

The US Army's Comprehensive Soldier Fitness Programme: Lessons for the Singapore Armed Forces

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Abstract:

The article elaborates on the concept of the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF) programme developed by the United States of America (US) Army, showcasing its benefits with the use of examples that are related with the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF). The author feels that CSF, a training system for resilience that taps on psychological science, may be better than traditional psychological programmes that seek to deal with post-trauma sufferers. Through exploring different areas of the programme, it is concluded that the SAF would benefit from the programme as it helps the organisation attain operational readiness.

Keywords: Psychology, Post-Traumatic Growth, Resilience, Operational Readiness, Psychological Health

INTRODUCTION

The Third Generation (3G) Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) will be one that continues to “rely on the dynamism, will and competence of its people.” It will “demand that they possess the fighting spirit to overcome challenging situations and prevail over the enemy”. It must ensure that servicemen continue to “receive rigorous realistic military training that would impart the necessary skills for modern warfare.”¹

An iron will and strong fighting spirit are associated with resilience, defined as the ability to resist or to bounce back from adversity and can be further enhanced with post-traumatic growth—a concept that will be elaborated on later. We can strengthen such resilience and post-traumatic growth in our servicemen by teaching them certain psychological skills and building their specific psychological capacities. Eminent military historian and retired Army General Robert H. Scales advocated that mastery over the 'psycho-cultural' dimension of military operations is imperative for success in 21st century warfare.²

If this proposition were to be accepted, combined with the emphasis that the 3G SAF will place on its human capital, then it is reasonable to assert that the putative psychological skills are “necessary skills for modern warfare” that must be developed.

What then does the SAF need for such a psychological transformation? For this, we can gain inspiration from the US Army's recent efforts at psychological transformation, the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness programme (CSF), which was catalysed by an all-time high suicide rate and a high post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) incidence.³ CSF, arguably the world's leading resilience programme, involves the implementation of a formal, structured training system for resilience that draws support from the cutting edge of psychological science. It is based on the emerging field of positive psychology, which is defined as the scientific study of what goes right into life, from birth to death and at all stops in between.⁴ This is thought to complement 'business-as-usual' psychology,⁵ which has a historical emphasis on the study of pathology and human problems.

I am grateful to be given the opportunity by the SAF to be a student in the University of Pennsylvania's Master of Applied Positive Psychology programme. In this programme, I learnt from Professor Martin Seligman (affectionately known to us as 'Marty'), known as the father of Positive Psychology. Marty was the leading psychologist, whom former US Army Chief of Staff, General George W. Casey, Jr. consulted, in the conceptualisation of CSF.

In this essay, I will start by elucidating a specific concept in positive psychology—post-traumatic growth. An understanding of this phenomenon will allow the reader to appreciate what is special about CSF. Then, I hope to highlight elements of CSF that may be instructive for psychological transformation in the SAF. Towards this end, I will review two major components of CSF: (1) Master Resilience Training and (2) measuring and fostering resilience with information technology. This process will take us through some evidence-based psychological skills that can be imparted to our servicemen to boost resilience and post-traumatic growth. In addition, I will argue that despite being an army-initiated project, the lessons learnt from CSF may be applied in a highly relevant manner to all three services in the SAF. Then, I will seek to examine potential limitations in the application of lessons learnt from CSF to the SAF context. I will conclude by making a final case for the relevance of studying the CSF for the SAF.

POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH

"That which does not kill us makes us stronger."

Friedrich Nietzsche⁶

You pull yourself out of the ejection seat. Looking beyond the trees into the distant clearing, you see a burning wreck. Wiping your brow, you heave a sigh of relief, "Well, that could have been me." You know that your mission is over. Your plane has been downed in hostile territory and there is no way you



Officer Cadets on the Platoon Assault Course clearing the low-rope obstacle with the help of their course mates.

can successfully destroy the key installation that was assigned to you. You unfold your map and look at the pre-designated area where you will be picked up by Search and Rescue. Suddenly, you hear rustling behind you. Turning quickly, you see five armed hostiles pointing their automatic weapons at you. You are captured. You know that for a very long time to come, if not forever, you will be kept as a prisoner-of-war and cruelly tortured. You know that as a result of the brutal treatment you will receive, you will develop a severe and recurring case of PTSD... Or will you?

An approach that CSF adopts to build mental toughness is that of equipping soldiers with psychological skills, which can be used to minimise catastrophic thinking.

A study of US aviators who were shot down, taken prisoner, and tortured for years by the Viet Cong, revealed surprising results. Indeed, 61.1% of these veterans reported that instead of spiralling into full-blown PTSD, they reaped psychological gains from their ordeal.⁷ Gains included positive changes in their personalities, enhanced self-confidence and a newfound emphasis on the things that truly matter in life. This phenomenon—that positive personal changes result from the struggle of some individuals to deal

with trauma and its psychological consequences—has been labelled as “post-traumatic growth.”⁸

A key distinction exists between post-traumatic growth and ordinary resilience. Immediately following a traumatic event, individuals, who show either the former or latter may, initially display symptoms of PTSD. However, those who experience post-traumatic growth will be better off than they were before the trauma (within a year), while typical resilient individuals will only be back to where they were before the trauma (approximately within a month), as assessed by physical and psychological measures.

WHAT’S THE BIG DEAL ABOUT CSF?

Readers may ask, what is so special about CSF? How is it different from the typical resilience training programmes based on 'business-as-usual' psychology? There are two key differences:

- 1) The 'business as usual' approach seeks to bring the PTSD sufferer back to baseline functioning. However, CSF goes beyond that and aims not just to maintain baseline functioning, but also to promote post-traumatic growth, should traumatic experiences arise.⁹
- 2) The 'business as usual' approach focuses on treatment by enhancing screening and therapeutic processes for individuals afflicted with combat-stress-related symptoms. CSF focuses on prevention of PTSD by equipping all service members (a universal approach) with the psychological skills and capacities needed to foster resilience before they are deployed in the field.¹⁰ The former is reactive, while the latter is proactive. Proactive prevention might potentially prevent more cases of PTSD. Why is proactivity important? A prospective study of 5,410 US soldiers exposed to combat revealed

that half of those diagnosed with PTSD were in the bottom 15 per cent of mental and physical health even before their deployment.¹¹ PTSD can be construed as a worsening of anxiety and depression than as a spontaneously arising case. As such, proactive prevention might potentially prevent more cases of PTSD.

MASTER RESILIENCE TRAINING (MRT)

Part of the CSF programme is a 10-day course that provides resilience skills training to sergeants and teaches them how to impart these skills to their soldiers. It systematically focuses on (a) enhancing mental toughness, (b) identifying and building character strengths and (c) fostering strong relationships. This 'train-the-trainer' concept is not unfamiliar to the SAF.

Minimising Catastrophic Thinking to Enhance Mental Toughness

Catastrophic thinking can be defined as ruminating about irrational worst-case outcomes.¹² This ineffective style of thinking can be distinguished from contingency planning, which is vital in operational planning. Catastrophic thinking can increase anxiety to pathological levels and paralyse action. In addition, it is also known to be a risk factor for PTSD.¹³ The mechanism through which catastrophic thinking adversely affects mental health, functions by contributing to a pessimistic explanatory style of experienced events.¹⁴ An approach that CSF adopts to build mental toughness is that of equipping soldiers with psychological skills, which can be used to minimise catastrophic thinking. Soldiers are taught a three-step model that includes (1) capturing catastrophic thinking, (2) generating a best-case possibility and (3) identifying a most likely outcome. After step (3), soldiers are taught to formulate a plan for coping with the situation.¹⁵

It is not unimaginable that these psychological skills can be taught to SAF servicemen. For one, the SAF is agreeable to Marty's hypothesis that optimistic or pessimistic explanatory styles significantly determine whether one is resilient or depressed respectively. Indeed, Marty's optimism test is currently implemented in the SAF's Officer Cadet School and in the Undergraduate Professional and Military Education Training (UGPMET) programme for regular officers.¹⁶

We can illustrate the aforementioned three-step model with the example of an officer cadet, who has just completed his nine-week-long Basic Military Training. He has just entered a significantly more physically and mentally demanding environment, in which he is exposed to stressors at an unprecedented level. An hour ago, he was served with a negative observation report by his platoon commander:

Step (1): He captures his catastrophic thoughts: "I will soon be sent out-of-course; I don't have what it takes to be a SAF officer."

Step (2): Putting things in perspective, he tries to generate a best-case possibility: "The negative report was wrongly addressed to me."

Step (3): Finally, he identifies the most likely outcome: "My section instructor will discuss with me what went wrong in the field. I will be disappointed by my mistakes but I will work out a plan to improve myself in this area."

The aforementioned psychological skill, if taught to our servicemen, will help them to cope well with adversity in other domains of their lives, beyond their national service. Indeed, resilience is an important factor that contributes to operational readiness—a most important objective for the SAF.



The newly-commissioned officers leap in joy as they celebrate the successful completion of 38 weeks of tough training to become officers of the SAF.

IDENTIFYING AND BUILDING CHARACTER STRENGTHS

“(H)appiness is an activity of the soul expressing complete virtue.”

Aristotle¹⁷

US soldiers complete the Values in Action character strengths questionnaire,¹⁸ which rank orders 24 character strengths, for example, curiosity, creativity, bravery, persistence, integrity, fairness, leadership and self-regulation, within the individual. In small groups, they discuss questions like: “What did you learn about yourself by taking the survey? Which strengths have you developed through your service in the military? How do your strengths contribute to your completing a mission and reaching your goals?” Subsequently, they view a case study in which an Army unit cooperated as a team to overcome obstacles in setting up a support hospital. In this exercise, soldiers identified character strengths that were exercised and led to mission success in the case study. Soldiers then go on to tackle a mission in teams, using their team member’s character strength profiles. Finally, the soldiers write down and share their personal ‘Strength in Challenges’ stories.

One sergeant recalled how he used his top strengths of love, wisdom and gratitude to help a soldier who was acting out, causing interpersonal conflict. Due to the soldier’s anger and hostile behaviours, most of his colleagues avoided him. However, the sergeant tapped into his strength of love to engage the soldier. He then found out that the soldier was consumed by anger at his wife and that this anger badly affected his relationships with his colleagues. The sergeant pulled on his strength of wisdom to help the soldier understand his wife’s perspective and worked with him to write a letter to his wife. The letter described the gratitude that the soldier felt for his wife, who had to handle so much alone during his three deployments.¹⁹

This strengths-based component of CSF is based on a core precept of positive psychology—the use of one’s top character strengths increase his well-being, i.e. not just reduced mental health problems, but also greater happiness. This is not only an axiom in ancient Greek philosophy, but also an empirically validated point in modern science.²⁰ It is believed that building a soldier’s top character strengths would help him build his psychological capacity to buffer the stress he will face from traumatic events.

Command schools in the SAF place tremendous emphasis on values inculcation. Before one can align his personal values to that of the organisation, he must necessarily have a clear sense of what his personal values are.²¹ As such, there is no surprise that the clarification of one’s personal values constitutes the first step of the values inculcation process. There exists a significant overlap between the 24 character strengths, assessed by the Values in Action questionnaire and the list of personal values that guides our servicemen in the clarification process. Given this, there is good reason to suggest that this existent process can be tapped on to build the identified top character strengths of our servicemen and hence lead to enhanced psychological resilience.

Fostering Strong Relationships

CSF seeks to foster strong relationships among soldiers in the same unit. The bonds that one shares with others are thought to be important for fostering adaptation and resilience through new learning and growth.²² CSF attempts to build strong relationships through positive communication and hence it teaches soldiers the evidence-based psychological skill of active-constructive responding (ACR). This involves responding actively and constructively, not passively and destructively, to someone who is sharing a positive experience (see *Figure 1* for illustration). It may involve posing questions about the event, elaborating on the event’s consequences for the



Chief of Defence Force, Lieutenant-General (LG) Ng Chee Meng, then-Chief of Air Force, (second from right) chatting with Chief of Staff-Air Staff, then-Commander, Air Combat Command, Brigadier-General (BG) Lim Yeong Kiat (second from left) and other senior military officers after observing the live firing.

discloser and reflecting on the specific meaning of the event to the discloser. Researchers posit that ACR fosters strong relationships by helping to raise the importance of the positive event, as perceived by the discloser. It also does so by expressing the understanding, validation and caring that the responder has for the discloser's ideal self, who is defined by the latter's goals, values and needs.²³ In CSF, soldiers fill up a work sheet about how they normally respond and identify factors that prevent them from using ACR, i.e. being exhausted or excessively focused on themselves.

As such, there is great potential for the measurement and fostering of resilience and post-traumatic growth to be facilitated by an information technology platform like LEARNet.

In a recent *POINTER* monograph,²⁴ former Chief of Defence Force, LG Neo Kian Hong, emphasised the importance of 'interpersonal effectiveness' and 'communicating to influence', as he shared his reflections on leadership in the 3G SAF. These are vital skills in the domain of social competency, as articulated in the SAF Leadership Competency Model,²⁵ and they are deliberately developed in our leaders. A necessary precondition for the effective deployment of the aforementioned two social skills is the existence of strong relationships between the leader and the led. In view of this, it is plausible that by equipping our servicemen with the psychological skill of ACR, we can not only boost their resilience levels, but also lead to enhancement in their domains of social competency.

<p>Context: PTE Chua tells his section mate, PTE Lee, “Hey bro, our training is working! I got a GOLD for my first IPPT test!”</p>	
<p>Active-constructive response: That’s good news. Your hard work has paid off. So how are you going to spend the \$200 awarded to you when you book out? Are you going to ION Orchard to buy your sister the blue dress that she liked for her birthday?</p>	<p>Passive-constructive response: That’s nice.</p>
<p>Passive-destructive response: You know what? I met this girl at my friend’s party last night. Listen to this...</p>	<p>Active-destructive response: Life’s going to get very tough for you. From now on, PC and PS will have very high expectations for you. They will make sure that you maintain your GOLD. Tiring, bro... No time for you to relax.</p>

Figure 1: Illustration of four responding styles.

MEASURING AND FOSTERING RESILIENCE WITH INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

CSF uses a robust information technology platform²⁶ to (1) administer a resilience measurement test (based on four domains of fitness) and score it in real time, showing the individual service member his or her results and (2) provide online education that covers post-traumatic growth and that is tailored according to the individual service member’s scores across each domain of fitness (see *Figure 2* for a brief summary of the online courses). Information technology can be harnessed to effectively reduce symptoms of mental disorder and enhance well-being; this is an empirically validated point.²⁷

Leveraging on information technology to measure and foster resilience is beneficial to the SAF for several reasons. It can speed up and simplify data collection, while eliminating redundancy. It can allow real time monitoring of the psychological health of servicemen across the SAF. Development of online courses can be expedited. Learning can be self-paced and can be customised to the specific needs of the individual servicemen. The latter point is a key characteristic of the SAF’s LEARNet initiative,

which resulted in the SAF being awarded “Asia’s Most Admired Knowledge Enterprise Award” at the World Knowledge Forum in 2011.²⁸ The infrastructure and technical support for LEARNet will be well-established in the 3G SAF. As such, there is great potential for the measurement and fostering of resilience and post-traumatic growth to be facilitated by an information technology platform like LEARNet.

APPLICABILITY TO THE WIDER SAF

A significant part of MRT is based on the Penn Resiliency Program (PRP), which was conceptualised by the University of Pennsylvania. The programme is focused on factors like optimism, problem solving, self-efficacy, self-regulation, emotional awareness, flexibility, empathy and strong relationships. It was initially developed as a school-based training programme for middle school children.²⁹ The PRP has been found to be effective in significantly reducing depressive symptoms in these children. Driven by such success, the PRP programme was further extended to US college students. It was found to result in a lasting decrease in depressive and anxiety symptoms, as well as a sustained increase in measured well-being.³⁰

Modules		Description
Four Domains of Fitness	Emotional Fitness	Teaches soldiers how to enhance positive emotions and how to become aware when negative emotions like sadness and anger, are not commensurate with the reality of the threat at hand.
	Family Fitness	Develops a range of relationship skills, such as fostering trust, constructively managing conflict, creating shared meaning and recovering from betrayal.
	Social Fitness	Explains the concept of mirror neurons in the brain, which are hypothesised to play a role in empathy. Teaches soldiers to identify emotions in others, with a focus on racial and cultural pluralism.
	Spiritual* Fitness	Helps soldiers build a “spiritual core” with self-awareness, a sense of agency, self-regulation, self-motivation and social awareness.
Post-traumatic growth		<p>Teaches soldiers the five elements that contribute to post-traumatic growth:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Understanding the response to trauma, constituted by shattered beliefs about oneself, others and the future. This response is typical and is not symptomatic of PTSD or suggestive of a character flaw. 2. Reducing anxiety with the help of techniques that control intrusive thoughts and images. 3. Engaging in constructive self-disclosure. Soldiers are encouraged to share their stories because attempts to contain their own trauma from within may result in the exacerbation of physiological and psychological symptoms. 4. Creating a narrative that describes trauma as a fork in the road that heightens one’s appreciation of paradox—loss and gain, grief and gratitude, vulnerability and strength. 5. Articulating one’s life principles. These include novel ways of demonstrating altruism, creating a new identity and endorsing the idea of the Greek Hero who comes back from Hades to make known to the world an important truth about how to live.

Figure 2: Brief description of online education modules

*“Spiritual” here does not refer to religion, but to belonging to and serving something larger than the self.³¹

There is preliminary evidence for the effectiveness of CSF in preventing mental disorders and promoting well-being.³² This, combined with the evidence that the PRP has worked for several different groups of individuals, suggests that CSF may not only be beneficial for armies. Rather, the psychological skills taught by and the psychological capacities cultivated by a programme like CSF may plausibly strengthen resilience and post-traumatic growth in the Republic of the Singapore Navy (RSN) and the Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF).

CAVEATS AND LIMITATIONS

CSF cannot be imported into the SAF without any prior improvements. In this section, I will seek to raise caveats and emphasise potential limitations in the application of lessons learnt from CSF to the SAF context.

'Asian Values' in Singapore

I have described ACR as an empirically validated method for fostering strong relationships. Nonetheless, I still retain doubts about whether ACR will work equally well in East Asian populations, which hold virtues like non-attachment and reduced concern for the personal benefits of one's actions.³³ As such, there is reason to suspect that East Asians may be affected differently by praise from others, i.e. using ACR, for positive events. This may be the case for Singapore, an Asian nation with features of collectivism, interdependence, familism, hierarchy and a holistic worldview. While some might argue that Singapore has been fully westernised, a more balanced view will be that Singapore embraces a mix of eastern and westernised values, attitudes, and lifestyles.³⁴ The concern that is raised is an empirical question that can potentially be answered by future research that takes cultural differences into account.

Spiritual Fitness – really secular?

The secularity of specifically the spiritual fitness domain in the implementation of CSF, has been called into question by critics. The remedial training modules for a low score on the spiritual fitness domain have been criticised as being overtly Evangelical-Christian.³⁵ This not only violates the separation of the state from church but also necessarily excludes service members who hold different beliefs. Singapore is a secularly governed state. Attempts to cultivate spiritual fitness will go against the SAF's fundamental grain as an armed forces that forms part of this secular government. As such, more research and debate should be conducted to decide if spiritual fitness is truly important for our service members' operational readiness and, if need be, how best to implement it. Perhaps re-labelling and re-focusing on this domain as 'existential fitness' (a more secular term) might be a judicious move.

While the secularity of the spiritual fitness component is now under scrutiny, I can personally attest to the scientific rigour and non-sectarianism behind the research of Marty and his co-workers. As SAF servicemen, we are not foreign to the idea that some things just do not go according to plan, during the implementation phase. Therefore, we should also be cognisant of the losses we will sustain if we choose to follow the ancient folly of throwing the baby out with the bath water.

Stigma

Psychological resilience programmes seek to promote empathic mental health awareness and compassionate prevention practices. These concepts relate to tender feelings and may seem incompatible with the tough, stoic warrior ethos of military organisations such as the SAF. As such, one can reasonably expect the integration of any psychological



Officer Cadets dashing under the cover of a smoke screen to reach their next objective.

resilience programme into these military organisations to be a challenging endeavour. The US Army has similar concerns. Indeed, almost 50% of recently surveyed US soldiers serving in Afghanistan believed that they would receive differential treatment from their commanders if they sought mental health care. About 30% believed that their careers would be jeopardised. And, more than half believed that they would be perceived as weak.³⁶

Given the importance of psychological resilience in an operationally ready 3G SAF, we must make sure that our psychological transformation is not impeded by unjustified stigma. Therefore, it is imperative that our servicemen are educated on the importance of psychological resilience. It should be noted that making resilience training universal, like the CSF, would also potentially reduce such stigma, which arises when we only include those who 'need' it.

RELEVANCE TO THE SAF

The SAF is a conscript-heavy military organisation. Life in the military is different from that in the civilian world. A high level of discipline and regimentation is required. The hierarchical rank structure is respected and strictly enforced. Communal living is the norm. In joining the military, one cedes some of his civil rights. These, among other points, require conscripted recruits to make non-trivial adjustments to military life. Stresses are not just restricted to conscripts. Regular servicemen, who are deployed overseas to undertake missions or training for extended periods of time, may face the stress associated with familial separation.

At this point, the reader may ask, "Do we really stand to gain anything from observing and studying CSF?" This is a reasonable question to ask. Indeed,

Item	Lesson(s) learnt
Principles of CSF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused not just on ordinary resilience, but post-traumatic growth; promotes positive health • Proactive (preventive), not reactive • Universal (all service members are targeted) • Uses evidence-informed strategies
Master Resilience Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imparts specific psychological skills (i.e. minimising catastrophic thinking and ACR) • Develops specific psychological capacities (i.e. building strengths to buffer against traumatic stressors) • Does the aforementioned in a structured and integrated manner
Measuring and Fostering Resilience with Information Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Efficient method of data collection • Allows real-time monitoring of psychological health of all servicemen • Offers customised online resilience training packages to suit soldier's needs and learning pace • Can tap into the LEARNet initiative for psychological transformation
Applicability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research, on which CSF is based on, strongly suggests that generality of the lessons learnt from CSF, meaning they will probably not just be applicable to the Singapore Army, but also the RSN and RSAF
Limitations in application of lessons learnt from CSF to the SAF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A consideration of Singapore's context is necessary (i.e. the influence of 'Asian values' on our society; the religious diversity in our country) • Stigma associated with seeking psychological help

Figure 3: Lessons we can learn from CSF.

the SAF has well-constructed screening procedures and an established mental wellness campaign.³⁷ Moreover, the three elements of MRT, i.e. enhancing mental toughness, identifying and building character strengths, fostering strong relationships, are core competencies for any effective leader, and are emphasised in our leadership development courses.

We should not seek to import CSF, wholesale, to the SAF. Moreover, the lessons we can learn from CSF are not meant to supplant the effective training and healthcare programmes that are currently in place.

Moreover, the lessons we can learn from CSF are not meant to supplant the effective training and healthcare programmes that are currently in place.

Rather, these lessons, summarised in *Figure 3*, are meant to complement these traditional approaches, in order to provide an evidence-informed, systematic way of developing psychological resilience and fostering potential post-traumatic growth in our servicemen.

CONCLUSION

Some may question the relevance of CSF to the SAF: “Many of the US Armed Forces Servicemen are in theatre and hence, are exposed to traumatic events. Our servicemen, on the other hand, are mostly training in peacetime. As such, PTSD should not be an issue for our servicemen.” We should be suitably concerned about the assumptions behind such an argument. For the SAF to be a credible defence force, it needs to be able to face up to its adversaries should the situation arise. Our service members engage in tough and realistic training so as to maintain a high level of operational readiness. If we were to accept General Robert H. Scales’ assertion about the importance of the 'psycho-cultural' dimension of military operations today, then psychological resilience is to be taken seriously when we consider the operational readiness of the 3G SAF. The psychological skills and capacities, as well as the structured training systems that foster resilience and post-traumatic growth cannot be developed overnight. Therefore, we should start thinking about psychological transformation now. Such a process would be well-informed by a balanced discussion of the strengths and limitations of arguably the world’s leading resilience programme—CSF. 🌐

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