

Operational stress control keeps sailors cool under fire

By MC1 (AW) Tim Comerford| The Flagship Staff Writer

Norfolk- Service members have one of the world's most stressful jobs – high operations tempo, physically risky, long days, under-manning in job fields and long separations from family. Stress for the service member is not only an acquaintance – it is a long time partner and task master. With that in mind, Commander, Navy Region Mid-Atlantic Sailors were educated on the role stress can play in their physical and mental health, Sept. 29.

The Navy defines stress as the way you respond to challenges in your mind or body.

Stress is not always a bad thing, in some cases stress can be beneficial. According to the non-profit entity The American Institute of Stress, it can increase the flow of blood to the brain to improve decision making, furnish more fuel for energy, provide more strength in combat or greater speed in getting away from a scene of potential peril and prevent blood loss from lacerations or internal hemorrhage.

Operational Stress Continuum uses a model that flows from green to yellow, orange and then red. It is used for identifying some of the stress and stressors that military service members may be under and how to help using operational stress control.

“Operational Stress Control is a new thing,” said Ted Kramer, Life Skills Educator for Fleet and Family Support Center Norfolk. “Sailors today are a foundation for a new military. Their buy-in today can impact the quality of life for Sailors for generations.”

There is something wrong with the way the Navy has been doing business where stress is concerned.

“We have to change some thing culturally,” said Kramer. “Here is the underlying problem, service members and their families are paying a higher cost for their service than they need to because we don’t get it when it comes to stress. If we can start to change the way we look at this, we can make a difference. We can take better care of ourselves, our coworkers, our unit and be effective at the mission and have less wear and tear on the family.”

When stress hits us, no matter when or where, there are two parts to the puzzle. Mentally human beings respond to stress with emotion – anger, frustration, impatience. Physically, we respond to stress now the same way we did back when we were cave people.

“Stress is the process by which you respond to demands placed on you in life,” Kramer explained. “This covers internal demands – your thoughts, your fears, your concerns, your goals and external demands – temperature, weather, traffic and workload.”

How can the Navy manage the stress level of Sailors?

“Through relevant training, expectation management and leadership support. Leadership support is a key component to this whole thing. It makes it a lot less stressful.”

He likened the need for counseling when stress hits you to taking care of a car.

“How many people would criticize you if you changed the oil in your car?” Kramer asked. “Is that just crazy to do? ‘Don’t change the oil in car, man, you have a busy schedule, your funds are tight, skip that.’ Just wait till the motor blows then fix it, right? We wouldn’t do it to our Hondas, but we do it to ourselves all the time. How many times do we wait until someone has a meltdown before engage them? How many times do you wait until you have a meltdown to admit something is bothering you? If you treated yourself with the same respect you treated you car in the parking lot we be well on our way to implementing these changes.”

It makes sense to stop and look at the problem when the effects can impact such a large group.

“What happens to the stress level of an operational unit when you lose one person due to a stress related meltdown? It goes up. You have to distribute that workload on less people. So, isn’t it in your best interests not to lose people to stress related meltdown?”

And everyone can help.

“Everyone has a role to play in mitigating operational stress at your workplace. Your quality of life is directly impacted by the quality of the work environment. If your stress at work is high that means your quality of life is low.”

Kramer expressed that Navy leadership has the responsibility to keep sailors in the green zone of the stress continuum.

“They set the tone at their command and decide what programs and policies are in place and supported and they decide whether it is okay if someone asks for help. They have to make sure the training is there and effective and resources are available to utilize.”

But everyone who is in contact with you when you are stressed has a role to play.

“When stress starts to mess with you, a little or a lot, who is more likely to notice it? The admiral or somebody else? Somebody else. Your coworker, your shipmate, your direct supervisor, your family member and you are responsible too. You have to take care of yourself. Don’t ask someone to care more about you than you do yourself.”