Leadership in Action

Strategies for Distress Prevention and Management

I. The Nature of Distress

🟥 Sources of Distress

   Stressful events can motivate and challenge an individual. However, they can also have adverse effects such as causing distress. Distress occurs along a continuum from mild to severe and its prevention and management are key components of Health Promotion. The sources of distress are numerous and include the following:

- Death of a loved one/unit member.
- Serious illness.
- Changes in relationships (e.g., getting married or divorced).
- Medical, financial, or legal problems.
- Changes in lifestyle (e.g., deploying, retiring).
- Promotion/pass over.
- Increased/decreased job responsibilities.

🟥 How Distress May Impact Individuals and the Mission

Distress can affect individuals in various ways including:

- Decreased ability to focus/concentrate.
- Becoming irritable or angry.
- Decreased problem-solving skills.
- Decreased self-confidence.
- Decreased ability to make sound decisions.
- Sleep disturbances.
- Mood swings.
- Withdrawal.

   Distress can have serious consequences which can negatively impact unit morale and mission readiness. These include increased risk taking and accidental injuries, decreased job performance, alcohol dependency, depression and possibly suicide.

■ Coping with Distress

The ability to cope with distress is highly individualized and is dependent on a combination of many things:

- Extent, duration, and intensity of the problem.
- Nature of the problem.
- Number and type of problem.
- Presence of a social support network.
- Spiritual beliefs that give people hope and strength when facing adversity.
- Personal resilience--ability to bounce back.
- Physical health.
- Emotional reserves to draw upon.

■ How Distress Can Be Decreased and Prevented

Although distress can be prevented with timely interventions to mitigate the impact of stressful life events, once it appears, distress management is essential. An individual's unique coping skills, perception of the problem and social support will determine how successfully they deal with their distress. Leaders can assist by preventing the individual from isolating themselves and linking them with the appropriate helping agencies.

II. Installation and Unit Support

Unit leaders, Installation garrison agencies, Soldiers, Army civilians, and their families share responsibility for the general welfare of the military community. They also demonstrate competence in taking advantage of opportunities for addressing community needs and confronting situations that threaten the safety and well-being of community members. Base and unit leaders promote the development of connections between members and families in their units, and demonstrate knowledge and skill in helping members and families balance work and family issues. Base and unit leaders also help members and families secure support services. An expected benefit from this approach is that unit leaders will encounter fewer members whose personal and family related problems impact individual or unit readiness.

III. What Leaders Can Do

Leaders are responsible for their personnel and play a vital role in preventing and managing distress. They must know their people and their organization and be aware of the resources available to assist them in dealing with distress.

■ Know Your People

To know your people, as individuals, you must spend time with them and listen to what they have to say. Attentive, reflective listening may reveal the concerns that are causing distress. Send the message that you are interested in hearing about the member's problem(s), be supportive of them and assist them in identifying what help they might find most useful. Emphasize that seeking help in times of distress displays strength, responsibility and good judgment. Recommend individuals seek needed counseling through their 1st line leaders, chaplain's office, mental health professionals, or counselors from the different agencies (ASAP, FAP, AER, SJA, etc.) throughout the installation.

■ Know Your Unit

Just like individuals, units can suffer from distress. Organizational stress affects the unit's morale and in turn can impact the mission. Signs of organizational stress are increased work-related accidents, a disproportionate number of health complaints, and decreased quality of service or production. Methods for reducing organizational stress include the following:

- Keeping staff informed about all decisions that may effect them.
- Encourage participation in unit planning.
- Develop a strong mentoring system within the unit.
- Foster an environment of self-care and peer support.
- Conduct anonymous unit surveys to identify problem issues.
- Arrange for appropriate assistance based on surveys results.
- Encourage healthy lifestyles (i.e., fitness, adequate rest, good nutrition).
- Provide sports facilities and/or flextime.

■ Foster an Organizational Climate of Mutual Support

Because of the potential negative consequences of distress on individuals, leaders should encourage active management of distress

as a good long-term investment in well-being. Accountability for one's own well-being is strengthened by the example set by leadership and the emphasis attached to the effective management of distress. Leaders can remind people in distress that their personal well-being is crucial. Improving communications reduces uncertainty and helps reduce barriers to help-seeking behaviors. Advocating a climate that supports the early identification and referral of distressed personnel is an essential part of maintaining a healthy climate.

■ Help Members Build a Community

   Friends and other members of a person's social network offer things that are very important; support, protection from feeling all alone in the world, a sense of identity and purpose, understanding, and guidance. Leaders can take opportunities to "orient" new personnel into the organization, helping them feel welcome and a vital part of the unit. Leaders can then follow-up and let each team member know where they fit in the organization, voicing appreciation for the member's efforts in making the team successful. The unit is often the key organization for many members, so anything leaders can do to foster this sense of community will yield great rewards for their personnel.

IV. Suggested Resources

   1. Bowen, G. & Martin, J. (2001). Building Community Capacity: A Manual for US Air Force Family Support Centers. HQ AMC/DPFF.

V. References

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