

BULLET BACKGROUND PAPER

ON

FACILITATING MENTAL WELLNESS BY TARGETING STIGMA

PURPOSE

Mental health is an issue that directly impacts the Air Force (AF) mission, yet there is a significant stigma associated with mental health that prevents Airmen from seeking help. The AF must find a way to reduce this stigma so that Airmen can get the help they need, when they need it. To reduce this stigma, we recommend that the AF mandate annual mental health assessments, add a fourth core value, and develop an educational and training curriculum, which focuses on available resources, the science of mental health, and personal mental health stories. Additionally, we recommend the development of a resiliency portal and an anonymous wingman program.

DISCUSSION

- The research paper promotes mental health maintenance, a preventive approach to mental health which seeks to address mental health issues prior to them negatively affecting an Airman's career
- Data indicate self-referrals to mental health professionals (MHPs) result in a more favorable outcome than commander-directed referrals.
 - When compared to commander-directed evaluations, self-referrals result in fewer instances of command notification and negative career impacts.
- Research indicates there are Airmen who leave mental health issues unaddressed due to the stigma associated with seeking mental health care.
 - Stigma is comprised of 5 elements: labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination.
 - Components of the AF mission, culture, and structure foster and reinforce this stigma.
- Five recommendations are proposed for reducing mental health stigma: annual mental health assessments, a resiliency portal, anonymous wingman program, adding a fourth core value, and more developed educational and training curriculum, which focuses on available resources, the science of mental health, and personal mental health stories.
 - First, Mental Health Screening should be universal in the form of mandatory annual check-ups at the Mental health Clinic for all Airmen.

- Over time, repeated exposure creates normalization and decreases the negative reaction to Airmen who seek mental health assistance.
- Second, consolidate information regarding mental health resources into a single website.
- Third, establish a program that provides peer-to-peer connections for those who want to speak about mental health issues in an anonymous environment.
- Fourth, develop an additional core value that emphasizes the fact that our greatest asset is the strength of our Airmen.
- Fifth, mental health education and training should be further developed within the current Comprehensive Airman Fitness (CAF) Program construct, using unit-level, small group discussions, with a three-step approach.
 - Step 1: Enhance commanders' mental wellness training
 - Step 2: Airmen need to be trained on the counseling resources currently available and the confidentiality rules that govern them: Mental Health, Military One-Source Counseling, Military and Family Life Counselors, and the Chaplain Corps.
 - Step 3: Airmen should be educated on the science behind mental health to better see mental health disorders through a medical lens.
 - Step 4: The curriculum should implement the "Real Warrior" concept, where leaders share personal stories of overcoming a mental health challenge.
- The curriculum should be standardized and implemented at the unit level by using the current AF policy of Master Resilience Trainers (MRTs), who will train a Resilience Training Assistant (RTA) within each unit.

CONCLUSION

The stigma surrounding mental health treatment acts as a barrier to Airmen seeking mental health services. This stigma can be reduced through increasing exposure to mental health information and services by implementing the recommendations listed above. This exposure creates normalization over time, which strengthens the effectiveness of preventive maintenance and facilitates mental wellness throughout the force.