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Combating Burnout With Proper System Maintenance

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Combatting Burnout With Proper System Maintenance

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Combatting Burnout With Proper System Maintenance

AIM

1. Platforms and systems operated and functioned by operators, maintainers, and support personnel are central to the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF). The amount and quality of the equipment is irrelevant if the operators, maintainers, and support personnel are near breakdown. Burnout of personnel has the ability to hinder long-term operational effectiveness and retention of personnel in the RCAF. In assessing the issue through the application of proven personal system maintenance principles, otherwise referred to as self-care strategies, resultant recommendations can be offered to the tactical level for the implementation of an effective system maintenance culture amongst our indispensable RCAF personnel.

INTRODUCTION

2. Stress exists as an innate characteristic in the fast-paced RCAF environment, and a healthy balance must be struck between tension and relaxation. Stress does not always result from one critical event but can build up as daily irritations that are compounded by pressure, excessive demands, or environmental factors such as noise, limited space, or general sensory overload.¹ These daily stresses constitute a steady challenge for stress-coping skills and will ultimately pose serious health consequences such as cardiovascular problems, elevated blood pressure, anxiety, and depression.² When stress becomes excessive, burnout can occur. Burnout is defined as “a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.”³ According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the three dimensions of burnout include feelings of exhaustion, increased cynicism to one’s job, and reduced professional efficacy.⁴ Therefore, it is ethically imperative for the RCAF to properly manage the stress levels and coping skills of their personnel.

3. RCAF personnel dedicate their careers to providing high-quality work on behalf of Canadians. The pace of operations in a professional military element such as the RCAF is always steady or increasing while the capacity to perform those operations could be strained due to retention issues or pandemic working environments. The lower manned occupations also directly affect the ability of the RCAF personnel to accomplish the mission, creating gaps that current serving members will try to fill potentially at the cost of their own health and wellness. The RCAF introduced Operation (Op) Talent as well as the concurrent Op Experience to manage current retention and training issues. In particular, Op Talent is an initiative to address the intake, training, absorption, and employment of RCAF members while the goal of Op Experience is to

¹ Lehrhaupt, Linda, and Meibert, Petra, *Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction* (Novato, California: New World Library, 2017) 36-37.

² Ibid, 37.

³ World Health Organization, "Burn-Out an "Occupational Phenomenon": International Classifications of Diseases," (accessed January 6, 2022).

⁴ Ibid.

stabilize and increase levels of pilot experience.⁵ Within Op Talent, there is an initiative to address the quality of life and quality of service specifically targeting a *Work-Life Balance Assessment* task, which involves empowering tactical leaders to improve this critical balance within their respective units under their command.⁶ The status of the *Work-Life Balance Assessment* task is currently listed as *In Progress*, however, there is no time to waste in implementing a more balanced routine tempo at the tactical level to lessen the impact of higher operational tempo.⁷

4. The global pandemic environment creates blurred lines for a proper work/life balance with many people working non-traditional hours as they accommodate conflicting work and family obligations. As a result, RCAF personnel struggle to disconnect from work. On the contrary, the secret to career and personal success is maintaining a good life balance.⁸ It remains more important than ever for all personnel to strike a healthy balance and to not let work stress extend into one's personal life. RCAF personnel who see their work role as a way of enhancing their self-esteem may view work as the most important part of their life to the point they ignore chronic stress symptoms such as sleep disorders, digestive problems, and lethargy.⁹ It is often those that are most committed to work that will be affected by this diminished quality of life as their sense of self depends primarily on their career success.¹⁰ The poignant truth of this issue is this behavior could be displayed more often in leaders thereby creating a negative RCAF culture of work until you burnout.

5. RCAF personnel are highly dedicated therefore may be completing the missions at the cost of their own system maintenance. Self-care is everything an individual does in a deliberate manner to take care of their mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing to prevent stress.¹¹ The tactical level leaders need to be healthy role models to promote wellness through their own self-care activities as well striking the proper work-life balance. Leaders who speak openly about the reality of struggles to maintain a healthy balance or manage stress will help destigmatize self-care and lead the way to turn these preventative practices into ongoing habits. There is no time like the present to promote the multiple Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) resources available to promote healthy living and to incorporate preventive self-care measures.

6. This paper aims to zero in on the specifics of individual self-care to combat stress and augment the Op Talent work task of creating a better work/life balance. The three self-care categories of mental, emotional, and physical well-being will be examined with evidence on how

⁵ RCAF, "Quality of Life - Quality of Service / Royal Canadian Air Force," Quality of life - Quality of service | Royal Canadian Air Force (forces.gc.ca) (accessed January 6, 2022).

⁶ RCAF, "Quality of Life - Quality of Service / Royal Canadian Air Force," Quality of life - Quality of service | Royal Canadian Air Force (forces.gc.ca) (accessed January 6, 2022).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Penney, Captain Kylie, "Colonel Commandant Royal Canadian Medical Service: Life Balance is the Key to Success," (accessed January 6, 2022).

⁹ Lehrhaupt, Linda, and Meibert, Petra, *Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction* (Novato, California: New World Library, 2017) 52.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Pratt, Elizabeth "What Self-Care is - and what it isn't," *Psychcentral*, June 20, 2021.

implementing suggested strategies could reduce stress and burnout. Finally, the paper will make recommendations for leaders at the tactical level to implement and lead by example to reduce burnout to minimize the impact of the stressful RCAF environment on their most important resources.

BODY

7. RCAF personnel deserve to work in a culture where self-care and good health are encouraged and supported. The WHO defines self-care as “the ability of individuals, families, and communities to promote health, prevent disease, maintain health and to cope with illness and disability...”.¹² There are excellent resources available to the RCAF and it is a matter of connecting the dots to ensure each person is prioritizing their own self-care. The Surgeon General of the CAF encourages all military personnel to make good decisions to maintain or improve their physical, mental, and spiritual health, otherwise known as self-care.¹³ Reviewing the three areas of self-care will offer ideas on how to incorporate one or two strategies in each category to empower mindful choices to maintain and improve personal health. Decisions such as getting enough sleep, eating healthy, stopping smoking, reaching out to a friend for a chat, and taking a daily walk all represent self-care strategies.¹⁴ Again, the critical piece to all of this is that leadership must set the example and provide reasonable support to ensure all members are exercising self-care. Due diligence is on each member to follow through and take ownership of their self-care.

8. Mental well-being involves practices focused on connecting with your inner being and can include spirituality, mindfulness, reflection, and overall seeking peace and joy in your life.¹⁵ The practice of mindfulness can include relaxed deep breathing, meditation, mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), yoga, and martial arts.¹⁶ The topic of mindfulness has in recent years gained immense popularity, and the CAF needs to incorporate mindfulness into the military lifestyle to increase resiliency and motivation during day-to-day operations.¹⁷ Mindfulness practices may help with pain management, cope with pre-deployment stress, decrease sleep disturbances and support the resiliency of military members.¹⁸ The practice of mindfulness has three major selling points including an overall increase in positive emotion, improvement in coping with stress and task performance, and finally the ability to incorporate the practice into

¹² Pratt, Elizabeth "What Self-Care is - and what it isn't," *Psychcentral*, June 20, 2021.

¹³ Bilodeau, Major General J.G.M. (Surgeon General), "Self-Care and Health Care," [Self-Care and Health Care - Canada.ca](#), October 21, 2021.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Pratt, Elizabeth "What Self-Care is - and what it isn't," *Psychcentral*, June 20, 2021.

¹⁶ Bonura, Kimberlee B., and Fountain, Dawn M., "From "Hooah" to "Om": Mindfulness Practices for a Military Population," *Journal of Social, Behavioral and Health Sciences* 14, no. 1 (2020) 183.

¹⁷ Beatty, Jordan, "Mindfulness: Building Resiliency in the Canadian Armed Forces," *Canadian Military Journal* 21, no. 1 (2020) 63.

¹⁸ Bonura, Kimberlee B., and Fountain, Dawn M., "From "Hooah" to "Om": Mindfulness Practices for a Military Population," *Journal of Social, Behavioral and Health Sciences* 14, no. 1 (2020) 183.

high-intensity schedules as experienced in the RCAF.¹⁹ Specifically, potential stress triggers which are part of daily life in the RCAF can be combatted with mindfulness practices by minimizing our perceived stress and reducing reactions to the stress.²⁰ A study of the effects of a four-month part-time mindfulness training program at a Norwegian military aviation unit found an increase in a sense of fellowship amongst co-workers, with primary change processes emerging in the areas of increased attention to others, increased self-observation, and increased reflection.²¹ Five distinct behavioural changes emerged including more direct communication, increased patience, decreased anger expression, increased calmness, and increased acceptance.²² Another study concluded that mindfulness experienced during work positively related to psychological detachment after work,²³ thereby creating a healthier work-life balance. Mindfulness training offers several different low-resource approaches from classroom to smartphone and can increase positive emotions thereby creating a more positive and motivated unit.²⁴ All this evidence should be highly encouraging for the tactical level to incorporate mental well-being practices such as mindfulness into work life.

9. Emotional well-being centers around ensuring your emotional needs are met with effective self-care strategies such as socializing, maintaining positive relationships, journaling, and taking time for meaningful active or passive leisure activities.²⁵ Work-life balance is a fundamental pillar of emotional self-care and boundaries must be set between home and work. Tips to keep work from home balanced include creating a physical boundary between your work area and home space as well as not answering emails outside of work hours.²⁶ The effort put forth into self-care of emotional well-being will counteract the effects of stress and eventual burnout. To further highlight the importance, a study determined that emotional exhaustion is a core dimension and the underlying trigger of burnout.²⁷ Individuals who are at risk of burnout recover better when off-work time is spent on social activities, taking the time to detach from the stressful work environment.²⁸ Leisure activities are vital to disconnect from work, and

¹⁹ Beatty, Jordan, "Mindfulness: Building Resiliency in the Canadian Armed Forces," *Canadian Military Journal* 21, no. 1 (2020) 63.

²⁰ Lehrhaupt, Linda, and Meibert, Petra, *Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction* (Novato, California: New World Library, 2017) 45.

²¹ Meland, Anders et al., "A Sense of Fellowship: Mindfulness Improves Experienced Interpersonal Benefits and Prosociality in A Military Aviation Unit," *International Journal of Aerospace Psychology* 31, no. 2 (2021) 167.

²² Ibid, 162-179.

²³ Hülshager, Ute R. et al., "The Power of Presence: The Role of Mindfulness at Work for Daily Levels and Change Trajectories of Psychological Detachment and Sleep Quality," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 99, no. 6 (2014) 1125.

²⁴ Beatty, Jordan, "Mindfulness: Building Resiliency in the Canadian Armed Forces," *Canadian Military Journal* 21, no. 1 (2020) 64-65.

²⁵ Pratt, Elizabeth "What Self-Care is - and what it isn't," *Psychcentral*, June 20, 2021.

²⁶ Belanger, Lucy, "Self-Care Series: Four Self-Care Tips for Busy People," Self-Care Series: Four Self-Care Tips for Busy People - Canada.ca, December 14, 2021.

²⁷ Vojvodic, A.R. and Dedic, G., "Correlation between Burnout Syndrome and Anxiety in Military Personnel," *Serbian Journal of Experimental and Clinical Research* 21, no. 1 (2020) 63.

²⁸ Oerlemans, Wido G.M., and Bakker, Arnold B., "Burnout and Daily Recovery: A Day Reconstruction Study," *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 19, no. 3 (2014), 303-314.

recreational programs have been shown to reduce depression and anxiety by increasing both physical activity as well as socialization for emotional health.²⁹ Staying connected with family and friends is essential as spending time and engaging in relationships provides companionship, support, and nurturance.³⁰ Social support also plays a crucial role to promote psychological well-being following exposure to a traumatic event.³¹ The CAF offers social wellness programming that encourages emotional fitness including healthy interpersonal communications and emotion management (stress and anger)³² and should be encouraged at the tactical level. The strength of the RCAF is in the companionship amongst its people and the mutual support that is provided throughout the force should be continued particularly when the going gets tough through pandemic stresses and critical incidents. Most importantly, time needs to be provided to all personnel to rest and recover from work in order to have optimum emotional health.

10. Physical well-being is a broad term to describe important daily activities such as hygiene, proper nutrition, effective exercise, and positive health practices such as vaccination, using sunscreen, and avoiding drugs, alcohol, and smoking.³³ Eating nutritional meals is a crucial physical well-being strategy as stress depletes the body and good nutrition can help to overcome stress symptoms.³⁴ The focus on alcohol as a social enabler in the RCAF contrasts with promoting physical self-care. Exercise is an important aspect of physical well-being and has the bonus of benefiting mental well-being, particularly during team sports involvement.³⁵ Regular sports and exercise can reduce depressive symptoms as shown in a recent study looking at over one million Americans, concluding that mental health peaked with 45 minutes of physical activity 3–5 days per week.³⁶ In fact, the optimum positive correlation with good mental health is participating in team sports 3 times a week for 40 minutes as it combines physical and mental well-being self-care categories for a more broad-spectrum effect.³⁷ The study also concluded that exercise over and above these ideal amounts was often related to excessive exercising and negative mental health impacts.³⁸ The intensity of physical activity also affects the mental health outcomes with vigorous activity, rather than walking, being associated with higher decreased

²⁹ Wynn, Gary H., "Complementary and Alternative Medicine Approaches in the Treatment of PTSD," *Current Psychiatry Reports* 17, no. 8 (2015) 62.

³⁰ Koucky, Ellen M., "The Relationship between Posttraumatic Cognitions and Social Support in the Severity of PTSD Symptoms" ProQuest Dissertations Publishing (2013), 9.

³¹ Koucky, Ellen M., "The Relationship between Posttraumatic Cognitions and Social Support in the Severity of PTSD Symptoms" ProQuest Dissertations Publishing (2013), 9.

³² National Defence, "Strengthening the Forces Health Promotion Program," Strengthening the Forces Health Promotion Program - Canada.ca (accessed January 6, 2022).

³³ Pratt, Elizabeth "What Self-Care is - and what it isn't," *Psychcentral*, June 20, 2021.

³⁴ Williams, Mary Beth et al., *The PTSD Workbook: Simple, Effective Techniques for Overcoming Traumatic Stress Symptoms*, 2nd ed. (Oakland, Calif: New Harbinger Publications, 2013) 244.

³⁵ Elbe, Anne-Marie et al., "Is Regular Physical Activity a Key to Mental Health? Commentary on "Association between Physical Exercise and Mental Health in 1.2 Million Individuals in the USA between 2011 and 2015: A Cross-Sectional Study", by Chekroud Et Al., Published in *Lancet Psychiatry*," *Journal of Sport and Health Science* 8, no. 1 (2019) 6-7.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 6-7.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 6-7.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 6-7.

anxiety and self-rated well-being.³⁹ Self-care fundamentally needs to be something the individual looks forward to and wants to actively participate in. Team sport activities seem to be intrinsically motivating to participants because of the social interaction and bonding, therefore, increasing the desire to stay active.⁴⁰ This is another example of combining the categories of self-care strategies to maximize the benefit and enjoyment. The military expects all members to be in good physical health, therefore provides resources and opportunities to benefit from physical exercise. The tactical level would be wise to incorporate physical fitness into a chance for increasing mental health and bonding amongst the members such as team sports.

11. The preceding paragraphs outlined three self-care categories of mental, emotional, and physical well-being as well as suggested practices that can have a positive impact on one or more of the categories. The tactical level has been empowered by Op Talent and Op Experience to implement strategies to promote a more balanced work/life tempo. The CAF has multiple resources to assist with the implementation of self-care with the Canadian Forces Morale and Welfares Services which includes Personnel Support Program (PSP) at each Wing.⁴¹ There are also multiple resources and points of contact from the Government of Canada for mental health.⁴² A new initiative called Strengthening the Forces (STF) is also available at every Wing to provide expert information, skills, and tools for promoting and improving CAF members' health and well-being.⁴³ The use of these resources will also promote a sense of community and social wellness amongst the unique RCAF population and their families. In the fast-paced and high operational tempo of the RCAF, leaders must ensure they are not leaving their subordinates vulnerable to stress and are promoting the excellent resources provided.

CONCLUSION

12. Professional military organizations such as the RCAF are exposed to a large number of stressors at a higher rate than the civilian population which can lead to burnout.⁴⁴ Self-care is potentially lacking and not prioritized amongst members in the RCAF for various reasons including the high dedication of personnel completing missions at the cost of their own well-being, retention issues causing capability gaps, and the pandemic environment's impact on work/life balance. However, the fundamental principle of self-care is that only the individual can

³⁹ Klusman, Kristine, and Langer, Julie and Nichols, Austin Lee, "The Relationship between Physical Activity, Health, and Well-being: Type of Exercise and Self-Connection as Moderators," *European Journal of Health Psychology* 28, no. 2 (2021) 66.

⁴⁰ Nielsen, G. et al., "Health Promotion: The Impact of Beliefs of Health Benefits, Social Relations and Enjoyment on Exercise Continuation," *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports*, no. 24 (May 23, 2014), 66.

⁴¹ "Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services." Welcome to the Canadian Armed Forces Community (cafconnection.ca), (accessed January 6, 2022).

⁴² Government of Canada - National Defence, "Military Mental Health. You're Not Alone. ," Military Mental Health. You're not alone. - Canada.ca, (accessed January 6, 2022).

⁴³ Belanger, Lucy, "Self-Care Series: Four Self-Care Tips for Busy People," Self-Care Series: Four Self-Care Tips for Busy People - Canada.ca, December 14, 2021.

⁴⁴ Vojvodic, A.R. and Dedic, G., "Correlation between Burnout Syndrome and Anxiety in Military Personnel," *Serbian Journal of Experimental and Clinical Research* 21, no. 1 (2020) 63.

complete it therefore members must do their part in taking ownership of the care of their mental, emotional and physical well-being. With that, there is also an element of self-compassion to be practiced as strategies take time to turn into habits.

13. The work until you burnout mentality has no place in the RCAF. There must be active awareness to watch for signs of stress and burnout and a preventative approach that includes creating a culture of self-care. Self-care is not an indulgence, but a crucial aspect of health maintenance recognized by the WHO.⁴⁵ If leaders take the time to properly carry out their own self-care, it activates approval for subordinates to also engage in proactive health measures. This positive step will spread fast in a tactical unit and certainly impact the health and culture in a positive way. Such is the pathway to better health and quality of life.

RECOMMENDATIONS

14. There are four main recommendations included below for RCAF tactical leadership to combat burnout and promote proper system maintenance of personnel.

- a. Ensure the numerous resources described in paragraph 11 are promoted, supported, and utilized.
- b. Incorporate mindfulness training and practice into the weekly routine, most likely relying on resources in paragraph 11 to assist.
- c. Allow work time each week to engage in proper physical activity that will also promote emotional well-being such as group sports.
- d. Educate the tactical level on the importance of self-care and provide examples of how to incorporate the preventative practice into daily life, with a particular focus on a broad-spectrum approach with self-care activities that combine more than one category.

⁴⁵ Pratt, Elizabeth "What Self-Care is - and what it isn't," *Psychcentral*, June 20, 2021.

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