Building Spiritual Fitness in the Army

An Innovative Approach to a Vital Aspect of Human Development

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This article describes the development of the spiritual fitness component of the Army's Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF) program. Spirituality is defined in the human sense as the journey people take to discover and realize their essential selves and higher order aspirations. Several theoretically and empirically based reasons are articulated for why spirituality is a necessary component of the CSF program: Human spirituality is a significant motivating force, spirituality is a vital resource for human development, and spirituality is a source of struggle that can lead to growth or decline. A conceptual model developed by Sweeney, Hannah, and Snider (2007) is used to identify several psychological structures and processes that facilitate the development of the human spirit. From this model, an educational, computer-based program has been developed to promote spiritual resilience. This program consists of three tiers: (a) building awareness of the self and the human spirit, (b) building awareness of resources to cultivate the human spirit, and (c) building awareness of the human spirit of others. Further research will be needed to evaluate the effectiveness of this innovative and potentially important program.

Keywords: spirituality, resilience, prevention, values, spiritual struggles

The last 25 years have witnessed a shift in the fields of psychology and mental health from a focus on the treatment of pathology after it arises to the development of positive skills and resources that contribute to resilience before serious problems develop (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF) program in the U.S. Army represents one of the exciting applications of this approach to health and well-being. Comprehensive Soldier Fitness is understood as multidimensional, involving physical, emotional, social, familial, and spiritual domains. In this article, we examine the relevance of spiritual fitness to a comprehensive resilience program and then provide an overview of this new and innovative approach to human development in the Army. Before we turn to this discussion, however, it is important to consider the meanings of three key terms.

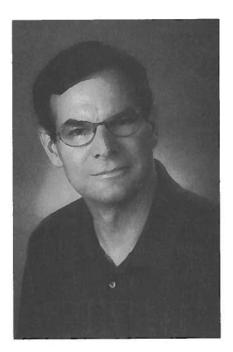## Definitions of Spirit, Spirituality, and Spiritual Fitness

The meanings of the terms *spirit* and *spirituality* have evolved over the past few decades and are continuing to change (Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999). Though a consensus of meaning has yet to emerge, it is important to be clear about the ways in which the terms *spirit* and *spirituality* are being used in particular projects. Here, we are speaking about spirit, spirituality, and spiritual fitness in the human rather than theological sense. The spiritual fitness component of the CSF program is not based on a particular stance or position on the ontological truth or validity of philosophical, nonreligious, or religious frameworks of belief and practice. Department of Defense leaders are not in a privileged position to answer ontological questions about God's existence or the truth of religious claims. However, they can facilitate the search for truth, self-knowledge, purpose, and direction in life as group members define it. In this project, we define *spirit* as the essential core of the individual, the deepest part of the self, and one's evolving human essence. As Sweeney, Hannah, and Snider (2007) noted, "Human spirit is thoroughly manifested in who we are" (p. 26). But the human spirit is not synonymous with personal identity. It has a deeper dimension to it. Scholars often ascribe a number of sacred qualities to "spirit," including ultimacy (what is true and of deepest significance), boundlessness (what is of lasting value), and transcendence (what is set apart from the ordinary) (Otto, 1917/1928; Tillich, 1952). The term *spirit* is also tied intimately to other higher order qualities, including purpose and meaning, enlightenment, authenticity, interconnectedness, and self-actualization. It is important to add that the human spirit is more than a set of fixed traits and characteristics; it is an animating impulse—a vital, motivating force that is directed to realizing higher order goals, dreams, and aspirations that grow out of the essential self (Sweeney et al., 2007). In this sense, the human spirit organizes people's lives and propels people forward. One military leader put it this way: "Our individual sense of who we are—our true, spiritual self—defines us. It creates our mindset, defines our values, determines our actions, and predicts our behavior" (Fairholm, cited in Snider, 2008, p. 14).

The definition of *spirituality* flows from the definition of *spirit. Spirituality* refers to the continuous journey peo-

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Relevance of Spirituality as a Dimension of Comprehensive Fitness

The Army has identified spirituality as a salient dimension of its strategic planning and training programs. The Army defines *soldier well-being* as consisting of four dimensions that contribute to mission preparedness: physical, material, mental, and spiritual (U.S. Department of the Army, 2006a, p. 20). Furthermore, the United States Military Academy at West Point has recently adopted the domain of the human spirit as one of the six developmental domains in its Cadet Leader Development System (Sweeney et al., 2007). Most recently, the Army articulated a spiritual dimension to the CSF program to assist in accomplishing its premier task of instilling an indomitable spirit and resilience in members of the organization as they face the challenges of carrying out their duties and living day to day (U.S. Department of the Army, 2006b, p. 5-3). There are several specific reasons why the spiritual domain is relevant to the CSF program.

Human Spirituality Is a Significant Motivating Force

Military leaders and historians, throughout time, have appreciated the critical role that the human spirit plays in propelling combatants toward victory during battles (Marshall, 1978; Patton, 1933). Walter Lord's inscription on the Battle of Midway panel of the World War II Memorial in Washington, DC, succinctly captures the importance of the human spirit in battle:

They had no right to win. Yet they did, and in doing so they changed the course of the war . . . even against the greatest of odds, there is something in the human spirit—a magic blend of skill, faith, and valor—that can lift men from certain defeat to incredible victory.

The U.S. Army has embedded a Warrior Ethos into its culture to foster the development of the values, attitudes, and beliefs that lead to a strong, resilient, and winning spirit in its members. The Warrior Ethos is part of the Soldier's Creed and entails a member's commitment to placing the mission first, never accepting defeat, never quitting, and never leaving a fallen comrade (U.S. Department of the Army, 2006b, p. 4-10). Moreover, the Army encourages all personnel to live by and internalize its core values: loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage (U.S. Department of the Army, 2006b, p. 2-2).

Theorists have posited that individuals motivated by a strong human spirit experience a number of benefits (e.g., Frankl, 1985; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). They are better able to accept the reality of a situation, develop creative coping strategies, find meaning in trauma, maintain an optimistic view of the future, access their social support network, generate the motivation to persevere, grow from adversity, and mitigate serious psychological problems such as posttraumatic stress disorder.

There is some empirical support for the value of spiritually based motivation. For example, a number of studies have linked higher levels of intrinsic, spiritual motivation to reports of greater psychological health and well-

ple take to discover and realize their spirit, that is, their essential selves (Sweeney et al., 2007; Teasdale, 1999). To put it another way, spirituality is a process of searching for the sacred in one's life (Pargament, 2007). From this developmental perspective, people can take any variety of pathways in the effort to develop the human spirit. Nature, music, exercise, loving relationships, scientific exploration, religion, work, art, philosophy, and study are just a few of the paths people follow in their efforts to grow spiritually. As long as people engage in these various means with the intent to enhance their search to discover and realize their essential selves, they are participating in the spiritual quest (Dalton, Eberhardt, Bracken, & Echols, 2006).

As noted above, Army leaders, health professionals, and researchers cannot evaluate the merits of human spirituality in terms of its absolute truth. Nor would it be appropriate or ethical to impose a particular spiritual world view on soldiers. In the tradition of William James, however, it is possible to evaluate human spiritual fitness on the basis of how well it works, that is, pragmatic criteria (see Pargament, 2007). Pragmatically, we can identify elements of a human spirituality that are associated with strength and resilience in the face of stress and trauma. Conversely, it is possible to identify spiritual risk factors that increase the likelihood of problems. On the basis of these pragmatic criteria, we define *spiritual fitness* in terms of the capacity to (a) identify one's core self and what provides life a sense of purpose and direction; (b) access resources that facilitate the realization of the core self and strivings, especially in times of struggle; and (c) experience a sense of connectedness with diverse people and the world.

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being (Donahue, 1985). Individuals who report stronger spiritual motivation also manifest less conflict among other goals in their lives, greater purpose in life, greater commitment to their goals, and more satisfaction and happiness in the pursuit of their strivings (Emmons, Cheung, & Tehrani, 1998; Mahoney et al., 2005).

The human spirit may play a particularly important role in motivating people to behave in a moral and ethical manner when social pressures push them to behave counter to their values and beliefs. For instance, on March 16, 1968, then Chief Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson witnessed American soldiers killing civilians in the Vietnamese hamlet of My Lai as he piloted a helicopter over the village. Aware that he was risking his own life, the lives of his crew, and a possible court martial, Thompson landed his craft between the American soldiers and the villagers in an attempt to stop the atrocity and evacuate the wounded civilians. He ordered his gunner to open fire on the American soldiers if they continued to shoot the civilians. The moral outrage Thompson experienced upon seeing American soldiers killing civilians motivated him to take action to stop these actions, even at great personal risk (Thompson, 2002).

This example highlights one reason why the spiritual dimension is relevant to the CSF program. The Army strives to ground its personnel firmly in a strong values and motivational system so they behave consistently with these values in even the most challenging situations, including combat operations and complex and chaotic environments (U.S. Department of the Army, 2006a). By strengthening soldiers' spirits through education and training opportunities, the Army hopes to ensure that its future operations will be carried out in a moral and ethical manner.

Spirituality Is a Vital Resource for Human Development

Many theorists have asserted that the development of the human spirit is important in promoting general physical and psychological well-being (Fowler, 1995; Maslow, 1970). Consistent with these arguments, researchers have demonstrated important links between spiritually based resources, health, and well-being. In their comprehensive review of this literature, Koenig, McCullough, and Larson (2001) found that indicators of higher levels of spirituality were frequently associated with higher levels of well-being, lower rates of serious psychological problems and drug/alcohol abuse, greater marital stability and satisfaction, and even greater longevity. These beneficial effects appear to be particularly strong when people are facing major life stressors, including those often experienced in the military (Pargament, 1997). Specific methods of spiritual coping (e.g., meaning-making, support, ritual practice, meditation) appear to be especially well tailored to the exigencies of life's most difficult challenges, and empirical studies suggest that they offer distinctive benefits over and above the effects of secular methods of coping (see Pargament, Magyar, & Murray, 2005). These findings also apply to people of military age (Astin et al., 2005).

The empirical literature on spirituality among soldiers is relatively limited. However, a few studies indicate that soldiers frequently draw on spiritual resources in difficult times, with beneficial results (e.g., Stouffer et al., 1949/1965). For example, Benda, DiBlasio, and Pope (2006) studied Vietnam veterans and found that spiritual variables were predictive of longer term survival in the community without rehospitalization. Taken as a whole, this literature underscores the vital role of spiritually based resources in facilitating health and well-being and highlights another reason why the spiritual domain is relevant to the CSF initiative.

Spirituality Is a Source of Struggle Leading to Growth or Decline

Although empirical studies consistently indicate that spirituality serves as a key resource for individuals, especially in stressful circumstances, spirituality can also be linked to human problems. Over the course of their lives, people encounter major life stressors that affect them not only physically, psychologically, and socially but spiritually as well. These stressors can result in spiritual struggles—questions, conflicts, and tensions about matters of deepest significance within oneself, with other people, and/or with the divine (Exline & Rose, 2005; Pargament, Murray-Swank, Magyar, & Ano, 2005). These struggles are not necessarily problematic. Spiritual struggles have been associated with profound growth, according to some empirical investigations (e.g., Drescher, Smith, & Foy, 2007; Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). This growth may be predicated on several factors, including whether the individual is able to accept the reality of the current situation, access a network of support, make meaning out of the experience, draw on

spiritually based resources, reaffirm a sense of purpose, and engage in positive problem-solving actions (e.g., Kegan, 1982; Park, 2005; Pargament, 2007).

Growth, however, is not inevitable following struggles of the human spirit. Empirical studies of many samples, including veterans, have also shown that if individuals are unable to resolve their spiritual struggles, they are apt to experience declines in psychological, social, and physical functioning and even greater risk of mortality (e.g., Bryant & Astin, 2008; Fontana & Rosenheck, 2005). This pattern of findings suggests that spiritual struggles may be a fork in the road that leads to growth or decline depending on the individual and social response to those struggles. As a whole, these findings underscore the importance of establishing a program that helps members of the military anticipate and deal effectively with spiritual struggles.

Overview of the CSF Spiritual Dimension and Fitness Applications

Conceptualization of the Domain of the Human Spirit

To assist in its efforts to promote the development of the human spirit, the Army has adopted a conceptualization of the human spirit created by Sweeney et al. (2007). This model focuses on several interrelated psychological structures and processes that facilitate the growth of the individual's spirit: spiritual core, self-awareness, sense of agency, self-regulation, self-motivation, and social awareness. The model acknowledges that the development of an individual's human spirit is influenced by membership in various important social groups such as family, schools, faith, and culture. The Army, as an organization, is responsible for providing resources (e.g., chaplain corps) and opportunities (e.g., schools) to assist individuals in their quests to develop their spirit.

According to the Army's conceptualization, an individual's *spiritual core* forms the foundation of the human spirit and comprises an individual's most central values and beliefs concerning purpose and meaning in life, truths about the world, and vision for realizing one's full potential and purpose. Several factors are important to understanding and facilitating the development of the human spirit.

Self-awareness involves reflection and introspection in order to gain insights into life's pressing questions. These questions pertain to identity, purpose, meaning, truth in the world, being authentic, creating a life worth living, and fulfilling one's potential (Ford, 2007; Mannion, 2002; Maslow, 1970). Through self-awareness, an individual also shapes and develops the core self and gains an appreciation of how key values and beliefs influence daily behavior and the pursuit of a fulfilling life (Williamson, 1965).

Sense of agency refers to the individual's assumption of responsibility for the continuous journey to develop his or her spirit. This requires people to accept their shortcomings and imperfections and to realize that they are the primary authors of their lives (Maslow, 1970; Rogers, 1961). Building on a large body of theory and research

(e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2006; Tyler, 2001), this model specifies that the exercise of psychological autonomy enhances a sense of efficacy in the core self, the ability to develop a meaningful life vision, and the capacity to realize that vision (Sweeney et al., 2007).

Self-regulation involves the ability to understand and control one's emotions, thoughts, and behavior (Baumeister, 2005; Goleman, 1995; McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). Understanding the source of one's emotions empowers an individual to implement measures to control and/or harness them (see Algoe & Fredrickson, 2011, this issue). Likewise, understanding how patterns of thought influence perceptions, motivation, and behavior enables the individual to think more freely (Kegan, 1982; Maslow, 1970; Rogers, 1961). In addition, an understanding of the causes and the consequences of past emotional reactions and behaviors allows an individual to choose future behavior that is aligned with values, beliefs, and goals. Thus, self-regulation is a prerequisite to authentic behavior and the realization of the human spirit (Goleman, 1995; Mannion, 2002).

Self-motivation regarding the human spirit entails the expectancy that the individual's path will lead to the realization of his or her deepest aspirations (Reiss, 2000; Sweeney et al., 2007). This kind of motivation can fuel the development of the human spirit and provide people with a source of strength and hope in the face of adversity (Snyder, Feldman, Taylor, Schroeder, & Adams, 2000; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Sweeney et al. (2007) posited that this intrinsic motivation provides Army personnel with several qualities: the courage to behave in a moral and ethical manner, regardless of the circumstances; the strength to exercise values-based leadership; the resolve to persevere and bounce back from challenges and discomfort; and the desire to seek growth experiences to develop the spirit.

Social awareness refers to the realization that relationships play an important role in the development of the human spirit (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006). According to the Army's model, relationships with significant others (including deities, if one so believes) assist in the shaping of values and beliefs, in the search for truth in the world, in the discovery of purpose and direction in life, in the opportunity to transcend self-interest, and in the development of insights to fulfill one's potential (Baumeister, 2005; Sweeney et al., 2007). To harness the power of the developmental resources of relationships, an individual must be able to demonstrate respect, empathy, and basic trust toward others (Goleman, 1995). Particularly important is the recognition that other people have the right to hold different values, beliefs, and customs and that one must, without giving up one's own beliefs, show others due consideration and openness to alternate viewpoints (see Cacioppo, Reis, & Zautra, 2011, this issue). Given the diversity of the Army and the requirement to work in diverse cultural environments, the development of social awareness in all personnel becomes critically important.

CSF Human Spirit Education Program

Building on the Army's model of the human spirit, our team of psychologists has designed three tiers of education modules to facilitate the spiritual resilience of soldiers. The intent of the first tier is to enhance soldier's self-awareness of their spiritual core, including their essential values and beliefs, purpose, and meaning, and also to introduce them to the human spirit model. The intent of the second tier is to provide Army personnel access to spiritual resources to facilitate the development of the human spirit and to help them anticipate and deal with struggles of the spirit that they may encounter in their military service. The third tier is designed to assist soldiers in building greater social awareness to foster a sense of deep connectedness with other people and the world.

In the development of the human spirit education program, the designers were guided by several principles. First, whenever possible, the application is empirically based, drawing on aspects of spirituality that have been linked with strength, resilience, health, and well-being. Second, the program is respectful of the autonomy of soldiers and their "freedom to define the lens through which matters of spirit are defined, developed and displayed" (Dugal, 2009, p. 5). Third, the program is appreciative of diversity in soldiers' core values, beliefs, and practices; the program is geared to individual spiritual needs and preferences. Fourth, the program is designed to be relevant and useful; examples are drawn from the lives of fellow soldiers and tailored to the real-world challenges and demands of life in the military. Finally, the program encourages soldiers to actively engage the material through effort and persistence; it is computer delivered and interactive.

Soldiers will participate in the program after they have completed items in the Global Assessment Tool (GAT) that measure spiritual fitness (see Cornum, Matthews, & Seligman, 2011, this issue). To evaluate the effectiveness of this initiative, soldiers will once again complete the GAT after they have completed the human spirit education program (see Fravell, Nasser, & Cornum, 2011, this issue).

Tier 1: Building awareness of the self and the human spirit. The five education modules in Tier 1 focus on assisting soldiers to identify their core values and beliefs; identify their passions, skills, strengths, and weaknesses; determine what provides their lives with a sense of meaning and purpose; assess current life direction to build a meaningful and fulfilling life; and create a human spirit development plan. Each module starts with a soldier's compelling and impactful story and uses this story to facilitate reflection on his or her human spirit. For instance, the first module depicts a World War II veteran who is delivering a eulogy for a friend. The eulogy highlights the values and beliefs that characterized the friend both in life and in combat and also how the friend's life had meaning and impact. After this story, interactive pages help individuals craft their own eulogy. Subsequent interactive pages assist them in identifying the end states they want to

achieve in their lives and the values and beliefs that they want to define them.

In the second module, soldiers identify their strengths, weaknesses, passions, and talents. The third module helps personnel determine what provides meaning and a sense of purpose in their lives. The fourth module has individuals assess their current human spirit development plans and check to see how well their lives align with their values, purpose, and vision. In the fifth module, soldiers update their plans to develop their human spirit to reach fulfillment. At the end of each module, individuals can print out products they produced, save their work to their electronic portfolio for future reflection and to track their developmental progress, and receive a list of resources for further exploration. The intent of the modules is to assist in the development of the human spirit by promoting self-awareness and a sense of ownership in the spiritual journey.

Tier 2: Building awareness of resources to cultivate the human spirit. The education modules in Tier 2 are designed to help soldiers develop greater access to spiritual resources, particularly in response to the struggles of the human spirit they may face over the course of their careers in the Army. The first module introduces soldiers to the idea that stress can impact them not only psychologically, physically, and socially but spiritually as well. Drawing on the personal stories and experiences of soldiers as well as research findings, the module describes spiritual struggles as a "fork in the road" that leads to growth and resilience on the one side or to problems on the other. Soldiers are encouraged to anticipate spiritual struggles as a natural part of the journey of the human spirit. In subsequent modules, they are introduced to the following spirit-based resources that can help them resolve their struggles of the human spirit and grow in this domain: meaning-making, ritual, spiritual support, and contemplation/meditation.

The second module underscores the importance of having a way to make meaning out of difficult life situations. Various meaning-making strategies are described that help soldiers apply their core values to their lives. Soldiers are presented with various ways to make sense out of challenging life situations, such as interpreting negative situations as opportunities for testing and growth. To gain practice applying these meaning-making strategies, they listen to real-world examples of challenging military scenarios and are then asked how they might be able to make meaning of these situations.

The third module introduces soldiers to rituals as important tools that can help them live out their core values on a regular basis. Illustrative rituals are presented of soldiers transitioning from one role to another, connecting with loved ones, and coping with stress. Military personnel are then encouraged to create their own rituals.

The fourth module focuses on ways soldiers can seek out support for their human spirit. The module includes exercises in which personnel are asked to reflect on their current approaches to gaining spiritually based support and to identify new sources of encouragement, such as spiritual role models, music, nature, reading, or prayer. Military

personnel listen to examples of spiritually supportive activities that have proven valuable to fellow soldiers.

In the fifth module, soldiers are introduced to the value of contemplation as a way of of getting in touch with core values and finding greater meaning and purpose within themselves and the world. Meditation is described as one common form of contemplation. Myths and misconceptions about meditation are presented. Soldiers are then given the opportunity to learn about specific forms of mediation and their benefits for health, well-being, and effective functioning in the military. The module concludes with a meditative exercise, information that challenges common myths about meditation, and an introduction to meditation resources for those who want to pursue this resource further.

Tier 3: Building awareness of the human spirit of others. The final set of modules is still in development. It is designed to help soldiers build a deeper connection with other people and the world. Soldiers will be introduced to people from diverse backgrounds and walks of life and will be encouraged to find commonality in their experiences. They will also be given opportunities to learn about specific ethnic, cultural, or religious groups that are most unfamiliar to them or the source of greatest misunderstanding.

Conclusions

Research on the human spirit has dramatically increased over the past 25 years (Weaver, Pargament, Flannelly, & Oppenheimer, 2006). The findings have underscored the importance of the spiritual dimension to any program designed to facilitate resilience, health, and well-being. Nevertheless, efforts to integrate the spiritual dimension into programs of this kind are still in their early stages of development. Thus, the Army's commitment to incorporating the spiritual domain in its CSF program is especially innovative and noteworthy. Of course, the spiritual component of the CSF program is very much a work in progress. Questions far outnumber answers. How helpful will the human spiritual education program prove to be in the short term and in the long term? Is the program likely to enhance positive human attributes? Will it reduce the risks of serious problems, such as posttraumatic stress, suicidality, and stress-related physical symptoms? Will the value of the program vary by subgroups in the military? Will the program be problematic for some individuals? These are just a few of the exciting questions that await answers through process and outcome evaluations of the human spirit education program.

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