



How to Harness the Power of Stress

Stressful experiences from the past can make Sailors stronger and more resilient today.

Changing the perception of stress can improve the ability to manage it more effectively.

 **TOTAL
NAVY SAILOR
FIT TO FIGHT**

Stress is a part of life, and how one responds to it shapes not only their performance but their overall well-being. This article explains the nature of stress, the difference between helpful and harmful stress, and practical strategies to build resilience against stress. By understanding stress and learning to manage it, Sailors can turn challenges into opportunities for growth and peak performance.

What Is Stress?

Stress is the mind's and body's response to a stressor. People react differently to stressors, and not everyone responds in the same way. Stress is a state of mental or emotional strain, or tension, resulting from demanding circumstances. Stress is associated with an individual's perception of their ability to handle adverse or demanding circumstances. Stress can have a positive and negative effect on a person's Mind, Body, Spirit, and social domains.

Stress and Resilience in the Military

Stress is inevitable in the military. For Sailors, stress may include the demands of maintaining a forward presence, handling increasing work demands with decreasing staff, adapting leadership or management styles, and addressing career concerns.

Resilience, the ability to adapt and recover, is essential for Sailors to overcome stressful circumstances, survive threats, and accomplish missions.

What Is the Difference Between Stress and a Stressor?

Stressors are events, experiences, or environmental conditions an individual perceives as threats or challenges while stress is an individual's physical or psychological response to them.

Some examples of stressors Sailors might face in their roles are long days of relentless drills where every mistake has consequences, sleepless nights before an inspection, the weight of separation from family during deployment, or juggling school deadlines after a full shift of duty.

Common environmental conditions that cause stress might be searing heat on the flight deck, icy winds during watch, the



Sailors struggling to control a broken pipe



Stress is a normal adaptive response. It's how our brain and body react when we face something challenging or threatening.

LT Rose Bauldry

ever-present smell of fuel or sweat, or the constant roar of machinery.

Why Is Stress Necessary?

Understanding stress helps Sailors develop a healthy relationship with it and allows them to use it as a tool for growth and performance.

The role of stress is to act as a signal. Stress alerts individuals that something requires their attention. Stress also motivates them by pushing them to act and achieve their goals. In addition, stress helps people learn. By navigating stressful situations, they develop strategies that allow them to grow and perform better.

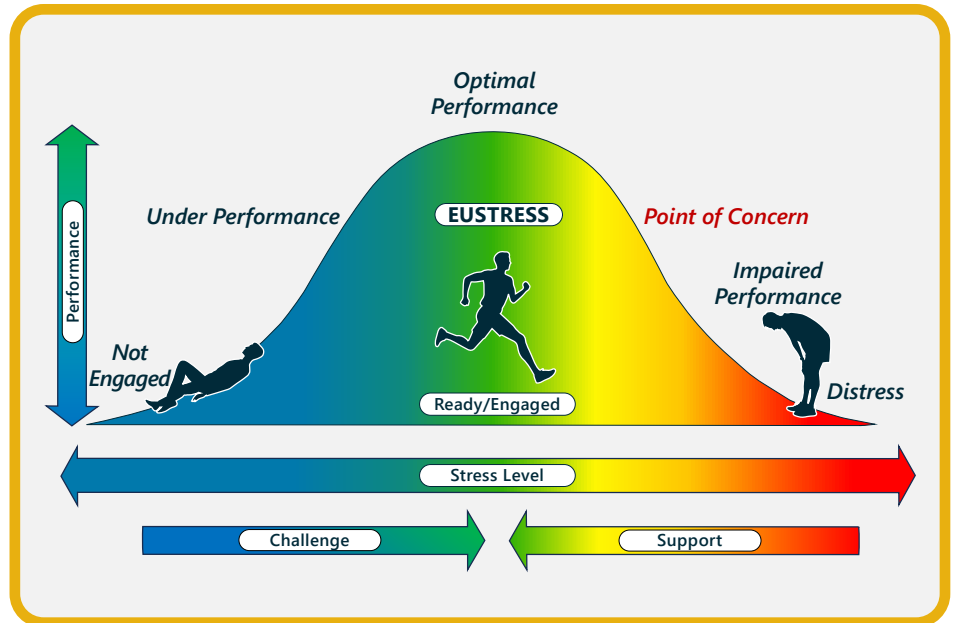
Stress can be helpful in some situations and unhelpful in others. What matters most is the level of stress. Too little or too much stress

can negatively affect performance and hinder an individual's ability to meet goals. People need some degree of stress in their everyday lives to function at their best.

Stress is essential for optimal performance because the right amount of stress helps individuals focus and perform at their highest level. It also builds strength and toughness since repeated exposure to stress develops resilience over time. Stress contributes to growth and development by helping individuals acquire new skills. It prepares them to face and overcome challenges, and it sharpens their ability to execute complex tasks in high-pressure environments such as the military.

Stress has the power to push people to grow, improve, and motivate them toward achieving their goals. When individuals have a healthy relationship with stress, it can be a valuable ally in helping them perform at their best. However, if they do not nurture and manage their relationship with stress, it can become toxic. They do not want to let stress overwhelm them and harm their well-being.

The key is to develop a balanced, positive relationship with stress, and learn how to use it for growth without letting it control them.



Optimal Performance diagram

Not All Stress Is the Same

Although stress is essential, it can take different forms; eustress motivates growth, while distress can be harmful to health and well-being.

Eustress is defined by several positive features. It includes a desire for movement that can motivate a person and push them forward toward growth. It also provides positive energy that can be used to achieve optimal performance. People experiencing eustress often feel a sense of excitement and have time and space for recovery.

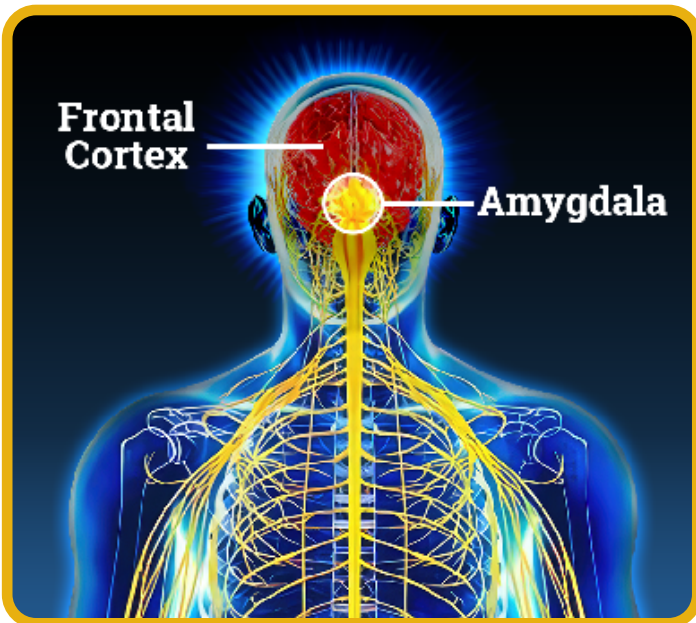
Distress, on the other hand, is defined by more negative features. It includes feeling overwhelmed or stretched beyond one's resources, which can demotivate a person from moving forward. Distress can

also involve feeling drained of energy or unable to control it, leading to decreased performance. It is often marked by exhaustion and by the sense of having no opportunity for recovery.

How Can Sailors Recognize Harmful Stress?

When Sailors begin to recognize signs of stress in themselves or others, the Expanded Stress Continuum provides a useful tool for understanding and describing their experiences. The continuum helps establish a standardized language that Sailors can use to identify and describe their stress responses.

The Expanded Stress Continuum is an evolved version of the original Stress Continuum Model (SCM) developed by the Navy and Marine Corps. It



Upper human torso with frontal cortex and amygdala labeled

remains an evidence-based and evidence-informed model aligned with military culture.

This model categorizes stress responses into five zones, each representing different levels of stress. It serves as both a tool and a common language to identify, engage, and intervene when stress reactions or injuries are present. The goal is to facilitate open conversations about asking for help and offering support when needed.

The continuum is a reminder that stress is not always harmful, but recognizing when it becomes dangerous is essential. With the right support, Sailors can return to healthier zones and maintain readiness.

Control the Stress Response

After recognizing harmful stress, Sailors can learn to control their body's automatic stress responses to stay calm and perform under pressure.

The Mind and Body are deeply connected, and what happens in the brain can directly impact one's physical state. Different emotions trigger distinct physical responses that can be detected throughout the Body.

The amygdala is the part of the brain responsible for triggering the fight, flight, or freeze response during stress. This response helps individuals react quickly to perceived threats. When a stressful situation arises, the amygdala takes control, bypassing the frontal lobes, which are the area of the brain responsible for rational thinking and decision-making. With the frontal lobes bypassed, the amygdala activates the fight-or-flight response, which can make it difficult to think clearly, make rational decisions, or control one's actions.

The stress response is an automatic physiological reaction that prepares the Mind and Body to deal with danger.

When it functions properly, it keeps a person focused, energetic, and alert, potentially saving their life in an emergency.

The frontal cortex, the most advanced part of the brain and the last to fully mature, plays a crucial role in critical thinking, decision-making, and self-control. It helps individuals understand what is really happening and directs their behavior accordingly.

For example, the frontal cortex can recognize that loud ceremonial cannon booms are not a threat. Similarly, it can help individuals stay calm and focused when parachuting out of an airplane, rather than succumbing to a fight-or-flight reaction.



Think of the amygdala as your internal smoke alarm. It's been with you since birth, and its job is to trigger that fight, flight, or freeze response when it senses that danger.

LT Rose Bauldry



A Sailor confronting barriers as the ship moves away from the storm

The goal of Warrior Toughness is to strengthen the function of the frontal cortex so that Sailors can perform effectively in high-pressure situations. Through consistent training, the frontal cortex becomes faster and stronger, allowing Sailors to override automatic amygdala responses when needed. This enables calmer, deliberate action in stressful or dangerous situations. In essence, Warrior Toughness trains Sailors to perform at their best when it truly counts.

Overcome the Stigma of Seeking Help

The Navy's desire is to normalize the process of seeking help.



Ignoring stress doesn't make you tougher. Speaking up is preventative maintenance.

LT Rose Bauldry

Breaking the code of silence reinforces that it is okay to ask for support during times of distress. Sailors cannot bottle up their struggles because the energy is eventually released and can be damaging if not properly addressed. Any illness or injury can worsen without proper guidance or assistance. Recognizing the signs and symptoms, creating a safe environment, and fostering a positive culture that supports Sailors in asking for help are critical. These steps make it acceptable to intervene and engage before problems escalate.

One of the most common barriers is the perceived stigma of asking for help. Many Sailors fear being seen as weak, worrying that peers might lose confidence in them, worrying that leaders will blame them for problems, or feeling it would be embarrassing for their family. Reducing misconceptions and stigma around seeking help for stress injuries helps create a safer space where Sailors feel comfortable reaching out.

Trust is also essential. Sharing personal details with another Sailor or leader can be



Sailors in the water during a training evolution

difficult, especially when there is concern that information might not remain confidential or could negatively affect a military career. Building trust among peers helps Sailors feel comfortable discussing life stressors and accessing services or resources.

Time and energy are additional barriers. Many feel too exhausted or overwhelmed by work and emotional stress to seek help. Scheduling time for support as people do for work meetings or appointments, reevaluating priorities, and canceling nonessential activities can make seeking help more manageable.

A lack of understanding and support from leadership can

further prevent Sailors from recognizing the need for help. Some may dismiss or minimize their struggles, thinking that everyone gets stressed out or that their problems are not that bad. Fear of retaliation also prevents action, as Sailors may worry that seeking help reflects poorly on their character or could have negative consequences.

Even when someone is willing to get help, access can be a barrier. Many believe they have limited options or are unaware of how to reach available care. Increasing communication is key. The more seeking help is talked about, the less stigma and fear Sailors experience, making it easier for them to get the support they need.

Six Ways to Build Resilience Against Stress

Warrior Ethos involves knowing one's values and greater purpose, which guides action with character and decisiveness.

Flexible Thinking means being aware of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors while replacing negative self-talk to foster optimism and control.

Mindfulness helps the Mind and Body work together, improving rest, recovery, and awareness of stress before it becomes harmful.

Healthy Behaviors such as exercise, good nutrition, sleep, and relaxation techniques strengthen both Mind and Body.

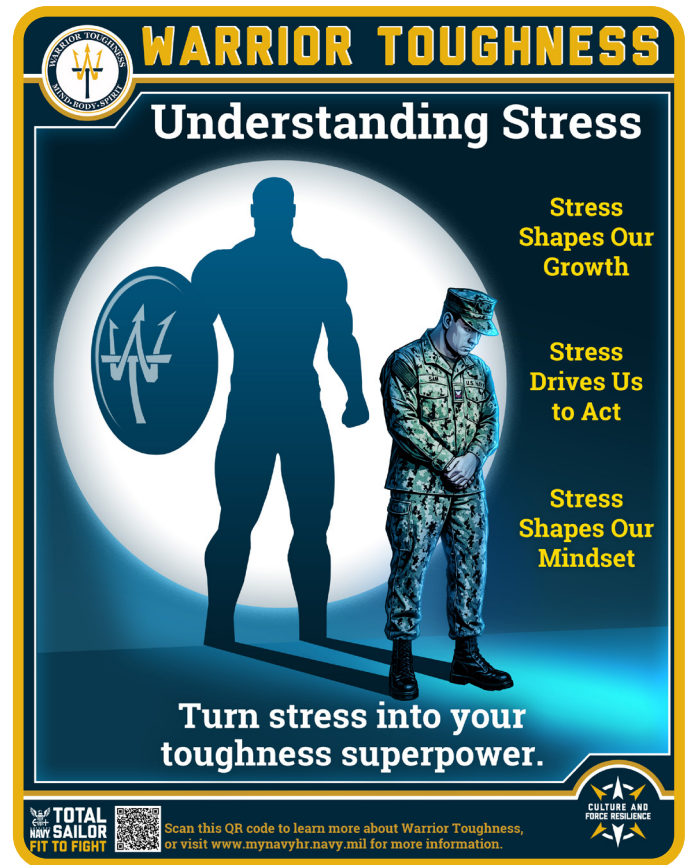
Energy Management focuses on matching energy to the task, training the brain and Body to be ready when needed.

Finally, **Performance Statements** are short, positive phrases that improve self-talk, build confidence, and support consistent performance.

Wrap-Up

Stress is inevitable, but it does not have to control individuals. By recognizing the difference between eustress and distress, learning to balance stress levels, and practicing strategies such as mindfulness, energy management, and healthy communication, people can transform stress into a tool for growth and achievement.

Building these skills takes time, reflection, and consistent practice. As individuals apply what they have learned, they will find that stress can become an ally, helping them grow stronger, perform at their best, and support those around them.



Warrior Toughness Understanding Stress infographic

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



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