

## THE STRESS CONTINUUM

### DISCUSSION LEADER'S OUTLINE

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Good morning my name is \_\_\_\_\_. Today we will be talking about the Stress Continuum.

The **ground rules** for this discussion are:

- (1) No personal attacks on anyone's opinions
- (2) Allow each participant to express themselves
- (3) Make head calls at your leisure, just don't interrupt the group
- (4) Keep your language clean as not to offend others
- (5) PARTICIPATION BY ALL!!!!!!

#### **Gain Attention**

MSgt Kim has been on many combat deployments. He recently returned from a tour, where he lost one of his most motivated Marines in an IED blast. He is planning a memorial at the chapel with other Marines in his unit, when Sgt Banks approaches him and asks if they can talk. Sgt Banks is still having nightmares about the day he lost his buddy. He was two vehicles behind when the blast occurred. Sgt Banks says he is dealing with feelings of guilt because it could have been him but it wasn't. He can't seem to snap out of it. He feels like he is between reality and a nightmare. Plus, his heart starts racing every time he hears a loud noise while driving or when the kids bang something together at home. Sgt Banks has been spending most of his combat leave with his wife and kids, but it's tough trying to have fun with his family knowing that it could have been him in that blast. He can't imagine not being able to see his kids grow up. MSgt Kim asks Sgt Banks if he's spoken to anyone else about this; they know OSCAR team members, including the chaplain, and a Military and Family Life Consultant. Sgt Banks hasn't even shared his thoughts with his wife. MSgt Kim can relate. He had similar thoughts that kept him from sleeping when he returned from the same tour, except he had used alcohol trying to work through his issues. When using alcohol made things worse for MSgt Kim, speaking to the chaplain helped him. The chaplain assisted him in making a plan to address his issues. With the new plan, he was able to take some time to regroup after everything happened. He still meets with the chaplain now and then to talk about stressors before they take over. MSgt Kim says to Sgt Banks, "Let's go see Chaps and get you connected with some other helpful folks. After the memorial, let's sit down and chat through how things are going."

**Key points** for the discussion today will be:

- (1) Identifying the four zones in the Stress Continuum
- (2) Describing protective factors and additional tools/resources for dealing with stress reactions

**Learning Objective:** After this guided discussion, you will have a better understanding of emotions and stress reactions in yourself and fellow Marines. You will be familiar with the four zones in the Stress Continuum. You will also have a better understanding of warning signs and protective factors in dealing with Combat and Operational Stress.

#### **DISCUSSION**

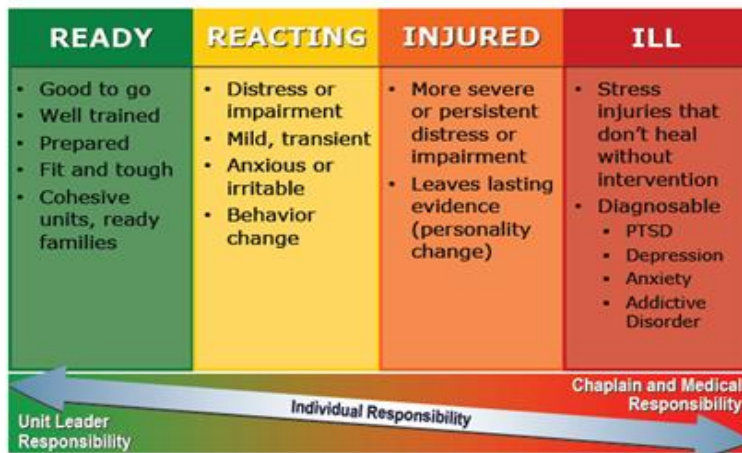
Marines have tough and challenging duties—even in noncombat areas. Experience or consequences of military operations other than combat can cause changes in physical or mental functioning or behavior. These changes can be positive. Operational stress can take place during peacetime or war and on land, at sea, or in the air. Combat adds additional stressors.

Marines and their families face challenges every day. Unique military life stressors include:

- Dislocation caused by frequent moves
- Having to repeatedly establish a household and routine
- Separation from friends, relatives, and support network
- Risk of death
- Loss of fellow Marines
- Concerns for Marine's safety during training or deployment
- Deployments cause additional stress due to increased workload, long workdays, or unpredictable hours
- Requirements to organize personal affairs (including legal or financial) prior to deployment
- Family separations and difficulty staying in contact with Marine—even in noncombat areas
- Multiple separations during training or deployment can make family and parenting routines difficult

### **KEY POINT 1**

The Stress Continuum Model gives us a common language to talk about levels of stress. The stress continuum has four zones: Ready, Reacting, Injured, and Ill. Please reference the graphic of the Stress Continuum Model below.



1. Green is Ready. Signs of a Ready Marine, in the Green Zone are:
  - a) Remaining calm and steady
  - b) Being confident in oneself and others
  - c) Getting the job done
  - d) Remaining in control
  - e) Possessing sound mind, body, spirit, and social fitness
  - f) Behaving ethically and morally
  - g) Retaining a sense of humor
  - h) Being at peace with oneself
2. The Green Zone is not simply a lack of stressors; rather, Marines in the Green Zone adapt to cope with stressors effectively and continue to function well. The Green Zone is where we want to be most of the time; however, when a stressor enters the picture, we can slide into the Yellow Zone.
3. Yellow is Reacting. The Yellow Zone is always temporary, common, and reversible. There is some anxiety, irritability, and behavior change, but the Marine is going to go back to Green on his or her own after the stress is removed. Every Marine goes in and out of the Yellow Zone.
4. Signs of stress reaction in the Yellow Zone are:
  - a) Cutting corners on the job
  - b) Being short-tempered, irritable, or grouchy

- c) Having trouble falling asleep
  - d) Eating too much or too little
  - e) Losing some interest, energy, or enthusiasm
  - f) Not enjoying usual activities
  - g) Keeping to oneself
  - h) Being overly loud or hyperactive
  - i) Feeling worried, anxious, or fearful
  - j) Feeling sad or angry
  - k) Being negative or pessimistic
  - l) Diminished mental focus
5. Marines in the Yellow Zone are reacting to temporary or mild stress and show temporary signs of stress that go away on their own. Even though Yellow Zone stress reactions are temporary, you have a responsibility to engage fellow Marines experiencing temporary stress and help them manage their stress to return to the Green Zone.
6. Orange is Injured. Marines in the Orange Zone might show a lasting change in behavior or personality caused by more severe and persistent forms of distress or loss of function. Because Orange Zone stress injuries may not resolve on their own and may last for many years, you have a responsibility to engage resources and get Marines in the Orange Zone assistance. In some cases, Orange Zone stress injuries may get worse and go into the Red Zone.
7. Signs of stress injury in the Orange Zone are:
- a) Having difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep
  - b) Having recurrent, vivid nightmares
  - c) Being unable to enjoy usually pleasurable activities
  - d) Losing the ability to remember or think rationally and clearly
  - e) Feeling persistent, intense guilt or shame
  - f) Feeling unusually remorseless or emotionally cold
  - g) Experiencing attacks of panic or blind rage
  - h) All these symptoms are in relation to a Marine's normal demeanor and activities, making it vital to know your fellow Marines and look for changes in their behavior. Marines can recover from stress-related issues with the proper support.
8. Red is Ill. Marines in the Red Zone experience severe distress or some loss of function that has gotten bad enough or persisted long enough to be diagnosable. Its symptoms, if unmanaged, may significantly impact a Marine's career and family. This Marine may have Post-Traumatic Stress, anxiety, or depression. Only a qualified medical officer can diagnose a Marine in the Red Zone. You CAN help identify symptoms associated with the Red Zone. If you think a Marine is in the Red Zone, refer them for assistance utilizing the assigned representative within your chain of command.
9. Signs of stress illness in the Red Zone are:
- a) Experiencing attacks of panic or blind rage
  - b) Long-lasting and disabling distress or impairment of normal functioning
  - c) Symptoms that worsen over time rather than improve
  - d) Problems and issues that return after improving or seeming to resolve
  - e) Impairment that does not significantly improve within several weeks
10. The Green Zone is where most of us are most of the time; however, when a stressor enters the picture, we can slide into the Yellow Zone.
11. What stress zone is Sgt Banks in?
- a) Red
  - b) Green, possibly Yellow
  - c) Orange (correct answer)
  - d) Yellow
12. What is the difference between a Yellow Zone (stress reaction), Orange Zone (stress injury), and Red

Zone (stress illness)? Which one is Sgt Banks exhibiting?

- a) Stress reaction:
    - Common
    - Always temporary
    - Mild distress or loss of function
    - Self-correcting
  - b) Stress injury (correct answer):
    - Less common
    - May leave a scar, like the emotional pain from a breakup
    - More severe distress or loss of function
    - May heal faster with help
  - c) Stress illness:
    - Stress injury symptoms that last for more than several weeks
    - Symptoms that get worse over time
    - Symptoms that get better for awhile but then come back worse
13. What emotions and stressors are Sgt Banks facing? (Participants need to provide only three to four of the possible answers.)
- a) Dealing with the loss of a friend
  - b) Planning buddy's memorial
  - c) Readjusting to being home with his wife and kids
  - d) Recurring nightmares about the day his buddy died
  - e) Several emotions: frustration, anxiety, worry, anger, fear, shame, guilt
14. What is MSgt Kim's zone?
- a) Orange
  - b) Red
  - c) Yellow
  - d) Green
15. What are some ways MSgt Kim can stay in "good to go" mode?
- a) Watch for signs of distress or stress reactions in future if concern arises
  - b) Practice relaxation techniques
  - c) Exercise constructive worrying—
    - Recognize stress and set aside a time to deal with specific, nagging concerns.
    - Work through problems to potential solutions or steps to move forward.
    - Make a record for future action
    - "What is the worst that can happen?" This helps prepare for and give perspective on what may not be a significant problem in the bigger picture.
    - "What is the best that can happen?" This can provide something to look forward to and might lighten the mood immediately, while providing a longer-term sense of opportunity.

**Interim Summary:** We just reviewed the stress continuum and its four zones: green, yellow, orange, and red. The continuum allows you to gauge your or your fellow Marine's stress. Now, let's look at some stress management tools and protective factors for dealing with stress reactions.

## **KEY POINT 2**

Although we all experience stress, protective factors reduce the likelihood of experiencing behavioral health issues due to those stressors. Imagine that these factors are shields helping you to avoid negative or hazardous situations like having a Family Advocacy Program case or being referred to the Substance Abuse Counseling Center. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention define protective factors as: *Individual or environmental characteristics, conditions, or behaviors that reduce the effects of stressful life*

events. These factors also increase an individual's ability to avoid risks or hazards, and promote social and emotional competence to thrive in all aspects of life, now and in the future.



1. When protective factors are strong, Marines are better able to withstand life's stressors—such as relationship stress and financial stress—and are more likely to avoid behaviors with negative outcomes or consequences. They are also less likely to have negative reactions to combat and operational stress. They are more likely to develop and maintain resilience.
2. The factors closest to the Marine— in the first two center rings— are internal to us. We are not necessarily born with the internal factors, but with practice, we can incorporate them into our daily lives. Protective factors can be strengthened with practice. What are some internal protective factors that were negatively impacted by Sgt Banks' stress?
  - a) Adequate sleep
  - b) Positive attitude
  - c) Healthy perspective
3. As we move outward, we see protective factors that are influenced by others, including peers and leaders. There are times when external resources are necessary to resolve issues. These are not the only protective factors available to us; you may have other things that work for individuals. Does MSgt Kim play a role in the protective factors?
  - a) Yes, Sgt Banks clearly sees him as a trusted leader and is comfortable disclosing personal information to him.
4. It's part of a leader's responsibility to help Marines build protective factors. Some examples of leadership involvement in growing protective factors are:
  - a) Giving Marines responsibility and opportunities, without micromanaging them— this provides a sense of purpose and then accomplishment when objectives are achieved.
5. Stress is always present, but if not managed, it can wear down our protective factors, which makes us vulnerable to future stress. It is the responsibility of all Marine leaders to mitigate stress. Mitigating stress is about lessening the effects of stressors and controlling the stress when you can. Leaders can use the following tactics to control as many unnecessary stressors as possible:
  - a) Put in place tough, realistic training
  - b) Maintain unit cohesion
  - c) Ensure adequate sleep
  - d) Keep Marines informed
  - e) Maintain physical fitness (both in garrison and combat)
  - f) Encourage time for mind, body, spirit and social fitness
  - g) Reduce unnecessary stress during operations
  - h) Ensure rest and recuperation after intense and prolonged actions
  - i) Honor the fallen
6. What additional resources are available?
  - a) Marines can also manage their stress by getting help from the "Big Five" resources.

- When you experience temporary and mild distress, characteristic of the Yellow Zone, engage your **peers**. Sometimes talking to another Marine is all you need to manage issues and return to the Green Zone. OSCAR team members (peers, chain of command, and chaplain) are selected unit Marines trained to prevent, identify, and manage stress problems as early as possible; as your peers they can help you build a plan to get back on track.
- In other cases, your first stop should be your **chain of command**.
- Your **chaplain** is a great resource, too, especially if you want confidentiality. At the medical clinic or hospital on your installation, you can speak to **medical personnel or a counselor** for help. You can also speak with the licensed counselors at your installation's CCP. If there is a corpsman attached to your unit, especially if you are deployed, he or she can direct you to the right resources, including self-improvement resources available to you through MCCS.
- Another confidential resource is the **DSTRESS Line**. You can speak anonymously with active duty Marines, veteran Marines, licensed counselors, and others who understand Marine culture, 24 hours a day.

### **SUMMARY/CONCLUSION**

Today we discussed the Stress Continuum and how to recognize what zone you or your fellow Marine is in. Managing stress starts with recognizing its causes and how you respond to them. I am confident that you now have a better understanding of tools and protective factors you can use to manage your own stress and to help your fellow Marines deal with their stressors. It is equally important to take advantage of Marine Corps resources. Getting help, and encouraging your fellow Marines to seek help, is essential for ensuring that every Marine is performing at his or her very best.

The objective for today was to provide you with a better understanding of emotions and stress reactions in yourself and fellow Marines as well as a better understanding of warning signs and protective factors. We also sought to equip you with tools, skills, and resources to help you deal with stress and help other Marines manage their stress.

#### **Closing Statement:**

Stress is universal. Although we use stress to build Marines, too much stress can be harmful. Taking care of problems as they arise, by using protective factors, Marine Corps resources, and other tools, helps you handle whatever the Marine Corps needs of you.

### **END OF DISCUSSION**

### **RESOURCES**

1. COSC Doctrine MCTP 3-30E
2. MCO 5351.1 Combat and Operational Stress Control Program
3. DSTRESS Line: [usmc-mccs.org/services/support/dstress-line](https://usmc-mccs.org/services/support/dstress-line)