

Stress center gives hope to weary fleet

By Gidget Fuentes - Staff writer

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SAN DIEGO — The toll on Marines and sailors from eight years of war, overseas deployments, extended tours and repeated family separations isn't lost on Navy Capt. Paul Hammer.

Hammer hopes to ease the stress he sees on the faces and in the actions of many of these veterans, from the petty officer returning from a tour in the Persian Gulf to the commander heading out on an individual augmentee tour to the grizzled Marine sergeant mourning the loss of his best friend.

"We do a lot of things to improve physical health," from smoking cessation programs to exercise classes, said Hammer, a psychiatrist who directs the Naval Center for Combat and Operational Stress Control.

"We really are focusing now on psychiatric health as a key aspect of that, too."

But too often, stress goes unrecognized or ignored, said Hammer, who has deployed twice to Iraq with the Corps, where he worked with Bravo Surgical Company during the 2004 Battle of Fallujah and served as I Marine Expeditionary Force psychiatrist. "Usually you are the last person to realize that you are under stress."

The Navy established the center at Naval Medical Center San Diego last September with a three-person staff of medical professionals that this year has grown to nearly three dozen. Their mission is to educate the fleet — sailors and Marines as well as families and leaders — about stress and to promote ways they can manage and cope with their stress and ultimately improve their overall mental and physical health.

The center — online at www.nccosc.navy.mil — is less of a brick-and-mortar command than a hub for all things about job-related stresses, from the horrors of combat to supervisor angst to personal tragedies.

The mission, as Hammer described it, is to:

- Get a better picture of the stresses on the fleet, especially on the individual.
- Make sailors and Marines, including leadership, more aware of the operational and combat stresses that affect them or others — and help them become more resilient.
- Erase the stigma that's still associated with those stresses, especially within the military community.

The center is expanding its research work, from studies on traumatic brain injury to white papers on issues such as sleep, resilience and post-traumatic stress disorder.

It also is taking its training programs to Command Leadership School and the Senior Leadership Academy, Hammer said, as well as to the chiefs' mess and communities such as explosive ordnance disposal and master-at-arms.

"We are developing a Navy-wide program for everybody, including the Petty Officer Indoctrination and Chief Petty Officer Indoctrination courses," he added.

The key, Hammer said, is to teach sailors and Marines to understand what stress is and to be tuned to their own minds and bodies. He cites the "stress continuum," a model that depicts someone's mental and physical state with green, yellow, orange and red zones.

Leadership has a role, too.

Studies have shown that a well-led crew "dealt with things a lot better than crews that are not well led," Hammer said.

Poor discipline, cliques and factions, even death, can test individuals' and units' resilience, compounding the stress. In a well-led crew, "people pull together, they reach out to each other."

Hammer said he hopes the fleet will accept stress as a common wound that may affect many service members.

"We have to make it OK. We have to make PTSD like a knee injury," he said. "There's ... a lot of attitudes that have got to change."

What color are you?

The Naval Center for Combat and Operational Stress Control uses colors to create a stress continuum.

Green = Ready

You are:

- Well-trained.
- Prepared.
- Fit and focused.
- Part of cohesive units and ready families.

You are mission-ready.

Yellow = Reacting

You are:

- Distressed or impaired.
- Anxious, irritable, sad.
- Experiencing physical or behavioral changes.

You have a stress response.

Orange = Injured

- You suffer more severe or persistent distress or impairment.
- Stress might leave lasting memories, reactions and expectations.

You have persistent distress.

Red = Ill

- Stress injuries don't heal without help.
- Symptoms persist for more than 60 days, get worse or improve before getting worse again.

You are mission-ineffective.