

Focused Writing Can Improve Readiness, Retention

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The Army faces a recruiting, readiness, and retention problem. Modernity has brought wondrous technology and products, but these have caused unforeseen negative consequences. Smart phones, social media, highly-processed foods, climate-controlled environments, and online shopping allow people to live more comfortably. Increased comfort, however, has failed to increase contentment and meaning, and mental and physical health have dropped in the United States and much of the developed world.¹ This crisis brings increased rates of obesity, diabetes, depression, and many other modern maladies. A growing number of Americans cannot meet the standards for enlistment, Soldiers may have issues arise during their service that prevent them from deploying and contributing to accomplishing the nation's missions, and ultimately, many Soldiers leave the service because they cannot meet medical, physical, or psychological standards.² The Army has developed various strategies to combat these issues, but a tool backed by psychological research remains unused. Goal-focused and trauma-focused writing offer an untapped well that the Army could use to combat these growing problems. Individual leaders and the Army should implement a program of goal-focused writing to increase Soldiers' performance and health- and trauma-focused writing to help Soldiers deal with past issues.

Army Chief of Staff GEN Mark A. Milley has declared readiness his number one priority.³ Readiness, of course, encompasses many facets of being a Soldier — physical fitness, mental health, dental health, family resiliency, training readiness — and the Army has adopted different means of ensuring Soldiers maintain readiness across various attributes. The Army has addressed these problems through a combination of reactive solutions — ensuring the availability of mental health professionals, offering physical therapy to help Soldiers rehabilitate injuries, and offering military family life counselors for couples and families in need of counseling — and proactive solutions such as increasingly realizing and publicizing the importance of sleep and stress reduction, providing healthier food options in dining facilities, and changing the physical fitness system to reflect more recent knowledge of performance, recovery, and injury reduction. These efforts have improved Soldiers' abilities to prevent and react to problems that may arise. Another tool exists, however, in guided writing to process the past and prepare for the future.

Many psychological empirical studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of writing to process past experiences,

evaluate one's character, or develop and implement goals. The benefits of writing and goal-setting include better performance at work or school and better mental and physical health.⁴ Additionally, developing one's own goals as opposed to being given goals from a leader or organization leads to improved results. One study found that even when students developed goals unrelated to school, their performance on tests improved.⁵ This research suggests that even if Soldiers developed personal goals for pursuits outside the Army, their performance in the Army would likely still improve. Overall, this research suggests goal-focused writing could lead to improved health and performance in Soldiers and thus increased readiness throughout the force.

Writing about experienced trauma has produced similarly positive results. Similar to discussing issues with a social worker, psychologist, or trusted friend, writing about traumatic experiences allows the Soldier to make sense of the trauma. It allows the Soldier to glean the potential wisdom from such experiences and develop a coherent narrative for the event. Different studies have demonstrated significant improvements in people's lives who complete such writing, including the following benefits: "These improvements included fewer consultations with physicians, greater long-term psychological health, and improved immune function."⁶ Though such writing cannot and will not replace counseling, it may reduce the need for some people and aid the counselor, as the Soldier will have already worked on his or her feelings through writing about experiences.

The Army could develop its own writing program to achieve this or use one that already exists. One such program is the Self Authoring Suite, which offers three different guided-writing programs. Future Authoring focuses on developing goals and plans to achieve those goals, Present Authoring helps identify one's virtues or flaws and address both, and Past Authoring lets the author develop a narrative about one's life, including traumatic events, to process those experiences.

This goal-setting program has some distinct advantages over some of the others I've seen. First, it is a systematic process with well-thought out prompts and questions, and each piece builds on itself. Second, the positive — but especially the negative — visualization can help motivate Soldiers to pursue their goals. Part of the exercise involves thinking about what will happen if Soldiers achieve their goals, which is helpful, but the truly impactful aspect is visualizing what will happen if they fail and allow their worst habits and tendencies to continue unabated. Soldiers

complete this segment before they develop their goals and plan to implement them. This provides a concrete, tangible reason to be motivated to improve, which increases the exercise's effectiveness. Plenty of people have bad habits they want to end or good habits they want to develop, but too many people quit when the initial excitement disappears. Relatedly, many Soldiers perform well at work, but one event may push a Soldier over the edge and cause him or her to spiral downward and suddenly become a poor performer. This exercise can help move the Soldier in the right direction toward self-improvement, ultimately improving the Soldier's resiliency, which contributes to the unit's readiness.

A writing program could be implemented in a number of ways, but offering a goal-focused writing exercise at critical times in Soldiers' careers makes sense. Enlisted Soldiers could complete it at Basic Combat Training or Advanced Individual Training and at every NCO Education System course. Officers could complete it upon beginning the U.S. Military Academy or ROTC and during each officer education system course in their career progression. Because the exercise involves looking out three to five years, Soldiers would return to the exercise at various times throughout their career, and depending on how it is implemented, the Soldiers could return to the program on their own through a website.

Another beneficial time for Soldiers to complete goal-focused writing would be while they complete the Soldier for Life-Transition Assistance Program (SFL-TAP). This would allow them the opportunity to sit down and think how they want to begin the next phase of their lives, not just in terms of getting a job or going to school, but really think about their goals and what will happen, most importantly, if they fail to achieve their goals and let their worst habits and tendencies rule the course of their lives. Many people look forward to exiting the Army but fail to develop their own mission or purpose and mindlessly enter school or find a job. This exercise could help.

Trauma-focused writing could be used for Soldiers seeking behavioral health treatment and, potentially, could be offered to Soldiers if they feel they could use some sorting out but are not pursuing the Army's behavioral health system. This would allow Soldiers to process their issues before seeing a mental health professional and, as research has shown, potentially decrease the need to see mental health professionals. It would not, of course, replace the behavioral health system, but supplement it and allow Soldiers to address problems on their own, just as they might lift weights to address a strength deficiency.

Computers, money, and time would be the biggest hurdles to implementing a focused-writing program. If computers are a limiting factor, then the Army could provide print outs and provide space for Soldiers to write their responses by hand. The benefit to using a computer, of course, is that Soldiers can return to a digital copy of what they wrote and modify it if they so desire from anywhere they have access to the internet.

If using a commercial program, cost may also be an issue. However, one could argue this may cost less than medication

or counseling. The programs may both prevent and help treat issues, so these benefits may also offset the cost.

Time would also be an issue to implementing such a program. Time is precious in Army schools, and something would probably have to be cut to make time for a focused-writing program. Instead of a class on SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timely) goals, Army Values, leadership, or a speech from senior leaders, Soldiers could develop goals of their own. This certainly seems to fall under the broader concept of mission command. This also shows Soldiers and leaders a certain amount of respect. Too often Soldiers get lectured, briefed, and trained to try to change behavior. How about we give the Soldiers some responsibility? This would benefit them and the Army. It would reinforce the Army Values, and probable benefits such as increased performance and improved health would likely offset its cost.

Though I hope the Army adopts a focused-writing program, I understand changes at the Army level happen slowly, and the Army does not want to invest in something without knowing it provides cost-effective benefits. For now, junior leaders could easily implement a program in their units across the force. Measures such as Army Physical Fitness Test scores, percentage of Soldiers on profile, sick call use, reenlistment rate, and behavioral incidents could be assessed before and after the use of the goal-focused writing program. These small experiments could provide evidence of the program's effectiveness in increasing readiness and retention. These leaders can then share the results in venues such as this and up the chain of command. My ultimate hope is that if this proves useful, the Army as a whole will adopt such a system.

Notes

¹ Edmund S. Higgins, "Is Mental Health Declining in the U.S.?" *Scientific American*, 1 January 2017, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/is-mental-health-declining-in-the-u-s/>.

² Nolan Feeney, "Pentagon: 7 in 10 Youths Would Fail to Qualify for Military Service," *Time*, 29 June 2014, <http://time.com/2938158/youth-fail-to-qualify-military-service/>.

³ C. Todd Lopez, "Army Chief of Staff Urges Soldiers to Take Responsibility for Unit, Individual Readiness." *Army.mil*. 11 October 2017, https://www.army.mil/article/195130/army_chief_of_staff_urges_soldiers_to_take_responsibility_for_unit_individual_readiness.

⁴ Jordan Peterson and Raymond Mar, "The Benefits of Writing," *Selfauthoring.com*, <https://www.selfauthoring.com/doc/WritingBenefits.pdf>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

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