

## Training Your Brain is the Key to Resiliency

Training the brain to remain resilient is the foundation of sustaining the readiness of our Air Force. The brain is constantly changing in line with how we use it to think, interact, learn, feel, and imagine. Changes in memory, mood, focus, and coordination can occur following a traumatic event, however that does not mean optimal brain performance cannot be restored. The way Airmen incorporate vital habits such as physical exercise, nutrition, sleep, and stress management into their daily routines, can affect the brain's performance potential.

### Air Force Resiliency Tools

To support and build a more lethal force, leaders must promote resilience among their Airmen by familiarizing themselves with available tools and resources to prevent and respond to crises. The tools below can help leaders sustain the readiness of the Total Force.

**Prevention Tools:** Many Airmen experience personal and professional challenges. More often than not, these challenges can be resolved long before they escalate into serious problems. Leaders can integrate resilient thinking tools such as celebrating good news and practicing gratitude, which can help Airmen learn to reframe challenges and control their reactions, preventing problems before they start, at all levels.

**Intervention Tools:** Leading Airmen with invisible wounds can present unique opportunities for those who may not have had similar experiences, and the next step may not always be clear. These tools are intended to help leaders detect and navigate through a crisis.

**Postvention Tools:** Suicide, suicide attempts, and acts of interpersonal violence are devastating to individuals, families, teammates, and the community at large. These tools are intended to help leaders through reintegration and the aftermath of a crisis.

**Situational Exercises:** Exceptional leaders remain calm and instill confidence in those they lead during times of hardship and trauma. These exercises present various scenarios that provide the opportunity for leaders to test their knowledge, rehearse their actions, and refine contingency plans so they are better prepared to lead in times of crisis. Exercises should spark thoughtful discussion amongst leaders and leadership teams at all levels and increase self-awareness of each leader's ability to respond to a variety of situations they may encounter.

### Rewiring Your Brain for Maximum Resilience

Leaders can help train fellow Airmen to be more resilient and bounce back faster from life's inevitable adverse events, becoming stronger as a result. Similar to physical training, resilience training can help Airmen strengthen their overall brain health by incorporating the below tips<sup>1</sup> into their daily lives.

- Exercise
- Take Five – allow five minutes, five times a day to rest your brain by taking a walk or going outside
- Stop Multi-Tasking – focus on one task for a concerted period of time, this will strengthen the brain and increase energy
- Increase fruit and vegetable intake
- Practice Innovative Thinking – challenge your brain by using different words to thank someone or reframe a conversation with a family member
- Believe in Your Brain – strengthen your brain reserve by implementing healthy lifestyle practices to combat the brain slowing down as you age

### Stress Continuum: Know Your Zone

Stress, which sometimes seems like an unavoidable part of daily life, is also a source of wear and tear on an individual's physical and mental health. A stressful situation, whether environmental or psychological, can trigger a cascade of stress hormones that produce well-orchestrated physiological changes. This is known as the "fight or flight" response and is now classified as a type of survival mechanism, enabling individuals to react quickly to life-threatening situations.<sup>2</sup>

The stress continuum is a color-coded map that outlines how service members react under stressful day-to-day situations.<sup>3</sup> The continuum also identifies behaviors that might arise following experiences that range from serving in combat to the work that is required of today's Airmen, with an underlying theme of building, maintaining, and restoring resilience to stress.



<sup>1</sup> Source: Center for Brain Health. (2018). More than Crunches: 7 Tips to Keep Your Brain as Sharp as Your Body. Retrieved from: <https://brainhealth.utdallas.edu/news/crunches-7-tipskeep-brain-sharp-body/>

<sup>2</sup> Source: Harvard Health. (2018). Understanding the Stress Response. Retrieved from: <https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/understanding-the-stress-response>

<sup>3</sup> Source: BrainLine. (2013). The Stress Continuum. Retrieved from: <https://www.brainline.org/article/stress-continuum>

## BRAIN HEALTH RESOURCES



NATIONAL INTREPID CENTER OF EXCELLENCE

**The Brain Fitness Center:** The National Intrepid Center of Excellence is a directorate of the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center that helps service members and their families manage their traumatic brain injury (TBI) and psychological health conditions. The **Brain Fitness Center** is a supplemental care option that provides patients with access to computer brain-training programs, heart rate variability biofeedback, and mind-body classes. The tools and resources can be used alongside cognitive rehabilitation and/or for enhanced mental performance.

## MILITARY ONE SOURCE

**Military OneSource:** A free service provided by the DoD for Service members to help with a broad range of concerns including complex issues like stress and grief. Services are available 24 hours a day by telephone (1-800-342-9647) and [online](#).



**The Brain Performance Institute:** Comprised of a team of leaders in the exploration of the brain who care about translating research findings into innovations that benefit people as quickly as possible. Their team of experts is committed to understanding, protecting, and restoring the brain – discovering what drives brain strength and what compromises it.



**The Bush Institute - Military Service Initiative:** Aims to maximize the health and well-being of post-9/11 veterans and military families through research, policy development, programs, and presidential recognition.