well as combat duties.

The training entails equipping the cadets with mental, moral and physical attributes required to cope with the challenges of the future battlefield with the aim of leading troops to victory in conventional, non-conventional and asymmetrical conflicts. The Physical Training Team (PTT) stands for traditions built over the years of experiment with excellence through training and hard work. Culture growing out of such traditions has moulded every generation

of cadets on a uniform pattern. It is this physical fitness that motivates a soldier to march into the valley of death, an air warrior to soar into alien skies and a sailor to sail through the formidable high seas. Physical Training at NDA is the ideal opportunity for young cadets to learn important aspects of leadership like courage, stamina, team spirit, physical fitness, mental toughness and the will to win needed by Officers, who at various stages of their careers must be prepared to lead the smallest combat unit or advise the highest government official. The long training hours with close supervision, guidance and motivation provide the force for self-reliance with a responsible attitude. (NDA, n.d.)

The extensive physical training in the academy definitely prepares cadets to survive and fight in all kinds of environments and deal with situations of unusual nature. However, while physical fitness and strength are very important contributors to self-esteem and by default, emotional wellness, whether these factors are enough to maintain healthy minds is debatable. Moreover, the sudden and subsequent physical strain on these 18/19-year-old teenagers, a rapid shift to a very disciplined, alienated life and breaking down of previously held beliefs and/or coping with strategies contribute to the making of a soldier. This ensures that the potential officers become good leaders, disciplined followers and cooperating team members. The said responsibility is with the *ustaad* or senior officer in the academy, who uses a number of tools for this purpose; these include official punishments, *ragada* (termed as ragging/unofficial punishments by some), motivation through performance benefits, hit on egos, etc., to turn these recruited '*boys into men*', a common saying in the community. However, how constructive or destructive these practices are, is a question that needs to be asked.

“Jitna ragada, utna tagada”

“The leadership development programme is inspired by the outdated traditional military culture of breaking the will through subjugation to ensure discipline, uniformity and adherence...There is a tendency among the young officer instructors, themselves groomed by the flawed leadership development at the NDA, to replicate their own experience with respect to their cadets...This not only condones and encourages the unethical ragging and illegal punishments but also scuttles reforms attempted by the system.”, says General Panag. Sena Medal awardee Siddarth Chatterjee said, “I have experienced first-hand the soul-destroying, humiliating and mental torture in the NDA.” He strongly maintains that “Nothing can justify this form of ragging and many carry this life-long mental trauma.” (Banerjee, A. 2019, October 5). According to an article in Outlook 2018, 16-20% of the recruited cadets dropped

out of the academy, allegedly due to unofficial punishments, excessive physical training and ragging (Outlook Web Bureau. 2018, January 5); the opposite viewpoint deems it essential. These officers maintain that soldiering is not an ordinary job and there is no civilian equivalent. Soldiers are required to operate in some of the most barbaric, amoral and geographically austere environments in the country. The punishing geography coupled with the thought of one's own mortality is enough to break the will of even the most resilient men and women. *Ragada* ensures that only the toughest make through the ranks. (Banerjee, A. 2019, October 5)

Even though the intentions behind such unique and thorough training seem suitable, there is a strict need for initiation of active dialogue around the impact of the said training programme, along with the stress of work, constant adjustment to extreme weather conditions, change of bosses, job profiles (generally speaking, administrative/ 'peace posting' and combat duty/'field posting'), separation stress from families, the trauma of seeing or dealing with deaths, injuries, losses, etc., on their emotional health. This paper attempts to work through these aspects and try to understand the synergic relationship between the emotional impact of being a warrior, and the need for intervention in the same, in order to have better efficiency and coping methods.

3.0 Research Method

A research was conducted on a small, random sample group of 25 people, having served or still serving in the Indian Armed Forces, between the ages of 20 to 60. The participants were from all three services – Army, Navy and Air Force in no particular order and were required to respond to a survey that aimed at assessing the impact of training and life as a soldier on their mental health and whether they felt the need for intervention by mental health professionals for better-coping methods and quality of life. The responses were collected and analyzed using the SWOT procedure, keeping in mind the existing policies and methods in place and the relationship between mental health and the 'army life'.

The research was considered necessary to understand the extent and nature of support needed for the soldiers of our nation and to assess the impact of such a physically and emotionally demanding profession through insight into lived experiences.

4.0 Results and Findings

Through the survey's findings, a distinct need for professional, psychological intervention was considered to be required (Figure 1 & 2). Ironically, however, it was also noted that help-seeking behaviour was very low, among the participants (Figure 3). This contradiction establishes the fact that even though a need for psychological aid is felt, the general mindset of the community is to attempt at overcoming it on their own (Figure 3), or stay back owing to little or no provision available for the same (Figure 4).

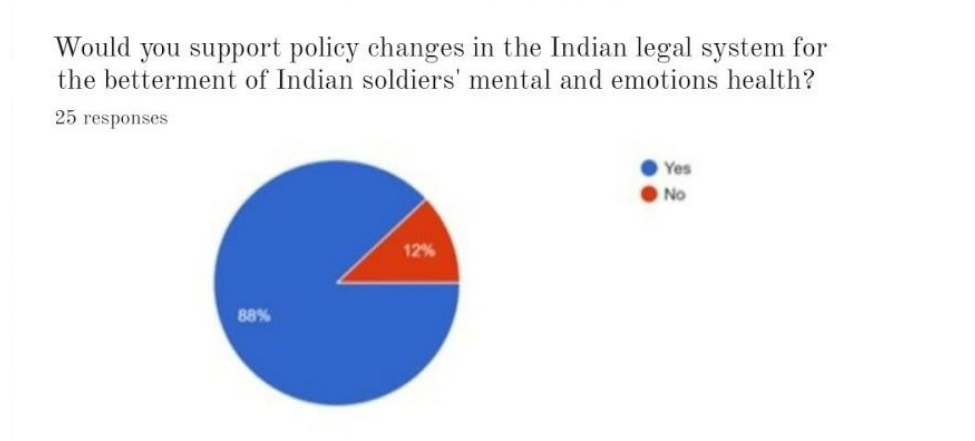


Figure: 1

Do you think the training and heavy job profiles renders a soldier vulnerable to mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, stress, etc.?

25 responses

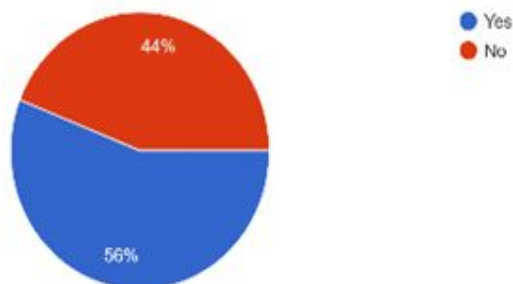


Figure: 2

Throughout your service as a soldier, did you ever feel the need to visit a psychologist/counsellor/psychiatrist?
25 responses

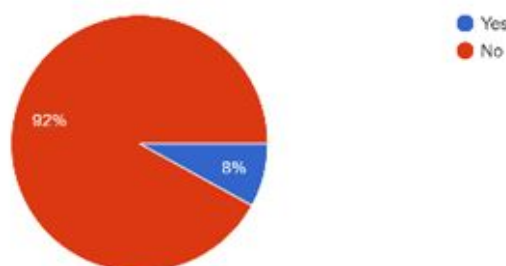


Figure: 3

Do you think constant mental-health checkups and interventions by professionals would elevate efficiency and productivity?
25 responses

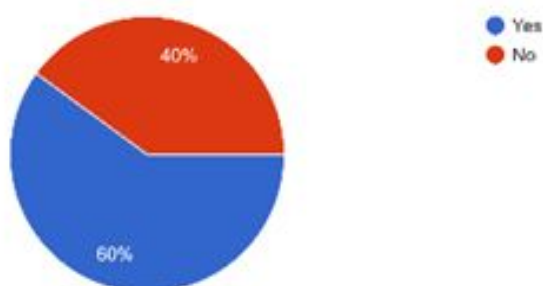


Figure: 4

It was also found out that despite not knowing much about the training procedure before joining as a cadet (according to a survey, only about 40% people had a rough idea) and acknowledgement of the “brainwashing” and stress of the academies (Figure 5 & 6), there is an evident belief that in comparison, there has been a more positive influence of the training than negative (Figure 7). In fact, it has made them mentally more robust and has had a profoundly productive impact on their mental health including build-up on aspects such as resilience, motivation, flexibility, calmness, etc.

Do you think some amount of "brainwashing" is essential during training for mental robustness and flexibility in soldiers?
25 responses

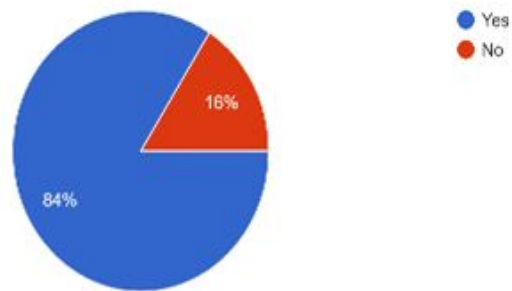


Figure: 5

Would you call the training process in academy "stressful"?
25 responses

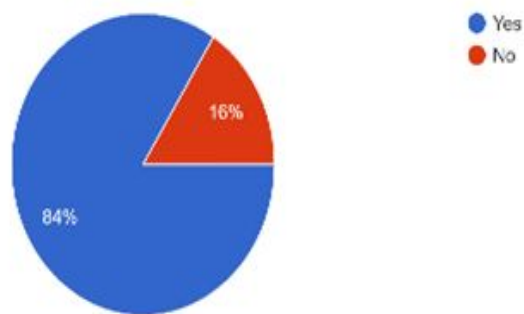


Figure: 6

On a scale of 1-5, how much positive impact (in terms of mental and emotional strength) has the 'army life' had on you as a person?
25 responses

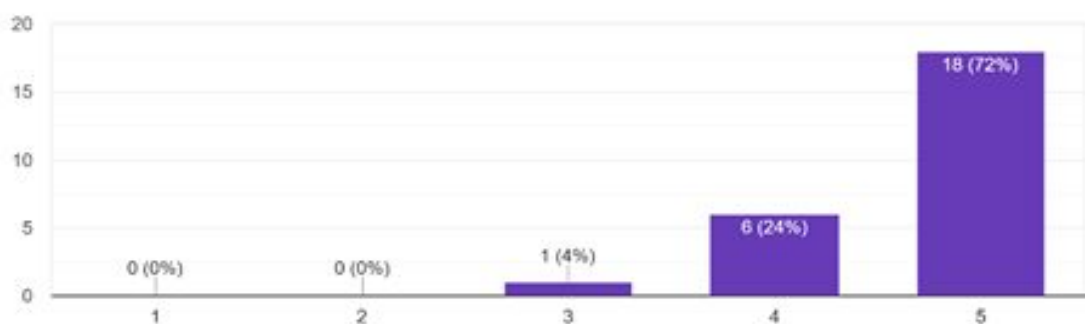


Figure: 7

On the whole, it can be seen that their training and life does impact the mental and emotional components of a defence personnel's lives. The perceived impact is on the same spectrum but still differs from the actual impact, it seems; the resulting impact is more positive on the soldiers' lives. However, the challenges faced, the extraordinary situations, the stress of continual need of adjustment to changes, the trauma of war and anxiety regarding the safety of their loved ones while they are away, inevitably render them vulnerable to a significant amount of distress which they either overcome owing to the phenomenal training, or choose to live with.

This brings us to the question of whether the current policies and structures in place are enough to cater to the mental health of defence personnel. The current structure does allow for those in uniform to become self-reliant but the stigma that stops those who are unable to cope with the lived trauma and/or distress is uncanny. Granted, seeking psychological help in India is already an issue and a taboo subject but for a profession this unique and integral to the nation, a facility for mental healthcare needs to be provided, at the very least. With the fear of cancelled promotions and reputation in the community, many of our soldiers become unnoticed sufferers of psychological distress and even illnesses. The current structure caters to and positively builds on certain aspects of the soldiers and the community in general as well, but the flaws of the same are in dire need to be determined and mended.

4.1 SWOT Analysis

The following table represents a SWOT analysis of the job specifications of a defence personnel. It is observed that while their profession bestows them with a Sense of Belongingness, Self-esteem, Physical fitness, it also takes a toll on their mental health and makes them susceptible to serious mental disorders.

Strengths +(4)	Weaknesses -(4)
1. Sense of Belongingness	1. Reduced help-seeking behaviour/
2. Self-esteem	2. Unusual levels of self-reliance
3. Identity Formation	3. Sense of alienation (personal)
4. Physical Fitness	4. Role ambiguity and conflict

Opportunities +(4)	Threats -(4)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mental Robustness 2. Resilience 3. Motivation 4. Agility and efficiency 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Susceptibility to mental disorders/distress 2. Sense of alienation (professional) 3. Familial troubles: distance, the difference in outlook, priorities, etc. 4. Self-sacrificing quality

4.2 Additional Literature

A study attempting to explore factors influencing occupational stress faced by Indian army soldiers using structured interview schedules to collect first-hand data from a sample of 415 soldiers was conducted in September 2015. The problem it focused on was that despite non-indulgence in any war activity in the last decade by India (though several counter-insurgency operations have been accomplished by the Army), the stress levels have continued to rise.

In this regard, it was observed that though military personnel have managed to adapt to the temporary hardships of wartime and humanitarian missions, the chronic stressors faced at the home base are found to be beyond their tolerance limit. Moreover, occupational stress arising out of routine military work environments is found to have a significant negative impact on the mental health of military personnel. As per the figures presented by the Defence Minister AK Antony to the Lok Sabha on March 6, 2013, a total of 368 defence personnel committed suicide from 2010 to 2012, out of which 310 soldiers belong to the Indian army alone; in 2010, 115 cases were reported as compared to 102 in 2011 and 93 in 2012 (Sharma, S. 2015).

Though the Indian government and army have taken several steps to counteract the problem of stress in the army, such as recruiting psychiatrists in the army, discussions by the defence ministry with the expert panel of psychiatrists, initiating stress-busting therapies in recuperation centres set up in certain geographies prone to stress, practising meditation, introducing regular lectures on yoga techniques, etc., suicides and fratricides in the army remain recurrent. Until these stress-reduction measures are initiated in a commitment-based supportive organisational culture, the efforts of the army are not expected to be significant in controlling such incidents (Sharma, S. 2015).

Another study conducted in the UK aimed at reporting levels of mental health disorders among 10,000 serving personnel (83% regulars, 17% reservists), found lower than expected levels of PTSD. However, common mental disorders and alcohol misuse were the most frequently reported mental health problems among UK armed forces' personnel. In particular, levels of alcohol misuse overall were substantially higher than present in the general population (Mental Health Foundation. November 10, 2017).

The main findings included reports suggesting 4% soldiers with probable PTSD, 19.7% with other common mental disorders and 13% involved in alcohol misuse. Additionally; it stated that reservists were more likely to report probable PTSD symptoms than those not deployed. Similarly, probable PTSD symptoms were reported more for regular personnel in combat roles, than were those in support roles. Experience of mental health problems, however, was not linked with the number of deployments (Mental Health Foundation. November 10, 2017).

4.3 Discussions

The primary research conducted through the survey and other data available on the topic at hand point to the strict need for intervention, at least in the capacity of regular check-ups and coping-strategy workshops for pre-crisis and post-crisis situations.

- *Positive Impact: "I have what it takes!"*

The strength instilled in cadets, both physical and mental, is unseen among the employees of any other profession(s). The structure set to break down previously held mental and societal blocks and rebuild worldly concepts provides the country with thoughtfully skilled soldiers. The by-products of the academy, hence, do not come out with just physical fitness and strength but are also intelligent and emotionally robust enough to work with almost any kind of leader/follower, situation, and environment.

The qualities of resilience and agility become so strongly ingrained in the personalities of these new warriors that they become ready to face any challenge or crisis that may befall them or their countrymen. The level of physical fitness and power achieved through years of rigorous training, subsequent involvement in physical activities, and regular medical check-ups motivate them to do better and perpetually remain ready to be of service to the nation.

An evident improvement in self-esteem has been noticed among the soldiers, owing to a renewed sense of belongingness, identity formation, worthiness, and the prestige and feelings of nationalism attached to the profession.

Promotions, badges of honour, provision of non-monetary amenities and services to the soldiers and their families, the security of job and pension, Annual Confidential Reports (ACR) are all tools used in the services as positive reinforcers. These provide the defence personnel with adequate and continual motivation, aids them with better performance, and push them to remain aligned to the purpose of their profession.

- *Negative Impact: "I am the saviour of the nation, but I miss my friend!"*

As has been discussed in this paper above, despite the servers of the nation being trained to work in adverse conditions and manage crisis situations of worldly importance, the truth about their profession being an extremely physically and emotionally demanding one, in comparison to others, does not falter. The constant stress of work apart from daily administrative chores, such as recruiting rescue teams during natural disasters, patrolling on enemy borders, carrying out insurgency operations, planning and plotting by the intelligence teams for potential emergencies, etc. is also something that affects their mental health in terms of adding to work stress and may lead to burnouts.

The unusual situations that the soldiers have to work in, namely war zones, field stations, and crisis areas, expose them to extremely traumatic events including deaths, life-altering physical injuries, losses of their friends, colleagues, and bosses. This inevitably makes them vulnerable to mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, etc. Intelligence failures on part of the government, diplomatic concerns, and glitches in loyalty causing the armed forces to lose their men and pride leave them with frustration, anger, and a significant need for revenge (on their enemies), further aggravating the problem.

There is also a sense of alienation among the workers in the armed forces, both on a personal and community level. The complete turnabout in their lifestyles, manner of thinking, coping mechanisms, priorities, outlook towards the world, leaves them feeling unfamiliar with the rest of the world; a phenomenon more common post-retirement when they return to the so-called civilized life. Lack of respect in the society and wrongly formed prejudices against the community are also factors contributing to this feeling of alienation.

Additional issues of finding a suitable life partner who can adjust well to the constant change of homes and physical distance from their spouses, both professionally and personally and relatability factor with family and friends back home, are bound to give them a feeling of being “different” and “separate” from the rest of those around them.

5.0 Conclusion

The life of a soldier is certainly not an easy one but if it can be made better, why not? There is no profession more sacrificing, prestigious, altruistic and respectable than that of a soldier, hence it is our duty to take care of our soldiers in every way possible. Right from their entry as a cadet to the retirement, men and women of the Indian Defense Services sacrifice on much more than we realize and give them credit for. From a passionate fighter in the field to a guitarist in the parties, a soldier lives life with almost 2 personalities, but mind you, to the fullest!

Veteran Colonel Atul Kumar explains what gives a soldier the mental strength they require, and the motto Indian soldiers fight for and live by – ‘*Naam, Namak aur Nishaan*’.

“Armed forces personnel come from the same society as all of us but what is that which makes them a breed apart? How come a 17 years old boy becomes so different from his peers that not only is he prepared to lay down his life for the nation he is also almost immune to normal pills and pressures of life others in society are grappling with? In my opinion, it comes from the training one gets on joining the armed forces, the way we live life on a daily basis and the job content that makes each and every member of the armed forces fraternity as mentally robust, physically capable and emotionally stable as one can get. A major factor is a drilled-in concept of ‘*Naam, Namak aur Nishan*’. Every soldier lives and dies for this motto, *Name of the Unit, Loyalty to the Profession and the Flag of the Nation*-makes everything else redundant. How can one be mentally stressed when one is pumped up to safeguard the nation and the adrenaline rushing to climb the hill and kill the enemy? Even during peace-time, the training, camaraderie of the unit and sense of fulfilment of life’s purpose ensures that the mental health of a soldier is safeguarded. Despite issues related to family back at home, loss of fellow soldiers and frequent moves, the backbone of mental health is the common string that binds all soldiers into one entity where no one is alone ever. No wonder an army advertisement stated - ‘It’s not a profession, It’s a way of life! Jai Hind.’”

A need for change in policies and structures is of utmost importance to make sure they are compensated enough for their services and so that they lead happy, healthy lives

during and after the termination of their contracts. They will always remain the soldiers of India, protecting us and loved ones and soaring through the skies with the tricolour!

References

Armed forces and mental health. (2017, November 10). Mental Health Foundation.

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/a/armed-forces-and-mental-health>

Banerjee, A. (2019, October 5). *Why Do So Many NDA Cadets Leave Training? The Reality Will Shock You.* SSB Crack.

<https://www.ssbcrack.com/2019/10/why-do-so-many-nda-cadets-leave-training.html>

National Defence Academy. (n.d.). National Defence Academy. Retrieved November 8, 2020, from <https://www.nda.nic.in/ptt.html>

Outlook Web Bureau. (2018, January 5). *More Than 1,200 Cadets Quit NDA In Last 10 Years, Alumni Blame It On Ragging, Torture, Excessive Punishment.* <https://www.outlookindia.com/>.

<https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/more-than-1200-cadets-quit-nda-in-last-10-years-due-to-ragging-torture-excessive/306441>

Sharma, S. S. (2015, September 1). *Occupational stress in the armed forces: An Indian army perspective.* ScienceDirect.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0970389615000634>