

Cooper Design Analysis for Addressing Mental Health of Military Service Members

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Abstract:

This paper examines the ethical challenges faced by military leaders in balancing mission readiness with the mental health and well-being of service members. Drawing on recent data and Department of Defense reports, it explores the rising rates of suicide in the U.S. military and analyzes competing moral frameworks for addressing this crisis. The analysis argues for a deontological approach, advocating for leadership that integrates mental health support as a core component of operational effectiveness. The paper offers practical guidance for fostering a culture that values both mission success and the holistic wellness of military personnel.

STATEMENT OF FACTS:

Since the Pentagon began tracking suicide rates in the U.S. military in 2008, reports have shown a concerning upward trend. According to the Department of Defense Annual Report on Suicide in the Military: Calendar Year 2023, 523 service members died by suicide, an increase from 493 the previous year. The overall suicide rate across the Total Force (active duty, reserve, and National Guard) was 9% higher than in 2022. Military personnel and their leadership operate under immense pressure to maintain constant mission readiness, often at the expense of fostering a culture that prioritizes mental health and self-care. Mission readiness is crucial for ensuring national and global security and refers to the ability of service members and units to maintain optimal physical, mental, and operational preparedness.

NATURE OF THE DILEMMA:

This case presents multiple competing moral obligations and principles:

1. The conflict between priorities of mission objectives versus workforce wellness.
2. Tension between leadership training and mindset needed to balance mission demands with mental health assessment and considerations.
3. Stakeholder impacts affect the operational readiness and safety of the team, national and global security, and the individual well-being of the military servicemember.
4. Contextual complexity involving operational readiness and emotional resilience considering both professional and personal factors that can affect well-being and performance.
5. Consequence uncertainty regarding the impact of compromising operational readiness for the wellness of a team member.

6. Value prioritization between ensuring mission and workforce readiness and ensuring the health and well-being of those who carry out military operations.

ETHICAL ISSUE

Are military leaders responsible for prioritizing the well-being of their service members, even if it affects mission readiness?

ALTERNATIVES

1. Teleological Framework - Prioritize Mission Readiness Over Mental Fitness

Pros

- Ensures that military forces are always prepared to meet the demands of national and global security.
- Foster a culture of accountability ensuring that service members are always performing at their best to achieve the mission.
- Leaders maintain focus on military objectives and do not have to balance mental health concerns with operational needs.

Cons

- Can result in increased stress, burnout, and mental health struggles, ultimately leading to increased suicide risk.
- Military may face negative impact with recruitment and retention.

2. Deontological Framework - Promote Mental Fitness and Mental Health Recovery That Supports the Service Member as a Function of Mission Readiness

Pros

- Enhanced resilience and performance of military service members.
- Opportunity for early intervention and reducing escalation of mental health issues.
- Increased retention and well-being of military service members.
- Establishes healthy practices that can be carried into post-military life, improving outcomes for veteran populations.

Cons

- Diverts resources from training to addressing mental health issues.
- Conflict with balance of mental health versus mission priorities.

3. Justice as Fairness Framework - Prioritize Mental Fitness Over Mission Readiness

Pros

- Improved outcomes for health and well-being of service members.
- Increased retention and recruitment.
- Reduced suicide risk and incidence in the military.

Cons

- Negative impact on mission readiness with larger implications to national and global security.
- Culture conflict between prioritizing mental health and critical need of mission readiness.

PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE (BEST FIT)

The Deontological framework advocating for mental fitness and mental health recovery that supports the service member as a function of mission readiness offers the most effective approach as it:

- Provides clear guidance to leadership on balancing mission objectives with workforce wellness.
- Enables leaders to incorporate mental health considerations when planning for mission readiness.
- Establishes a sustainable framework for managing the impacts on operational readiness, team safety, national and global security, and the individual well-being of military personnel.
- Balances competing interests to achieve the best outcome for service member performance while supporting mission success.
- Cultivates a culture that prioritizes the public health needs of service members alongside the necessity of operational readiness.
- Promotes continued investment in service members to maintain optimal performance and mission readiness.

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