

New Paradigm of Military Fitness

Lieutenant General Dato' Pahlawan (Dr) Md Amin Muslan

Director General, Malaysian Armed Forces Health Services

ABSTRACT

Fitness in the military is an unquestionable maxim. It is a vital component of combat readiness. Soldiers are required to maintain a high level of fitness in peace and wartime. Throughout the history of the Armed Forces, physical fitness has been a common concern of commanders. Thus, most of the current training program adopts a comprehensive approach toward physical fitness. Nevertheless, fitness is much more than physical fitness. Fitness is a state of being fit from a physical, environmental, nutritional, social, spiritual, psychological and financial perspective. All of these dimensions are strongly interdependent and interconnected. Any disruption of one dimension will affect other dimensions and subsequently disturbing the whole dynamic of fitness. By this definition, the fittest individuals would be those who have mental stability, emotional intelligence, physical fitness, spiritual connection, and a high level of self-awareness. In order to achieve this, the focus should be more on disease prevention rather disease management.

KEYWORDS: Fitness, Readiness, Malaysia Armed Forces, Military

INTRODUCTION

Fitness and wellness are the keys to readiness. In military health center, the terms often used interchangeably, but their origins and meanings are different. There is an intersection between wellness, fitness, and performance optimization in which reflect readiness. Fitness inherently connects with military service. Soldiers are required to maintain a high level of fitness in peace and wartime. Traditionally, physical fitness is a vital component of combat readiness. Thus, most of the current training program adopts a comprehensive approach toward physical fitness.

Military readiness

As of February 2021, approximately 3459 of our soldiers were nondeployable. The leading cause was metabolic disorders followed by musculoskeletal injuries; both acute and "overuse" injuries. Also, almost half (44%) of active personnel were overweight and obese. These soldiers were more likely to sustain an injury and have an increased risk of being nondeployable. 10 years of data (from 2007 to 2017) recorded 646 soldiers were non-deployable due to mental health condition and traumatic brain injuries with about 463 were medically discharged from military service.

In modern society, stress is unavoidable. In some way, people are fraught with relationship struggles, financial struggles, work, loss of the loved ones, poor health, insecurities, anxiety, unexpected circumstances, illness and injuries etc. Also, many aspects of military life can be stressful such as frequent deployments, job transitions, separation from family members, temporary duty assignments, and many other events. During deployment, soldiers are faced with multiple challenges including sleep deprivation, hectic schedule, rapid adjustment requirement, short- and long-term fatigue and functional sustainment in heat, cold, and altitude, knee, leg, ankle, and spine trauma resulting in premature osteoarthritis as well as psychological injuries.

A new paradigm of Fitness

Since the last decade, the broader concept of fitness has been introduced, known as total forces fitness. This concept is constructed based on a biopsychosocial and spiritual model of human function. The components of this model work synergistically to improve function in all major areas that compromise human function and performance in any venue as well as, creates an optimal healing environment¹⁻³.

Fitness is much more than physical fitness. Fitness is a state of being fit from a physical, environmental, nutritional, social, spiritual, psychological and financial perspective; in parallel with established medical and dental standards for military readiness. These dimensions are interdependent and interconnected each other. Any disruption of one dimension will affect other dimensions and subsequently disturbing the whole dynamic of fitness. By this definition, the fittest individuals would be those who have mental stability, emotional intelligence, physical fitness, spiritual connection, and a high level of self-awareness. Total force fitness incorporates 8 dimensions of fitness namely physical, environmental, medical and dental, nutritional fitness, psychological, spiritual, social and financial fitness¹.

1. Physical fitness is referring to an enhanced physiological or functional capacity that allows for an improvement of physical performance while remaining mission capable and avoiding injury.
2. Environmental fitness is an ability to optimally perform in any environment, including worldwide, garrison, training, and operational environments.
3. Medical and dental fitness is an ability to sustain health and wellness and facilitate restoration to meet established medical and dental standards for fitness for duty, return to duty, and medical readiness.

4. Nutritional fitness is an ability to sustain an optimal level of performance through consuming foods, supplements, and beverages in adequate quantities, quality (nutrient content), and proportions.
5. Spiritual fitness is composed of beliefs and practices that sustain an individual's sense of wellbeing and purpose. Spiritual and religious struggles or uncertainties predisposed soldiers to moral injuries or ethical conflict and compromised psychological and social functioning.
6. Psychological fitness is an ability to approach life's challenges positively by demonstrating self-control, stamina and good character with choices and action, seeking help and offering help. This includes cognitive, emotional, and behavioural capacities which are essential to optimize performance and ensure mission readiness.
7. Social fitness is our ability to engage in productive personal and professional relationships, including family and community engagement, cultural inclusiveness, peer-to-peer networks, unit cohesion and command networks. Social connection is a basic human's need. However, the military community frequently faces challenges in maintaining social connections. Frequent deployments, job transitions, family movements, temporary duty assignments, and many other events that are relatively common to military life which make the maintenance of relationships challenging.
8. Financial fitness is the ability to manage financial matters effectively. This requires the combination of attitude, knowledge, skills and self-efficacy.

Wellness and fitness

While fitness is a state of well-being, wellness refers to self-directed committed action aimed at enhancing well-being ie making decisions and practicing behaviors toward fitness . These two elements, fitness and wellness are the keystone for military readiness. National Wellness Institute defined wellness as "an active process through which people become aware of, and make choices toward, a more successful existence" ⁴.

CONCLUSIONS

Military service experience significant rate of nondeployability, predominantly degraded by obesity and other Non-Communicable Disease (NCDs), musculoskeletal injuries, substance use, psychological injuries and other health-related issues. In order to win on the battlefield, soldiers first must be able to be deployed to the battlefield.

The preventive measures should not be limited to routine physical examinations, vaccinations, health risk screening, enhanced exercise, and the reduction of unhealthy habits, such as smoking and alcohol use, but also to examine and evaluate the social and environment health of service members and their families. A comprehensive approach toward holistic military wellness is crucial to ensure military readiness. A shift to total force fitness will be difficult, but essential for wellness and readiness of our soldiers.

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