



# Operational Stress Control

## Principles of Resilience and Stress Control

Evidence from research and observations guide the Navy Operational Stress Control (OSC) Program development and will continue to guide refinements and improvements as the OSC Program evolves. The evidence has provided some core considerations to use as guiding points to understanding resilience and implementing stress control.

These core elements are:

- Predictability
- Controllability
- Relationships
- Trust
- Meaning

### **Predictability**

A large body of research demonstrates that adverse stress outcomes (particularly health impacts) are less likely when a challenging event is predictable. We won't jump as high to a loud noise or wince at the sting of a vaccination when something lets us know its coming. Young children more easily leave the playground or go to bed if they have been given a "5 more minutes" warning. Realistic training and drills, consistent leadership, routines, and clear communication all contribute to predictability.

### **Controllability**

No one can control every aspect of a challenging event; however, we know that having a sense of control generally leads to more positive results. A sense that we have some control over unfolding events comes from training and experience (such as knowing what to do to respond to a fire and having practiced it before). Often the event itself may not be in our control, but our response to the event to include problem solving actions or managing our own stress reactions (controlling breathing for example) can prove helpful. Another way to improve controllability, even when the event is beyond control, is offering choices (for example the child evacuating before a flood can choose which stuffed animal to bring or the Sailors who lose a shipmate can help choose how to do the memorial service).

### **Relationships**

The underpinning of unit cohesion and morale, family wellbeing, and community is interpersonal relationships. With strong relationships, individuals and groups can thrive despite profound challenges. When important relationships fall apart, this can be very stressful and removes a portion of the foundation of resilience. For example, across the Department of Defense, relationship failure has been the most common stressor associated with suicide. Actions to foster, develop, preserve, and repair supportive relationships should always be a consideration in stress control.

### **Trust**

Trust plays a critical role in withstanding adversity and extends beyond individual relationships. Trust provides a positive expectation from the organization and systems in which we operate and includes integrity, dependability, and competence on the part of leaders and larger organizations. Trust is built through experience and includes certain expectations (for example that the parachute will open, the equipment will function, medical services will be there in times of need, family will be faithful, etc.). Loss of trust will erode stress control efforts and increase risks of psychological difficulties. Presence of trust increases willingness to confide, which better allows concerns to be recognized and addressed before stress injuries occur.

### **Meaning**

People fare better when they know why they are doing what they do – why the mission is important, how their duties fit into the picture, why their family makes certain sacrifices. A consistent aspect of recovery from traumatic events involves establishing meaning regarding the event and the changes in the person's life. Leader activities like after action reviews can help speed this process by planting the seeds of shared meaning after a challenge. In addition, having a greater sense of purpose before significant challenges or stressful events occur makes it much easier to perform.

### Short Version

#### Predictability

- “What they can predict they can prepare for.”
- Be consistent
- Communicate
- Conduct drills, practice
- Align expectations with results
- State and follow policy
- Prepare families

#### Controllability

- Allow Sailors to control situation when possible
- Give control where you can
- You may not be able to control every situation, but you can learn to control responses to situations (thoughts, attitudes, emotional response, focus, compartmentalization)
- Recognize and communicate what you can't control

#### Relationships

- Conduct exercise specifically for team-building/building cohesion
- Include family members whenever possible
- Encourage healthy supervisor/subordinate relationships

#### Trust

- In self, in leadership, in equipment, in the Navy
- Involves leadership integrity; being and doing what you say you will be and do
  - Involves predictability and consistency in relationships

#### Meaning

- Explain mission
- Explain their role in the mission
- Give the big picture
- Conduct after-action reviews (AARs)/Pre- and post-briefs

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Resilience refers to our capacity to withstand, recover, grow and adapt in the face of stressors and changing demands. Having cohesive and trusting relationships and maintaining a sense of control, predictability and purpose are all critical to building resilience and enables us to thrive not just survive.

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### Applying the 5 Guiding Principles

Ask, “How does a drill, a social event, or Quarters increase resilience?”

- What is the benefit?
- Quantify benefit of actions
- Activities that build resilience challenge but foster success and learning
- Example of hydraulics to build capacity
- Quantify benefit of these actions
- Checklist: To what extent will this activity, event, or action build resilience? OR What is the resilience factor of this activity?