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**MHRIC**

# A MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH AND INNOVATION COLLABORATIVE IN MILITARY, VETERAN AND FAMILY MENTAL HEALTH

**Plain language summary**

## **CRISIS IN UKRAINE: SUPPORTING THE MENTAL HEALTH OF NATO SERVICE MEMBERS**

### **THE ISSUE**

As the Russian invasion of Ukraine continues, thousands of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) service members in Europe are in a heightened state of readiness. They have been mobilized for an extended period. This can lead to prolonged psychological stress and can have a negative impact on service members' motivation, mental health, and long-term health outcomes. Many may feel frustrated or helpless because they are not providing direct support to Ukrainians.

### **WHY IT MATTERS**

Research from previous conflicts has found that it's essential to protect the mental health, resilience, and mental readiness of mobilized troops.

### **WHAT UNITS SHOULD REMEMBER**

#### **Sleep is critical**

Sleep predicts how well a person responds to high-stress settings. When service members are mobilized, it can be challenging to get the quality sleep they need. There are physical demands, changing schedules, and psychological threats. Leaders must prioritize sleep so troops can refuel and bank their sleep. This allows troops to pay down their sleep debt and be better able to withstand periods of reduced sleep.

#### **Deep breathing and self-talk can help**

In a long-term crisis like the invasion of Ukraine, building resilience is essential. Mental skills such as psychological grounding (a quick mental skill that helps keep service members focused on the present moment), deep breathing, and self-talk can be part of every service member's routine.

#### **Team cohesion is essential**

Cohesion can help maintain the team's optimism and commitment when troops are in a state of uncertainty or setback. Leaders at all levels should build cohesion by emphasizing their team's purpose and values.

#### **Techniques to manage anger help regulate emotions**

Problematic anger is a risk factor for military teams. It can lead to distress, interfere with proper functioning, and get in the way of good decision-making. When tensions run high, it can also impact communication and relationships. Helpful techniques to regulate difficult emotions include:

- emotion labelling (especially naming negative emotions)
- temporal and personal distancing (putting concerns into perspective)
- cognitive-behavioural techniques (looking at negative thought patterns)

The 5 Eyes Mental Health Research and Innovation Collaborative is composed of thought leaders from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. These experts conduct research and provide advice on mental health issues to governments and other interested parties, including policymakers, practitioners, and scientists. Our shared goal is to improve mental health outcomes for past and present military personnel, veterans, and their families.

## KEY MESSAGES

- **Primary (upstream) prevention strategies are essential to protect mental health, strengthen resilience, and ensure troop readiness.** It's easy for these strategies to get lost during mission-critical tasks. Leaders should prioritize the use of these strategies.
- **Strategies that build on existing skills help ensure individual and team success.** These include sleep, mental skills, emotion regulation, and team cohesion.
- **In the face of adversity and prolonged stress, support from informal and formal leaders is critical.** Strategies that promote calm and connectedness are essential in high-stress contexts.

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This is a plain language summary of “Sustaining NATO service member mental health during the crisis in Ukraine.”

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