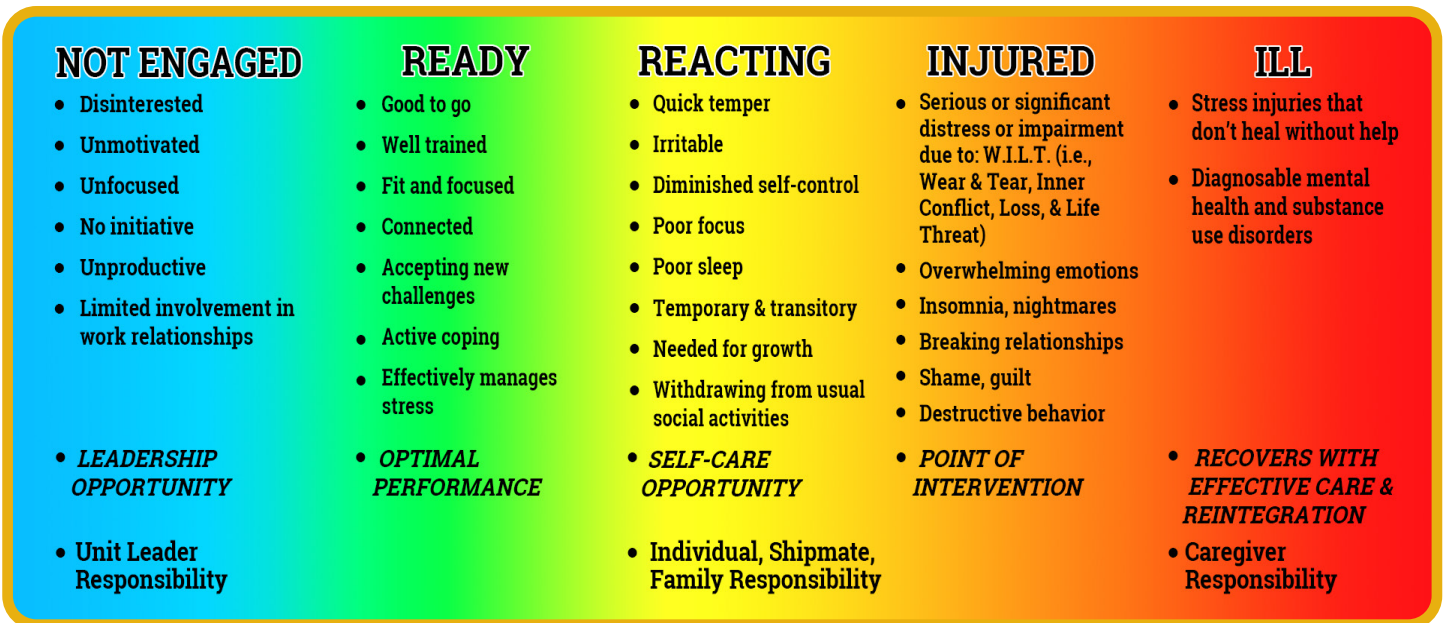




Combating Stress With COSFA

What happens when a Sailor is obviously struggling mentally or tells another Sailor they want to hurt themselves?

Should it be written off as daily work frustration or should the other Sailor try to help? Combat and Operational Stress First Aid (COSFA) is a process that can help in these situations. This article defines what COSFA is and how to use it, the benefits of using it, and how it relates to Warrior Toughness and the Warrior Mindset.



Expanded Stress Continuum model

Using COSFA

A Sailor might experience daily stress that can cause them to be irritable, quick to anger, unable to focus, and unable to get restful sleep. Such a Sailor may register in the yellow zone on the Stress Continuum model, which can be viewed as a normal way to function but can lead to stress injuries.

A stress injury is unlike a physical injury where a Sailor may experience a strain or a broken bone. Stress injuries relate to a disruption of emotional or mental health that require help. Everyone reacts differently to stress.

If stress is not addressed in a healthy manner, it can build to the point of a stress injury and put a Sailor in the orange zone of the Stress Continuum model. Being in the orange zone

can result in overwhelming emotions, insomnia, harmful behavior, or the possibility of a Sailor hurting themselves or others.

COSFA is a multistep process to quickly determine if and when help is needed, and an individual does not require a certification to use it. The purpose of using COSFA is to preserve life, prevent further harm, and promote recovery. COSFA consists of three levels of aid for Leadership and Sailors to help fellow Sailors: Primary Aid, Secondary Aid, and Continuous Aid.

What Is Primary Aid?

Primary Aid is an immediate course of action to ensure the stress-injured Sailor's safety, the safety of those around them, and to prevent further harm from happening.



COSFA is used when the peer-to-peer process does not meet the mark. It provides a step-by-step guide to help a Sailor who is already responding to a stressful event.

LCDR Courtney Pullman-Turner

At times, Sailors witness their fellow Sailors reacting to stress and they do not know what to do. It is easy to get caught up in day-to-day duties and Sailors might feel like they do not have the time or energy to help, or they may not feel comfortable approaching a Sailor in distress out of fear of making things worse. Both the Sailor wanting to help and the Sailor in need face barriers, but time is of the essence when dealing with a possible stress injury.

Primary Aid consists of two essential components, cover and calm.

Getting to Cover

In a combat situation, the term cover is used when Sailors are under fire. Quickly finding cover can be the difference between life and death. Cover as it relates to Primary Aid is a Sailor getting a fellow Sailor in the orange zone to physical safety as quickly as possible. The Sailor in distress may not be thinking clearly and their ability to recognize and react to danger may be impaired.

How to Get a Sailor to Cover?

Cover can be achieved by talking to the Sailor in distress to find out if they need assistance, alerting the Sailor to impending danger, or giving them a firm order to cease what they are doing. A Sailor attempting to help can also make a signal stop with their hands, physically restrain the Sailor in distress, or take control of the Sailor's body while pulling them to safety if necessary. The technique depends on the situation. If the Sailor is not in immediate danger to themselves or others, simply talking and listening to them may be enough to get them to cover.

What Is Calm?

The calm component of Primary Aid means using verbal and nonverbal techniques to help

calm a Sailor in distress. Sailors need to be able to calm other Sailors in stressful events as well as themselves. It does not help to tell a distressed Sailor to calm down.

Calming a Sailor Down

Sailors can help fellow Sailors calm down by remaining calm and composed, maintaining eye contact, and listening to the Sailor in distress if they are willing to speak. A Sailor can also ask the Sailor in distress to breathe with them as they perform a recalibrated breathing technique. Something as simple as breathing in through their nose for 5 seconds and breathing out through their mouth for 7 seconds can be enough to help them reset in the moment and find their calm. As they start to relax, statements such as, "You are safe now," or "I am here with you," can further help them to relax and find a calmer state of mind.



A Sailor assisting another Sailor in distress

What Is Secondary Aid?

Secondary Aid is provided when immediate danger has passed to help the Sailor process their emotions and begin recovery.

After a natural disaster, such as a hurricane, earthquake, or tornado, it is necessary to recover and rebuild. Although not as intense as a natural disaster, Sailors face their own personal internal storms during their day-to-day operations.

The three essential components of Secondary Aid are connect, competence, and confidence.

Connecting to Recover

Connect as it relates to COSFA focuses on providing Sailors access to major support systems like friends and family while removing barriers to social support. It is important for Sailors to reconnect with people they feel comfortable around after experiencing a stress injury.

Asking simply, “Hey, how are you doing?” can pull a Sailor out of feeling isolated and uncomfortable. They may feel ashamed or have difficulty expressing their emotions and support from Leaders and fellow Sailors can make all the difference in getting Sailors in distress



A Leader counseling a Sailor

back to a solid mental place, also known as the green zone, and help them recover.

Restoring Competence

Competence, as it relates to COSFA, refers to helping Sailors restore their personal effectiveness and performance both at work and at home. If a Sailor is asked what skills they are competent in, they may say marksmanship or swimming. Managing peak performance of those skills can be difficult when a Sailor is stressed out or having a rough day. Increased levels of stress can directly impact a Sailor’s ability to function. When a Sailor experiences a stress injury, they may struggle to stay motivated, not be able to perform tasks they were previously competent in, or feel they are not part of the team.

These are the moments they need their Leaders and fellow Sailors to step up and provide encouragement and support while they regain their previous abilities. Sailors can help their fellow Sailors get out of their shell by verbally building them up when they see them struggling. Statements like, “You can do it,” and “You’ve got this,” allow the Sailor to feel included and helps remove the feeling of disassociation. A few words of encouragement could be just what the Sailor needs to begin to restore their functionality and physical capabilities.

Reestablishing Confidence

As a Sailor in the Navy, confidence is key to performing daily tasks under heightened stress levels.



A Sailor checking on another Sailor

When a Sailor is not reacting to stress well or suffers a stress injury, their confidence may take a hit causing a loss of hope and purpose.

The Sailor's mind and spirit may need a boost of confidence and they might rely on their unit members and family to restore their sense of purpose, trust, and self-belief. Sailors can help fellow Sailors in need rebuild their self-worth and restore their faith by listening to Sailors and promoting optimism.

The more support a Sailor receives while in distress, the more they may believe in themselves. This is accomplished through the selfless actions and words of their fellow Sailors and Leaders. The road to recovery is never easy, but with their team behind them, nothing is impossible.

What Is Continuous Aid?

Continuous Aid is a continuous cycle of support and consists of two essential components: check and coordinate. Continuous Aid can happen at any time before, during, or after a Sailor experiences minor stressors or is impacted by a stress injury. Continuous Aid can also happen during a Sailor's recovery from a stress injury to ensure they do not become reinjured.



At the very basic level, check in on your Sailors, and check in on your peers. A lot of us get really good at hiding our distress because the military trains us to do that, and sometimes we must do that in order to accomplish a given mission.

LCDR Courtney Pullman-Turner

Checking In

When a family member is going through tough times, it is normal to periodically reach out to check on them and offer support. The idea of the check component is basically the same concept. When a fellow Sailor is suffering from unregulated stress or recovering from a stress injury, it is important to check up on them to ensure they are not a danger to themselves or others and that they get the support needed to work through their stress and fully recover.

Checking on a fellow Sailor can be accomplished through daily observation of their behavior and their ability to complete tasks successfully. Having brief conversations with the Sailor is also an effective way to check on their current emotional state to determine if they need Primary or Secondary Aid.

Coordinating Support and Resources

The Navy oversees the strength and coordination of their Sailors as a whole, but the coordinate component is based on each individual Sailor. Minor stressors can escalate quickly into stress injuries for a Sailor without the proper support.



A Sailor adjusting another Sailor's face mask

Their fellow Sailors are the first line of defense, but a Sailor in distress (not covered or calmed), requires a higher level of support from Leaders, Chaplains, or additional resources.

Benefits of Using COSFA

During final gear checks at Camp Lejeune late Friday afternoon, HM3 Vega spotted PFC Miller alone, fumbling with his helmet strap while taking rapid breaths. Recognizing acute stress, Vega calmly approached Miller to check, knelt beside him providing cover, and quietly urged him to, "Deep breathe with me," to calm and connect. After hearing Miller's worries, Vega helped him adjust his helmet, restoring his competence, and offered him firm reassurance, "Trust your training and team.

You've got this."

This brief COSFA intervention restored Miller's composure and confidence, allowing him to rejoin his squad's preparations. When used properly, COSFA can help to effectively support Sailors that may otherwise feel isolated or unsupported. Checking in on fellow Sailors helps them reach and stay in the green zone. The Navy is a family, and no one should have to fight their personal battles alone.

How Does COSFA Relate to Warrior Toughness and the Warrior Mindset?

Warrior Toughness goes beyond being physically strong and requires Sailors to be mentally fit as well. It is the duty of every Sailor to recognize and respond when a fellow Sailor is in distress

to ensure their health and effectiveness, their long-term well-being, and to help keep them in the fight.

The Warrior Mindset represents a peak performance framework that empowers Sailors to consistently excel. When stress injuries compromise this mental foundation, COSFA offers a pathway to recovery and restoration.

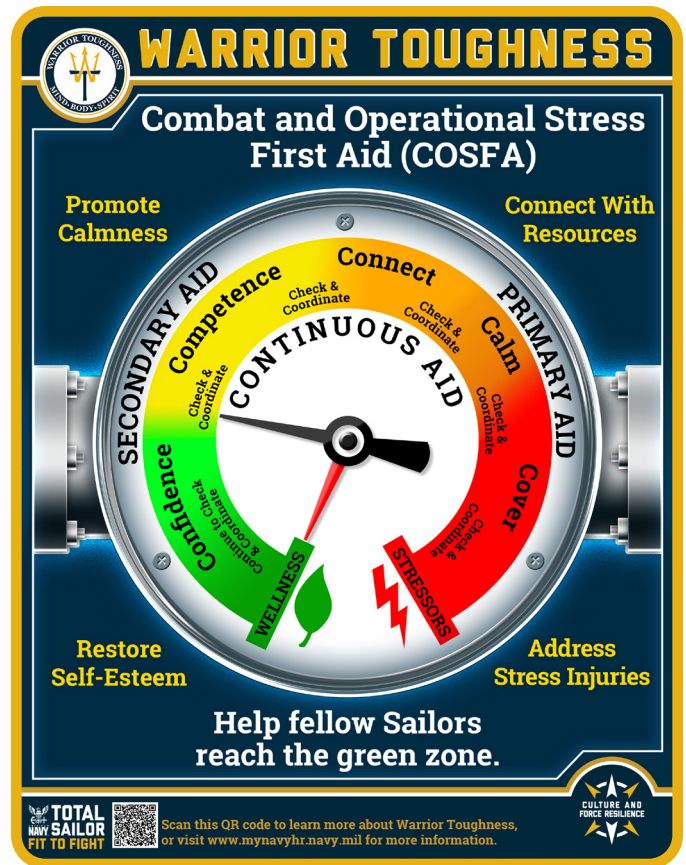


A Sailor standing at a ship rail in a storm

Wrap-Up

Every Sailor has a duty to preserve life, prevent fellow Sailors from further harm, and help promote recovery by using COSFA.

This article covered what COSFA is and how to use it, benefits of using it, and how it relates to Warrior Toughness and the Warrior Mindset.



Warrior Toughness COSFA infographic

For more information, check out the videos and podcast about COSFA.



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