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Peer-based intervention for acute stress reaction: adaptations by five militaries

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ABSTRACT

Military service members need to be able to operate under conditions of extreme stress to ensure the success of their team's mission; however, an acute stress reaction (ASR) can compromise team safety and effectiveness by rendering an individual unable to function. Building on an intervention originally developed by the Israel Defense Forces, several countries have developed, tested, and disseminated a peer-based intervention to help service members manage acute stress in others. This paper reviews how five countries (Canada, Germany, Norway, the UK and the USA) adjusted the protocol to fit their organisational culture while retaining essential elements of the original procedure, suggesting there can be interoperability and mutual intelligibility in the management of ASR by military allies. Future research should examine the parameters of effectiveness for this intervention, the impact of intervention on long-term trajectories, and individual differences in managing ASR.

Militaries around the world are invested in ensuring that their service members are capable of functioning in stressful environments. Yet there are times when service members may be so overwhelmed by mental stress that they are unable to function, placing themselves and their teams in further danger. In that case, it becomes crucial for teams to be prepared to respond effectively. This paper reviews a new method being introduced in several countries in which teams are trained to intervene with service members experiencing an acute stress reaction (ASR).

An ASR is characterised by a set of shifting and temporary responses, such as freezing, dissociation and agitation. Some expressions of ASR feature inactive symptoms (eg, being in a daze and stupor) and some feature active symptoms (eg, tachycardia and anger). An ASR can occur immediately (within hours of exposure) and can be expected to subside within days. Critically, individuals who experience an ASR are unable to engage in productive action, keep themselves safe or respond effectively to a threat, and hence are potentially unable to keep others safe. This common denominator makes ASR a significant threat to a military unit's ability to accomplish its mission and protect its members.

ASR is not a psychiatric disorder; rather, it is a natural psychological and physiological response to an extreme stressor. Defined as a 'factor influencing health status' in the International Classification of Diseases, 11th Revision,¹ ASR does not appear in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental*

WHAT IS ALREADY KNOWN ON THIS TOPIC

→ An acute stress reaction (ASR) is primarily characterised by difficulty in functioning, placing individuals and teams at heightened risk.

WHAT THIS STUDY ADDS

- Several countries (Canada, Germany, Norway, the UK and the USA) have adapted a new peer-based intervention to manage ASR in unit members.
- Across these countries, service members have reported the peer-based intervention improves confidence and is clear, relevant and important.

HOW THIS STUDY MIGHT AFFECT RESEARCH, PRACTICE OR POLICY

- Allied countries should encourage further adoption of this technique and ongoing research to optimise implementation.

Disorders, 5th Edition² and should not be confused with acute stress disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder.³

Although research on ASR is sparse,⁴ ASR is not a rare event in military operations. Initial estimates suggest that ASR may occur in more than 1 in 10 service members during a combat-related event such as a firefight or detonation from an improvised explosive device. For example, a Canadian study found that 13% of special operations personnel involved in a small pilot study reported experiencing a possible ASR.⁵ Similarly, a US study with soldiers who had combat experience found 17%–24% reported experiencing a possible ASR.³

In addition, emerging research suggests that most affected individuals (52%) report ASRs last more than 5 min,³ with 43% reporting it lasted 10 min or longer. These estimates underscore the importance of intervening immediately in order to prevent the military unit from being unable to perform because of reduced capability of its team members.

By their nature, ASRs typically render individuals experiencing them unable to accelerate their own recovery; that is why it is important to consider how teammates can intervene. Research in Israel,^{4–6} the USA⁷ and Canada⁵ suggests that approximately 29%–56% of service members who have been in high-stress contexts have witnessed a teammate experience an ASR. The fact that service members can identify the signs of an ASR in their teammates provides the foundation for focusing on developing a peer-based intervention.



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Five Militaries Nfsas

Terry C. Jones



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Table of Contents Five Militaries Nfsas

1. Understanding the eBook Five Militaries Nfsas
 - The Rise of Digital Reading Five Militaries Nfsas
 - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying Five Militaries Nfsas
 - Exploring Different Genres
 - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
 - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
 - Popular eBook Platforms
 - Features to Look for in an Five Militaries Nfsas
 - User-Friendly Interface
4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from Five Militaries Nfsas
 - Personalized Recommendations
 - Five Militaries Nfsas User Reviews and Ratings
 - Five Militaries Nfsas and Bestseller Lists
5. Accessing Five Militaries Nfsas Free and Paid eBooks

- Five Militaries Nfsas Public Domain eBooks
- Five Militaries Nfsas eBook Subscription Services
- Five Militaries Nfsas Budget-Friendly Options
- 6. Navigating Five Militaries Nfsas eBook Formats
 - ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
 - Five Militaries Nfsas Compatibility with Devices
 - Five Militaries Nfsas Enhanced eBook Features
- 7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience
 - Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of Five Militaries Nfsas
 - Highlighting and Note-Taking Five Militaries Nfsas
 - Interactive Elements Five Militaries Nfsas
- 8. Staying Engaged with Five Militaries Nfsas
 - Joining Online Reading Communities
 - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
 - Following Authors and Publishers Five Militaries Nfsas
- 9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books Five Militaries Nfsas
 - Benefits of a Digital Library
 - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection Five Militaries Nfsas
- 10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
 - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
 - Minimizing Distractions
 - Managing Screen Time
- 11. Cultivating a Reading Routine Five Militaries Nfsas
 - Setting Reading Goals Five Militaries Nfsas
 - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
- 12. Sourcing Reliable Information of Five Militaries Nfsas
 - Fact-Checking eBook Content of Five Militaries Nfsas
 - Distinguishing Credible Sources
- 13. Promoting Lifelong Learning
 - Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development

- Exploring Educational eBooks

14. Embracing eBook Trends

- Integration of Multimedia Elements
- Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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