

DoD Factors Families into Mission Readiness Equation



Military leaders have long known that if you retain the family, you retain the soldier – an axiom that reverberates even louder today as the Department of Defense (DoD) begins the development of a comprehensive Military Family Fitness initiative for 2012. The initiative, which is a major pillar in DoD's Total Force Fitness concept, is redefining the way military leaders look at fitness and mission readiness.

Introduced two years ago under the leadership of Adm. Michael Mullen, USN, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Total Force Fitness concept represents a “new paradigm” for DoD, one that focuses on expanding the meaning of military fitness to include much more than just physical training, and puts more of an emphasis on spiritual, nutritional, medical, environmental, psychological, social/family and behavioral factors.

“Total force fitness is more than a physical fitness,” says Mullen. “It is the sum total of the many facets of individuals, their families and the organizations to which they serve. It is not something someone achieves twice a year for a test. It is a state of being.”

“Total Force Fitness and Military Family Fitness will likely be key drivers in Defense Department resilience efforts among federal and civilian agencies and will help synergize efforts and further identify, define and establish a consensus on key topics,” notes Col. Stephen Bowles, Ph.D., Department of Medical & Clinical Psychology Uniformed Services University, who was part of a team that presented “Military Family Fitness Model” at the DoD Family Resilience Conference in April 2011.

As DoD looks to implement this blueprint for military fitness in the 21st century, Morale, Welfare and Recreation (MWR) professionals have already begun to expand the

meaning of fitness to include more than just physical training.

“The concept of Total Force Fitness is a shift away from simply having a sound body to a holistic view of health and fitness that includes both mind and body,” says Cathy Ficadenti, branch head, Semper Fit Programs, Marine Corps MWR and Business Operations Division.

In addition to boosting morale, these programs – fitness, sports, recreation, child and youth, for example – combine to build stronger service members and families, better prepared for the physical and mental rigors of long deployments and time spent away from loved ones.

FAMILY FITNESS INITIATIVE

As a major pillar of the overall Total Force Fitness initiative, DoD has funded for 2012 the development of a department-wide Family Fitness initiative, and a working group has been formed to begin this important work.

“We are excited about the potential in this arena for a multi-service initiative,” notes Lisa Sexauer, Fitness, Sports and Deployed Forces program manager (N921), Commander, Navy Installations Command (CNIC), who is part of the working group. “We have held a preliminary meeting and that was to establish our current baseline to evaluate what each of the services is doing. Our effort is to leverage best practices and maybe implement those across the services so that whatever is newly created wouldn't be duplication, and in fact where there is an opportunity to consolidate and reduce duplication, we are looking at that as well.”

“Increasing and improving the physical fitness opportunities for military family members, wounded ill and injured Marines, retirees and the military civilian workforce is the focus of the Semper Fit Family Fitness Program,” adds Ficadenti. “Providing guidance to our existing fitness programs for this

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large and varied section of the military population encompasses not only healthy individuals but also those with medical concerns (obesity, heart disease, asthma, autism, anxiety disorders, etc.), as well as physical disability and in every age group (cradle to grave). Due to the importance of this effort, the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) has funded the development of a DoD-wide Family Fitness Initiative.”

This Family Fitness initiative is a pillar or natural extension of the Total Force Fitness initiative.

“If you step back and take a look, it is my belief that MWR in many ways – with, of course, partner organizations, the medical communities and many others – is all about total force fitness – that is what we do,” says Sexauer.

The difficult part of the process, she points out, is identifying the target population.

“This is a large population that includes the service member, the spouse and their dependents,” she says. “And that is a very diverse age range, so our effort in this area, which has yet to be developed, is to figure out which portion or parts or

whether it is the family as the unit that we target initially. And I see this as an iterative process; I don’t know if it is going to be, ‘Here is a packaged project that addresses all your needs.’”

She points out that from the beginning OSD has emphasized the need for outreach. “Families aren’t always located on an installation, so there has to be some method that reaches out to families where they live and play.”

The Family Fitness initiative working group, made up of professionals from each service (including representatives from child and youth, fitness and athletics), is currently working on a charter as it does industry research and identifies best practices.

CREATING A BLUEPRINT

The “Military Family Fitness Model” provides a blueprint or foundation for the Family Fitness initiative. The model is the result of extensive work done by DoD; Department of Medical & Clinical Psychology, and the Human Performance Resource Center, Uniformed Services University; and the Defense Centers of Excellence (DCoE) for Psychological Health & TBI, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs; and a diverse group of professionals and researchers across multiple disciplines.

According to Bowles and the team who presented the model on Family Fitness at the Family Resilience Conference, there has been a great need for a better support network for service members and their families.

“Since the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, around two million U.S. troops have deployed,” noted Bowles. “The operational tempo associated with these conflicts, in conjunction with extended and multiple deployments and the shortened time for rest between deployments, has placed unprecedented stress on service members as well as spouses, parents, children and significant others.”

He points out, “It is imperative that the military continue to offer strategies and resources for promoting and sustaining families who are resilient and those trying to adapt to high and prolonged levels of stress. Such stressors present a formidable challenge for the military components and civilian communities as these families work to reintegrate, re-establish effective family patterns of functioning and minimize adverse impacts.”

The Total Force Fitness and Family Fitness initiatives are based on a new “mind-body paradigm” that DoD has created to better focus on the health, readiness and performance of warfighters and their families.

“The Family Fitness Model is based on the Military Demand-Resource Model (MDR) from the psychological Total Force Fitness domain,” said Bowles. “In addition to the MDR, the Family Fitness Model integrates empirically-based family resilience and community models while leveraging a public-health, socio-ecological approach.

“This model begins by examining the family demands and baseline family strengths that can arise in military and civilian families suddenly integrated in and then out of the military. Some of the major stressors or demands that impact the military family are separations, health issues and the level of functional and emotional support for the service member’s family. Other baseline information looked at in families is the stage of the family life cycle, ethnicity, family patterns and well-being.”

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members, family role conflict, non-supportive relationship outside the family, and/or domestic violence),” according to Bowles.

“The Family Fitness Model builds on existing family strengths and resources; takes a family-focused approach to individual struggles; focuses on prevention/early intervention; and fosters multi-level collaborations. At any point along the Family Fitness Model, all families can build resilience-enhancing resources to promote total family fitness.”

The presenters concluded that Total Force or Total Family Fitness is “a state in which the individual, family and organization can achieve and sustain optimal well-being and performance under all conditions,” and involves “the integration and optimization of mental, emotional, and behavioral abilities and capabilities to optimize performance and strengthen the resilience of warfighters.”

In addition, to achieve this goal of optimal mission readiness requires “a high-level heuristic model for leaders, policy makers and program managers to see the full picture and give equal attention across a variety of ways health can be improved,” and requires “a process oriented, multi-level systems model for Service Members, their families, leaders, policy makers, and program managers to see how family fitness can be achieved/maintained.”

Along with promoting and providing more opportunities and resources in the areas of health and fitness, DoD points out that one of the most important ways it can help families is by helping them to build mind-body skills, an effective approach for enhancing resilience and preventing and treating stress-related illnesses.

In the end, building resiliency not only creates stronger service members and families, but also a stronger and more mission-ready force.

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COMBATING STRESS

During the resiliency conference, DoD focused on identifying integrative practices for lowering stress and anxiety such as breathing exercises, yoga, and mindfulness and meditation exercises to promote wellness within the individual, and enhance and maintain positive relationships within the family, unit and community, as well as available family resources such as family dimensions, communication skills, coping, family cohesion and flexibility, shared family routines and social-support networks.

“As stressors increase, the family will lean on their internal and external resources for resilient outcomes or espouse transient characteristics that indicate more support is needed (e.g., family strife, children acting out, job instability for non-service

