



Caring for People Forum: “Resiliency”

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General Norty Schwartz

**As Prepared
for Delivery
~15 min.
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Introduction

Thank you, D.J., for that kind introduction, and for hosting this conference. You and your team deserve a lot of credit for diligently working behind the scenes, and providing this important opportunity for our “caring professionals” to meet, network, and brainstorm ways in which we can better care for our Airmen and their families.

I trust that all of you—Key Spouses, special-needs family specialists, Air Force Teen Council members, Air Force civic leader representatives, and certainly not least, caring professionals—have gleaned valuable perspectives, and perhaps made some useful professional connections, to continue the progress that has been made from the past two Caring for People forums. We are proud of your accomplishments and grateful for your on-going participation in this vital program.

Resiliency

Caring for our people and our families continues to be a top Department of Defense priority, as articulated in the report on the Quadrennial Defense Review—which, as the undersecretary of defense for policy, Michele Flournoy, noted, was the first time that a QDR elevated caring for people to a strategic-level objective. Appropriately so, this notion was reaffirmed in the National Security Strategy, because our people will continue to be our most valuable asset.

And, in this era of prolonged conflict, ongoing fiscal distress, and federal resource constraints—all converging at the same time—the issue of resiliency is understandably becoming an increasingly significant priority for commanders, supervisors, and wingmen at all levels. As our service members dutifully answer the call to serve—with frequent deployments and increased operational demands—the effectiveness of our Joint force depends largely on the ability of our service members and their families to manage deployment-related challenges and bounce back from setbacks.

“Resiliency,” therefore, is an entirely appropriate topic for this forum. I am hopeful that, over the last two days, you have further unpacked this intricate



concept and discussed its finer points—and that, having done so in this forum, we might be able to help advance the broader discussion. As we grow to understand the trends that indicate diminishing levels of resiliency and associated challenges, we will be looking to develop effective proposals for action.

As we proceed, we should take note that resiliency is neither an on/off condition nor a static reality. None of us are absolutely and perfectly equipped to handle the unique, ever-evolving rigors of military service; and, occasionally, each of us may require, to varying degrees, some form of assistance. I am extremely wary of any simplistic notion that some in our ranks are categorically resilient, while others tend to have a difficult time adapting. This sort of characterization divides us into two artificial camps—those who are resilient and those who are not—which, in addition to being divisive, is also decidedly inaccurate. As my friend and colleague, General Pete Chiarelli, would explain, “Any attempt to characterize [individuals who happen to be struggling] as somehow weaker than others is simply misguided.”

I couldn’t agree more. The demands of military service during this time of sustained conflict—in preparing for war, participating in war, and coming home from war—changes people. Therefore, the issue of resiliency—and suicide—is far too complex, and the environment far too dynamic, for us to be satisfied with blatant oversimplifications.

The fact of the matter is: we all cope with varying circumstances that affect us in different ways, and we all might have to ask for help in dealing with personal resiliency issues from time to time. We must be open to the idea of getting help for ourselves when we feel that we might need it, and of encouraging a fellow Airman or family member to do the same when he or she is experiencing difficulties.

To further promote this idea and others, the Community Action Information Board, chaired by General Breedlove, formalized our Air Force Resilience initiative by launching the Comprehensive Airman Fitness Program on March 30th of this year. One of its goals is to boost the attendance of Airmen and their family members in classes that are offered by base-level assistance agencies such as the Airman and Family Readiness Center, and the Health and Wellness Center. Comprehensive Airman Fitness also ensures that resilience training principles are



incorporated into Air Force training venues such as professional military education and technical training. As we progress through these and other resiliency-related campaigns, we will improve our ability to speak even more openly about resiliency and the invisible wounds of war, including post-traumatic stress, depression, and anxiety.

Unfortunately, despite awareness campaigns and emphasis from top Department of Defense leaders, a stigma persists in the minds of many, making it uncomfortable to speak openly about these difficult issues. I appreciate that eliminating this stigma will take time, but we must keep pressing forward. I therefore will continue to call upon commanders, leaders, caring professionals, and indeed all Air Force wingmen to give further serious thought to this subject, and to carefully consider how we can best ensure that our Airmen and their families obtain the support that they need.

As we strive to speak more clearly and openly about resiliency, we also must continue to listen ever more attentively. Truly purposeful listening is a very difficult skill to master, but it is essential for effective leaders, care providers, and wingmen alike. By taking the time to listen, we can begin to truly understand people, relate to them, and demonstrate our commitment to helping them on a person-to-person level. I think that most in this room would agree with this assessment. Without considerate and attentive listening, our ability to harness the power of compassion is greatly curtailed.

Conclusion

Ultimately, we can, if we wish, set any number of policies into motion—we can put pen to paper, and create the best of well-intentioned initiatives—but base-level success can result only from the determined actions of commanders, supervisors, and dedicated caring professionals. Effective programs such as Leadership Pathways and military school liaisons are real-world best practices that resulted from policies that caring professionals helped to implement.

We note, in particular, not just action but also progress on caring for special needs and exceptional family members. A good share of the credit for the recent gains in these areas can be attributed to this—the Caring for People—forum, since



these programs were highlighted as focus areas at your first meeting here two years ago. Your efforts have appropriately emphasized a holistic approach to include all of the dimensions of care and support—physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual—and accordingly, your hard work has led to real and positive results for our Airmen.

One of the ways in which we honor our Airmen is through the great work of groups just like yours, and through the helping programs that you sustain. Suzie and I are very proud of our caring professionals who are so instrumental in helping Airmen maintain personal balance, and we are committed to remaining actively engaged. Through Suzie's Facebook page, we are harnessing the power of social media as a valuable tool for sharing information and ideas, with posts on many issues, from special needs in particular to family support writ large. The site also provides answers to questions on Air Force agencies that oversee our programs, and links to other valuable websites such as the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, and the Military Child Education Coalition.

But, even more important than the Facebook page is Suzie's direct and personal engagement. Those who have heard Suzie speak on family support—here and in other important venues—know that our Airmen and families have an empathetic ear to register their concerns, and a passionate, articulate, and convincing advocate for their issues.

I hope that this event has exceeded your expectations. Again, we are grateful for your selfless dedication to these important causes, and we look forward to your continuing focus and thoughtful suggestions. We are all in this together, and Suzie and I are very proud to serve among you. Thank you.