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Manage Your Anxiety

In the short conflict in Lebanon during 1982, the Israeli Defense Force had one combat stress casualty for every soldier casualty to physical wounds. In Okinawa during WWII, the Marines suffered one combat stress casualty for every two Wounded in Action (WIA). But, the elite airborne divisions in Europe never had higher than one combat stress casualty for every ten WIA, despite being placed into some of the most intense conflicts of the war. The conclusion of the military is that while combat stress is inevitable, casualties (severe impairment) from stress can be reduced or avoided.

Symptoms of Stress

Muscular: Headaches; backache; mild or severe shaking.

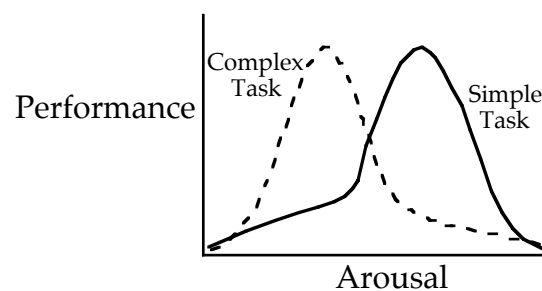
Digestive: Nausea and vomiting; loss of appetite; abdominal distress; frequent urination; incontinence.

Circulatory/Respiratory: Heart palpitations, hyperventilation; faintness; giddiness.

Sleep: Difficulty falling asleep, nightmares, restless sleep, excessive sleep.

Emotional: Irritation; explosive anger; low energy level, social withdrawal; substance abuse; suicide

Cognitive: Slow reaction time; difficulty sorting priorities; difficulty starting routine tasks; excessive concern with minor issues; preoccupation with familiar tasks and details to the point of being aimless; indecision; memory impairment; inhibition of long term memory formation; learning impairment; reduced decision making skill; short attention span;



Yerkes-Dodson Curve (1908)

Combat Stress. Army Field Manual 6-22.5. (June 2000)

Anxiety Management Techniques

The military recommends that each soldier have two kinds of stress management tools available one for deep relaxation and a quick one for on the job.

Deep Breathing: One way we can influence our anxiety level is by using diaphragmatic breathing. Rather than inhaling by expanding the rib-cage and pulling air to the top of our lungs, push out your abdomen as in you inhale and retract it on exhalation. This kind of breathing tends to happen during deep relaxation or sleep and willfully using the diaphragmatic breath can rapidly diminish your arousal state. Diaphragmatic breathing can be used with five deep slow breaths to relax in the midst of a task or continuously to invoke deep relaxation.

Muscular Relaxation: By clenching and releasing muscles one can reduce the arousal level. The quick version is to tighten all the muscles in your body for 15 seconds or more and then releasing the tension and shaking out the muscles. The deep version is to start with the feet and work up your body, clenching and relaxing each muscle group. As you do this be mindful of the feeling of tension and be aware of the warmth that comes with the relaxation.

Cognitive Exercises: Self suggestion through positive self talk (a mild form of hypnosis); imagery through fully imagining a relaxing safe place; rehearsal by imagining the successful accomplishment of the task under pressure; and the various forms of meditation. With practice you can use these cognitive techniques to relax quickly or more completely.

Example Meditation Exercise

Sit in a comfortable position in a safe quiet and dark place. Because deep relaxation will dramatically increase your loss of body heat, place a blanket over your shoulders and body. Close your eyes and begin deep diaphragmatic breaths. Visualize a safe relaxing place and imagine taking ten slow steps toward that place. With each step, imagine as much detail as you can about the place – sights, smells, sounds, textures, tastes. With each step relax more and more until you reach the center. When you arrive at the center, let any intruding thoughts float by, take note of them and let them pass. Consider using a focus word like God, Love, Peace, Calm, etc and breathe that word in and out as you still your mind. When you are ready to return, take ten slow steps to come back to your daily life.



Other meditation techniques: yoga; walking meditation; lectio divina; contemplative prayer; guided imagery.

Davis, McKay, et al. The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook. (2000) (\$13.96)