

## A LEADER'S GUIDE TO RISK COMMUNICATION IN THE FACE OF EMERGING THREATS

War creates many psychological stressors. Some are known and understood, allowing for preparation and training. As military conflicts evolve, novel mechanisms of killing and disruption, both in peacetime and war, increase fear and uncertainty and can significantly diminish readiness. Historically, the introduction of new weapons into warfare, such as the Gatling gun or chemical agents, increased the stress burden on service members. During recent Middle East conflicts, increased use of improvised explosive devices was associated with elevated rates of suicide attempts in service members, including those currently deployed, previously deployed, and even among those never deployed. The increase in suicide attempts was independent of operational tempo, indicating it is not the "intensity of war" but the nature of warfare on the battlefield causing distress.

Service members can be best prepared through training, protective gear, education, and effective ongoing risk communication. Risk communication is a critical tool for optimizing the psychological and behavioral response of an organization or community. For military leaders, risk communication involves sharing information about operational risks, the significance and meaning of those risks, as well as decisions, actions or policies aimed at managing the risks. Effective risk communication builds esprit-de-corps, reduces operational stress, and allows service members to better focus on the mission. Leaders can enhance service members' readiness for the unique psychological stressors of novel and evolving weapons on the battlefield through the following:

- Utilize effective risk communication principles, including: provide information on a regular and timely basis, share what is known about the threat, avoid speculation, always be truthful, avoid false promises, provide updated information when available, and anticipate the need to repeat messages.
- Realistic preparation for combat deployment, including new and emerging threats, encourages mastery and reduces fear.

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- Involve NCOs at all levels of training so they can understand risks and teach in ways that reassure and protect troops.
- Frequently assess personnel at all levels regarding their understanding of and concerns about new and emerging threats.
- Education on risk communication is an important part of leadership training at all levels.
- Ensure health care providers receive training in risk communication across medical disciplines, so they are well equipped to work with families about health and deployment concerns.
- Educate family members on the potential adverse effects of continuous or ongoing exposure to media coverage of combat, which increase stress, particularly for children.
- Training and education about new protective equipment developed for novel threats can enhance feelings of safety and improve performance.
- Distress over new threats presents a particular challenge to individuals who have yet to experience combat.

### References and Additional Resources

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- Leadership Communication: Anticipating and Responding to Stressful Events. Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress. <https://www.cstsonline.org/resources/resource-master-list/leadership-communication-in-anticipation-of-and-responding-to-stressful-events>