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Seeking Mental Health Help Shows Courage, Officials Say

By Christie Vanover
Special to American Forces Press Service

CHIÈVRES, Belgium, Sept. 8, 2008 – The Army is a team that embraces the Warrior Ethos by never accepting defeat and never quitting.

But what happens when someone is pressured by the daily grind, life at home or financial burden? What happens when they believe admitting their problems contradicts the ethos by which they live?

“It’s hard for [people] to ask for help,” said Chris Staker, U.S. Army Garrison Benelux health promotion coordinator. “Even though we try hard, we haven’t erased the stigma of seeking help.”

Because of this and other concerns felt throughout the service, Lt. Gen. Michael D. Rochelle, Army deputy chief of staff for personnel, is stressing that seeking help is not a sign of weakness; it is a sign of courage and strength.

Indeed, the service’s 2008 Suicide Prevention Program is aimed at communicating to soldiers that in order to be “Army Strong,” they need the resiliency and the ability to be flexible to the inherent stresses in military life.

The program acknowledges that not everyone who enters the military has those skills. Just like learning to fire an M-16 rifle for the first time, developing positive life-coping skills is something that the Army is eager to help soldiers learn.

“We teach soldiers to make sure their equipment is always 100 percent. We need to teach them to keep themselves at 100 percent,” Staker said. “They are the Army’s biggest investment. Mental health is just as important as passing a physical fitness test or qualifying at the [weapons] range.”

According to Army statistics, more than 580 soldiers have been lost to suicide since the beginning of the global war on terror – the equivalent to an entire infantry battalion task force.

“Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem,” Staker said. “A lot of times, soldiers just need to be able to get over the hump.”

The 2006 Army Suicide Event Report revealed that the majority of suicides are triggered by problems with personal relationships or jobs. The Army offers many free, confidential programs to help soldiers, family members and civilians in these areas. Behavioral health task forces work to block these channels early while they’re still manageable, Staker noted. Each task force targets specific local needs and develops prevention tools and support based on those needs, he added.

From military family life consultants to behavioral health specialists to chaplains – along with garrison organizations such as Social Work Services, Soldier and Family Assistance Centers and Army Community Services – the availability of help is endless and easily accessible.

Those who aren’t sure whether they need help can visit www.militaryonesource.com. The home page includes a link to a variety of self-assessment tools aimed at evaluating one’s stress level and resiliency. Military OneSource also has counselors available 24 hours per day.

The Army acknowledges that some soldiers don’t have the strength to seek help on their own – which is where the Warrior Ethos comes in.

“Even if you’re not the one in need, you know your buddy best,” Staker said. “Send them in for [care].”

(Christie Vanover works in the U.S. Army Garrison Benelux Public Affairs Office.)

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