

# What You're Getting Wrong About Resilience and How to Truly Train It

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Resilience is an attribute that military leaders discuss often that has many definitions. The Army's Resilience Directorate defines resiliency as "the ability to persevere, adapt, and grow in dynamic and stressful environments." Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, defines resiliency as "the tendency to recover quickly from setbacks, shock, injuries, adversity, and stress while maintaining a mission and organizational focus." In simple terms, resiliency can be defined as the ability to adapt and overcome in the face of adversity. As our Army's operating environment and mission becomes more dynamic and uncertain, fostering resiliency in our Soldiers and leaders will be key in ensuring they can overcome new and complex challenges. The question must be asked then is how are we training this key attribute as an Army?

Most often, discussions within the military and elsewhere on resiliency revolve around concepts that aim to alleviate, avoid, or reduce stress. The U.S. Army's Master Resiliency Doctrine lists some of the core competencies of resilience being self-awareness, connection, and optimism. This published doctrine goes on to describe master resiliency skills as mental frameworks like hunting the good stuff and avoiding thinking traps, and doctrine recommends practices like rhythmic breathing and journaling. Are these competencies, skills, and practices enough to train resilience in our teams? Shouldn't a core component of resiliency training be the recursive practice of intentionally imposing hardship and adversity on yourself and your Soldiers? Resiliency is not an attribute that is simply learned or acquired through classroom discussion, but rather, a skill that must be trained. Resiliency is also not trained through the avoidance or alleviation of stress. **On the contrary, resilience is developed by welcoming and embracing challenges in order to become familiar with — and overcome them.**



Paratroopers in the 173rd Airborne Brigade pull simulated casualties during a stress shoot lane at Grafenwoehr Training Area, Germany, on 14 December 2021. (Photo by Markus Rauchenberger)

There are three key methods we can train to build more resilient Soldiers and units. **First**, resiliency is built by deliberately inducing stress into our training. Soldiers cannot effectively learn to overcome adversity if it is foreign to them. **Second**, to further resiliency, our Soldiers should not just endure hardship but be able to plan and think their way out of it. Incorporating critical thinking into training develops resilience by making it instinctual for our team members to find ways to overcome obstacles in complexity. **Finally**, we must prepare our Soldiers for their inevitable encounters with failure. Failure in their systems, their tools, and in their ability to complete the mission. Our team's ability to overcome failure is of vital importance and a hallmark of a resilient force.

The foundational way in which we can train our Soldiers to be more resilient is by introducing controlled stressors into the training environment. Our teams achieving success in optimal conditions is not an appropriate benchmark for us to evaluate as satisfactory performance. We must be able to do our jobs in adverse conditions, in degraded states, and in the face of external stressors. How can we ensure our Soldiers are able to accomplish the mission when they are cold, wet, tired, and hungry? By intentionally introducing them to factors like this in training. As leaders, we must figuratively, and literally, hunt the bad stuff and train alongside our Soldiers to overcome these hurdles to build resilience. Maintaining focus when the stakes are real and conditions are not ideal doesn't happen by coincidence. Our Soldiers should be able to self-inoculate their own duress when faced with these stressors and build resiliency in the process. We must train to be comfortable with being uncomfortable. Leaders can do this by introducing stressors into training environments in a controlled manner. Train your Soldiers to shoot well when physically exhausted, move well in the dark and in inclement weather, and plan well when they are tired and hungry. Through the process of coping with and succeeding despite these stressors, our Soldiers gain resiliency to face the new challenges to come. Although enduring stress and adversity during training builds fortitude, it is not enough to simply impose hardship and consider our teams to be resilient. Our teams must be able to adapt and overcome, not just endure through the challenges presented to them. Soldiers must be able to critically think and solve problems under duress to cultivate comprehensive resilience.

A key aspect to being resilient is the ability to persevere after setbacks and in stressful environments. Our Soldiers when faced with resistance or adversity, should instinctively transition to a problem-solving, critical-thinking mindset. Critical thinking, like resiliency, is a skill that must be trained. In the current multidomain operating environment, Soldiers will be tasked with solving problems and executing complex missions in foreign environments. Being resilient in these conditions will be key to their success. Frequently in training, we take for granted problem sets that could be used to train critical thinking in our Soldiers. Test your Soldiers' ability to navigate without a Global Positioning System (GPS), employ equipment that they are unfamiliar with, and find solutions to problems in ambiguous situations. Soldiers should know how to react in the absence of orders and how to manage volatile and uncertain situations. They cannot be prepared for this unless we place them in these circumstances during training. Resilience will not be developed, and skills cannot be honed, through optimistic thinking alone. Our Soldiers must face obstacles and overcome them to develop the resilience. While it is imperative that we incorporate training that builds resilience through solving problems with critical thinking, we must also train our Soldiers to operate through failure.

Resilience as a skill is derived through the iterative process of achieving success by overcoming obstacles. We cannot train this skill in our Soldiers, however, without exposing them to failure. When our teams are completing a mission, treating a patient, or engaging in combat, they — and their equipment — will inevitably fail. Too often, our training scenarios simulate a landslide victory for ourselves with all systems being fully operational and without incurring any casualties. Failure is often said to be a great teacher, and our Soldiers can learn resilience from it if we leverage its lessons in training. Junior Soldiers should be tested and required to perform the roles of those senior to them. Force-on-force training as well as live-fire scenarios should simulate casualties into a large percentage of iterations. Leaders must train their teams on what to do when communications fail, weapon systems malfunction, and mobility platforms break down. Simulated failure in training both induces external stressors and requires critical thinking to react, all while realistically depicting the realities of our profession.



Paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division participate in an attack during training at Fort Polk, LA, on 1 May 2023. (Photo by SPC Luis Garcia)

A Soldier's first encounter with fatigue, stress, complexity, or defeat should not be on the battlefield when it matters most. Our Soldiers should be well acquainted with these adversaries and have a mental playbook detailing past instances in which they conquered these foes in training. Leaders cannot expect to build resilient Soldiers through mental-hardening tactics alone. **Resiliency as a skill is learned the hard way, through tough realistic training that includes applying controlled stress, complex problem solving, and the harsh truth of failure to our teams.** Leaders should incorporate both mental resiliency education along with the intentional application of these three resiliency training methods to achieve capable and resilient organizations that are prepared for the complexity and uncertainty of our future operating environment and missions.

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