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Stress Management in the Nepali Army: Enhancing Personal Well-being for Professional Readiness

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ABSTRACT

This article critically examines the importance of stress management among personnel of the NA to enhance personal well-being for professional readiness. The central argument asserts that unmanaged stress arising from personal, organizational, and environmental domains undermines morale, discipline, and performance, while effective stress management enhances resilience, motivation, and professional efficiency. The study pursues the objectives of identifying the existing stressors within the NA personnel, their impact and practical strategies for stress management. This study adopts a literature- and policy-oriented review design grounded in the principles of military psychology and occupational stress specific to the NA. Findings reveal that stress among the NA personnel stems primarily from operational challenges, workplace environment, socio-economic conditions, and personal or family-related strains. Positive stress (eustress) makes a person alert, enhances the sense of urgency and increases performance, whereas negative stress (distress) leads to cognitive decline, emotional fatigue, and reduced professional performance. Active engagement of commanders at all levels, early intervention, and structured stress management measures can significantly mitigate such consequences. The study concludes that institutionalizing stress management measures within the NA is essential not only for individual welfare but also as a strategic tool for maintaining operational excellence, fostering unit cohesion, and ensuring a resilient mission-ready force.

Introduction

Military service is widely recognized as one of the most demanding professions, requiring personnel to perform under conditions of uncertainty, risk, and prolonged stress (Pande et al., 2024). Soldiers need exceptional physical endurance, mental resilience, and emotional stability, as they must continuously adapt to unpredictable operational, organizational and personal challenges (Boga, 2023). Within this context, stress management in the Nepali Army (NA) is not only a concern of individual welfare but also a strategic determinant of collective readiness and institutional effectiveness.

Stress is commonly defined as a physical, mental, and emotional response to internal or external pressures that exceed an individual's coping capacity (Iqra, 2024). In the military context, stressors emerge from multiple sources, such as prolonged deployments, combat exposure, resource constraints, hierarchical rigidity, and family separation (Briggs et al., 2020). For NA personnel, these challenges are magnified by frequent mobilizations during national emergencies, internal security duties, nature conservation, nation-building and peacekeeping operations etc. Soldiers are expected to act decisively and remain composed under extreme pressure, maintaining the critical importance of mental health.

In recent years, Nepal's socio-economic and political landscape has introduced additional sources of psychological strain. The ongoing situation following the Gen-Z movement, digitally mobilized youth protests advocating accountability and reform has created serious challenges for maintaining internal security and public order. The loss and damage resulting from the protests and their impact on the national economy will definitely cause further strain on both public and private lives. Although NA is constitutionally deployed only as a last resort, personnel need to remain mentally prepared for contingencies requiring disciplined restraint, impartiality, and cooperation with civil authorities. These circumstances underscore the need for emotional intelligence, patience, and psychological resilience at both individual and collective levels.

Unmanaged stress has the potential to impair judgment, erode morale, increase the risk of burnout, misconduct, and mental health disorders thereby, deteriorating operational performance and institutional reputation (Baquero et al., 2025). Conversely, a psychologically resilient force with well-managed stress can enhance adaptation, motivation, cohesion, and performance (Bekesiene et al., 2023). In this regard, much of global military literatures increasingly emphasize structured stress management and resilience-building programs, but there remains limited systematic synthesis of NA-specific stress literature and institutional responses. This article attempts to bridge the research gap by integrating NA-specific evidence with broader military psychology-related empirical studies. This paper argues that institutionalized stress management measures are essential to sustaining the NA's operational readiness because they safeguard well-being, strengthen resilience, and prevent stress-related performance decline in an era of complex security and societal transformation. This article employs qualitative approach to research based on literature and policy-oriented narrative review related mostly to military psychology and the NA-related documents.

Methodology

Relevant literature and policy documents were assessed through Google Scholar, PubMed, Research Gate, defence repositories, and NA publications. The review focused on secondary sources published mainly between 2000 and 2025 A.D. that discussed military stress, resilience, well-being, and organizational factors. Literature lacking clear relevance to military occupational stress was excluded. Findings were synthesized thematically to link psychological evidence with institutional practice and policy.

Conceptual Understanding of Stress

Definition and Nature of Stress

Stress is a multidimensional physiological and psychological response that takes place when individuals perceive a situation as threatening, demanding, or exceeding their coping capacity (Ghasemi et al., 2024). It is the wear and tear of the body and mind resulting from exposure to internal or external stressors, creating a gap between expectation and reality, which is an inevitable part of daily life (Charles et al., 2013). It arises from both real and imaginary demands and can be manifested in varying intensities depending on a person’s personality, experience, coping mechanisms, and social support network. The diagram shows the stepwise cognitive appraisal of how stress takes place.

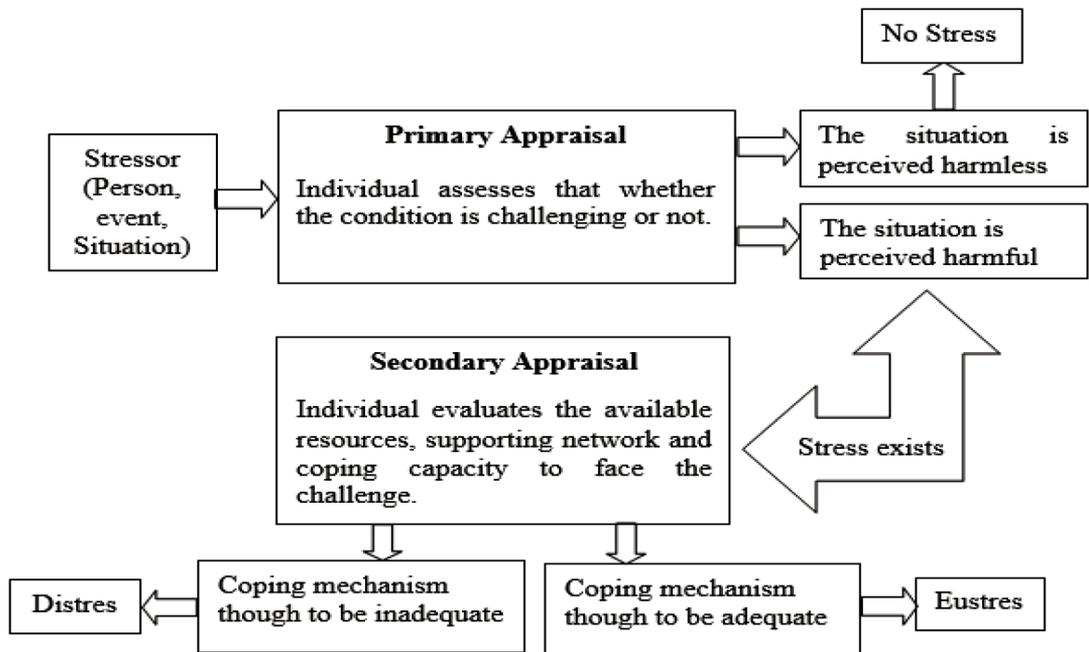


Figure 1. Cognitive appraisal of the stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

From a cognitive appraisal perspective, as shown in Figure 1, stress develops through an evaluative process in which individuals first assess whether a situation is benign, challenging, or threatening and then evaluate their capacity to cope with it. When adequate resources match perceived demands, stress may take the form of eustress, enhancing alertness, motivation, and performance. When coping resources are insufficient, distress emerges, resulting in adverse psychological, physiological, and behavioural consequences (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Prolonged exposure to distress causes sustained demands on both mind and body, increasing vulnerability to fatigue, emotional exhaustion, anxiety, depression, and stress-related illnesses, including suicidal tendencies (Salleh, 2008). In military life, stress often represents a psychological transition between perceived safety and survival, commonly activating

instinctive responses such as *fight, flight, or freeze* (Kozłowska et al., 2015). Understanding this phenomenon is essential for designing effective stress management interventions that address both perception and coping capacity.

Types of Stress

Stress can be classified by its impact, duration, intensity, and source (Tamang, 2022). Based on impact, *eustress* is a positive form that enhances motivation, performance, and adaptability, whereas *distress* has detrimental effects on physical and psychological well-being (Selye, 1984). Duration and intensity shape *acute stress* which arises from short-term challenges such as combat exposure or sudden deployments, while *episodic stress* results from repeated acute episodes leading to irritability, fatigue, and conflict and *chronic stress* develops from prolonged exposure to persistent demands or unresolved issues, often contributing to depression, burnout, or post-traumatic stress disorder (Chu et al., 2025). Furthermore, stress can be classified by sources such as *work-related, relationship, environmental, psychological, financial and health-related* each influencing individual performance, and overall operational readiness (Tamang, 2022).

Response to Stress

Stress is the taxing effort of a person’s physical, mental, and emotional responses to a threatening situation termed a stressor. The intensity of the stress response goes through different stages as described in three stage General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) model (Selye, 1984) as presented below.

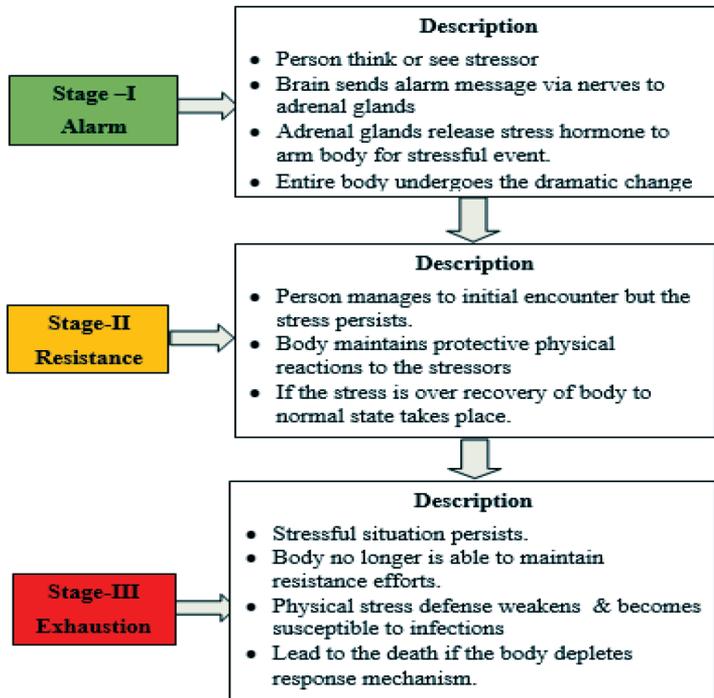


Figure 2. General Adaption Syndrome Model of Stress (Selye, 1984).

Coping mechanisms are behavioural and cognitive strategies individuals use to manage stressors that threaten their psychological balance (Algorani & Gupta, 2025). Effective coping entails adaptive and purposeful responses to stress. Constructive mechanisms include sharing experiences, problem-solving, engaging in music, or seeking social support, which enhance resilience. Conversely, destructive coping methods such as alcohol abuse, self-harm, withdrawal, or denial can intensify stress and impair personal and professional functioning. Individual and collective coping strategies are briefly described here.

Individual Coping Strategies

Soldiers utilize both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping approaches. Problem-focused coping seeks to modify the source of stress through planning, task prioritization and skill improvement, whereas emotion-focused coping regulates emotional distress through acceptance, mindfulness, or spiritual practices (Schoenmakers et al., 2015). A problem-solving coping strategy enhances psychological well-being and operational performance. Within the Nepali context, spirituality, cultural values, and family ties play critical roles in sustaining morale and emotional strength, reflecting the country's collectivist traditions (Gurung et al., 2024).

Collective Coping

Social support serves as a vital protective factor against stress (Hostinar & Gunnar, 2015). Strong unit cohesion, camaraderie, and peer support promote resilience and reduce post-deployment maladjustment. In the NA, collective practices such as group exercises, team sports, and collective engagement foster mutual support and shared responsibility, enhancing both morale and mission effectiveness. Strong bonding serves as an informal but powerful mechanisms of psychological stability during demanding operations.

Prevailing Stressors among NA Personnel

In alignment with the objectives of the study, evidence from literature related to military psychology and NA-related studies were synthesized to identify the causes of stress affecting NA personnel. The prevailing stressors are classified into three categories: *personal*, *organizational* and *environmental* as per the theme of the narrative-integrative literature and policy-oriented review. The succeeding paragraphs present a brief description of each stressor category and its interplay to ensure that the findings remain conceptually grounded and supported by existing scholarship.

Personal stressors

Personal stressors arise from both internal and external factors that influence an individual's emotional and psychological stability (Zhang et al., 2025). Internal stressors consist of personality traits, perfectionist tendencies, excessive ambition, and maladaptive coping behaviours that increase vulnerability to stress. Personnel with high achievement orientation may suffer frustration when expectations exceed available opportunities, leading to anxiety or burnout. External stressors encompass family-related pressures, financial difficulties and discouragement stemming from unfulfilled career aspirations or limited recognition. Extended deployments and frequent separation from family often result in loneliness and emotional exhaustion. During peacetime, personal stress may arise from lifestyle imbalances, unmet

professional ambitions, and challenges in maintaining family relationships, while during conflict periods, it intensifies due to uncertainty, threats to life or the loss of co-workers (Tamang, 2022)

Organizational Stressors

Organizational stressors are embedded within the Army's structural, administrative, and command systems (Rus et al., 2022). The commanding officer's vision, professionalism, communication style, and ethical standards greatly influence the work climate. Leadership that prioritizes authority over empathy may inadvertently heighten anxiety, discourage open communication and diminish morale. Other contributing factors include rigid hierarchy, demanding workloads, resource constraints, limited welfare provisions, and inconsistencies in promotion or reward systems. Soldiers may also experience tension from negative peer interactions, lack of teamwork, or conflicting environments that erode cohesion. In peacetime, unclear career progression, administrative overload and high-performance expectations, are major stress triggers. While in conflict periods, resource scarcity, operational pressure, and ambiguous instructions amplify organizational strain.

Environmental stressors

Environmental stressors are external factors that challenge soldiers' adaptation and endurance. NA personnel frequently operate in adverse and hazardous terrains, including mountainous, flood-prone, fire-affected, and conflict-ridden areas (Baniya, 2024). Inhospitable weather, poor infrastructure, and the risk of natural disasters impose additional physical, and psychological burdens. Prolonged exposure to such environments can lead to fatigue, sleep disturbances, and decreased cognitive efficiency. Moreover, the misuse of social media platforms has emerged as a stressor, fuelling misinformation and disinformation that extend into professional life (Muhammed & Mathew, 2022). Peacetime stress is often linked to lifestyle issues, limited leisure, and family separation, while conflict environments introduce acute threats, uncertainty, and trauma exposure. Following the Gen Z protests in Nepal, for example, military personnel faced heightened stress due to operational alertness, public scrutiny, and the psychological burden of maintaining stability during volatile civil movement situations, demanding additional emotional restraint, discipline and legal adherence.

Interplay of Stressors

These stressors—personal, organizational, and environmental—rarely act in isolation.

. Rather, they interact in cumulative and reinforcing ways that multiply the impact. An individual may simultaneously experience family concerns, leadership pressure, and environmental adversity, creating a compounding effect that diminishes motivation, morale, and unit cohesion. Charles et al. (2013) mention that simultaneous exposure to multiple stressors significantly undermines team performance and resilience.

Prevalence of Stress in NA

Like in other militaries, NA personnel are not free from stress-related psychological burdens. Evidence shows that prevalence varies with research design and the time elapsed since the conflict. A cross-sectional study conducted by the Nepalese Army Institute of Health Sciences in 2012 among two randomly selected battalions of No. 10 Brigade (Special Forces) reported that 48.2% of personnel experiencing above moderate levels of combat exposure, with 21.9%

meeting PTSD criteria and 20.9% reporting depressive symptoms even after six years of the peace process (Rawal et al., 2017). A later random survey of 300 security personnel with similar operational history identified a lower PTSD prevalence of 9%, fifteen years after the ceasefire (Rawal et al., 2021), indicating either gradual recovery or methodological and disclosure differences.

Complementing this, Tamang (2022), using a cross-sectional survey of 500 NA personnel across 63 districts, reported 3.8% suicidal ideation. Reported stressors included family problems (32%), workload (23%), career concerns (12%), training (5%), promotion/posting (4%), and commander behaviour (2%). Among family-related stressors, financial challenges (50%) and domestic problems (28%) predominated. Collectively, these findings reveal that stress in the NA is persistent, multifactorial, and shaped by personal, organizational, and environmental pressures, reinforcing the need for systematic stress-management and longitudinal monitoring rather than episodic intervention.

Impact of the Stress

Stress among the NA personnel exerts far-reaching and complex effects across individual, interpersonal, and institutional dimensions. While positive stress can promote adaptive growth, alertness and progress enhancing resilience, and performance under pressure, negative stress produces detrimental outcomes that undermine personality development, health, interpersonal relations, performance, and the overall organizational climate (Selye, 1984).

Health Implications

Sustained stress activates the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, resulting in hormonal imbalances that impair immunity, sleep regulation, and cardiovascular health (Herman et al., 2016) which act on multiple organ systems to redirect energy resources to meet real or anticipated demand. The HPA stress response is driven primarily by neural mechanisms, invoking corticotrophin releasing hormone (CRH). Among military personnel, such physiological strain leads to fatigue, reduced physical endurance, and heightened vulnerability to illness.

Effects on Personality Development

Persistent psychological strain hampers healthy personality growth, fostering cynicism, emotional instability, and reduced self-esteem (Chen, 2023). For younger soldiers, repeated exposure to high-stress conditions without sufficient coping mechanisms can erode confidence, discipline, and leadership potential core traits of military professionalism.

Degradation of Interpersonal Relationships

Stress adversely affects communication, empathy, and trust among co-workers. Soldiers under heavy pressure may display irritability, withdrawal, or aggression, weakening camaraderie and mutual support (Baquero et al., 2025) with a focus on the mediating role of psychological distress and the moderating role of psychological flexibility. A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 334 full-time male hospitality workers. Using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). Such interpersonal breakdowns reduce cohesion, morale, and collective decision-making effectiveness Behavioural Couple Therapy (BCT) includes interventions that may help to improve PTSD, such as increasing positive behavioral exchanges and improving communication. Studies have yet to examine whether BCT, which has demonstrated efficacy

for improving substance-related outcomes, is efficacious for reducing PTSD. We conducted a secondary analysis of a randomized clinical trial comparing individually based treatment (IBT).

Decline in Job Performance

Perceptual and cognitive impairments are among the most immediate impacts of stress. Diminished concentration, slower reaction time, and reduced decision accuracy degrade tactical judgment and responsiveness during military operations (Pande et al., 2024). Prolonged exposure to stress severely undermines mission performance and safety.

Deterioration of Organizational Climate

Distress fosters indiscipline, absenteeism, burnout, corroding morale, and professional standards (Rus et al., 2022). It creates toxic work environments characterized by mistrust, dissatisfaction, and reduced organizational commitment.

Emergence of Workplace Violence and Misconduct

Excessive stress combined with destructive coping behaviours such as alcohol misuse or aggression can escalate into workplace conflict, violence, or misconduct (Baquero et al., 2025). Such incidents tarnish the Army's reputation and endanger civil-military relations, particularly during peacekeeping or humanitarian operations.

Stress Management Practices in the NA

The NA has implemented comprehensive stress management measures to enhance the individual well-being and maintain operational readiness. Recognizing the multifaceted nature of military stressors, these initiatives operate at individual, unit, and institutional levels, integrating psychosocial support, unit cohesion, physical fitness, and welfare schemes.

At the individual level, personnel are encouraged to participate in sports, physical training, and recreational tours alongside spiritual and motivational sessions delivered by military experts, civilian professionals, and unit priests. These practices reinforce physical fitness, emotional regulation, and promote mental health. Welfare initiatives, festival celebrations, leave facilities, and family-support schemes further help to maintain work-life balance.

At the unit level, regular counselling is institutionalized through standardized formats administered by commanders or counselling experts, enabling early recognition of distress. Collective activities such as "*happy hour*" programs strengthen morale, peer support, and unit cohesion.

At the institutional level, mobile mental-health teams incorporating the Primary Psychiatric Training Module (PPTM) deliver awareness programs and counselling. Welfare schemes such as scholarships, subsidized loans, free medical care, and educational access address socio-economic stressors. The provision of tele-counselling extends psychosocial support to the force across the country.

However, despite strong institutional initiatives, stress management coverage remains uneven. Mobile teams generally visit units only once annually, meaning not all personnel receive awareness or counselling exposure. Awareness of tele-services is limited, and specialist

staffing within the Psychological Study and Counselling Branch remains insufficient for the entire organization. Systematic monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are also still evolving. These gaps suggest that the NA's framework for stress management is appreciable in design, but requires expanded reach, frequency, and specialist capacity to ensure consistent and equitable mental-health support across the organization.

Personal Wellbeing for Professional Readiness

Personal Wellbeing

Personal well-being is a multidimensional construct that extends beyond the mere absence of illness or distress, encompassing physical health, psychological stability, emotional resilience, social connectedness, purpose, and the ability to function effectively in one's environment (Gautam et al., 2024). Psychological well-being specifically includes self-acceptance, mastery, personal growth, life purpose, and meaningful social relationships (Clarke et al., 2001). In military contexts, personal well-being translates into being physically fit, mentally alert, emotionally balanced, socially supported and morally grounded, enabling soldiers to respond effectively to stressors, recover from challenges, and maintain optimal functioning under operational pressure.

Professional Readiness

Professional readiness in the Army reflects the capacity of individuals and units to execute assigned tasks effectively under volatile and unpredictable operational circumstances (Alim et al., 2023). Readiness depends not only on equipment and technical competence, but also on the human dimensions of performance, such as psychological preparedness, physical fitness, emotional resilience and social cohesion. For the NA, professional readiness encompasses preparedness for diverse operational tasks ranging from national security to disaster response, nature conservation, sports, cultural preservation, nation-building and United Nations peacekeeping operations while maintaining discipline, situational awareness, sound decision-making, and team cohesion under stressful situations.

Personal Wellbeing as a Foundation for Professional Readiness

Personal well-being and professional readiness are mutually reinforcing. Military personnel with profound well-being, good health, emotional stability, and social support demonstrate higher motivation, concentration, decision-making speed, and resilience in operations (Szivak & Kraemer, 2015). Conversely, compromised well-being, caused by fatigue, stress, sleep deprivation, emotional strain, or social isolation impairs performance, discipline, and adaptability, thereby undermining operational readiness. Military research emphasizes that mastery of one's environment and meaningful interpersonal relationships are essential for adaptive functioning under stress. Organizational studies similarly highlight that human performance, including mental and physical health, is a central determinant of operational readiness (Bekesiene et al., 2023)

Stress Management for Wellbeing and Readiness

Effective stress management serves as a vital link between the personal well-being of the NA personnel and their professional readiness for duty (Alim et al., 2023). When stress remains unaddressed, it gradually diminishes physical endurance, cognitive effectiveness and emotional

stability thereby weakening operational performance (Chen, 2023). Studies further indicate that excessive perceived stress neutralizes the positive outcomes of psychological resilience on military functioning. Within the NA, where personnel frequently operate in demanding environments and undertake diverse roles, systematic stress management is therefore central to sustaining performance and morale.

A counterargument suggests that prioritising stress management may risk diverting attention from core military competencies and discipline (Bekesiene et al., 2023). However, emerging military psychology literature demonstrates that resilience training, emotional regulation, and social support systems reinforce, but do not replace the professional standards and mission performance (Szivak & Kraemer, 2015). Thus, the NA personnel who are mentally supported, physically prepared, and socially connected will be better equipped to sustain performance under pressure, reinforcing both individual well-being and the operational readiness of the Nepali Army as a whole.

Commander's Role in Stress Management

Commanders play a critical role in identifying, preventing, and mitigating stress within their units, directly influencing morale, discipline, and operational readiness. Effective command creates a supportive environment where soldiers feel valued, understood and psychologically safe, forming the foundation for both personal well-being, and professional performance (Boga, 2023).

A key responsibility of commanders is to establish a supportive command climate that fosters trust, fairness, and mutual respect while discouraging a toxic environment and prioritizing welfare and morale (Campoverde, 2025). Commanders must lead by example, demonstrating patience, confidence, and healthy coping behaviours in challenging circumstances, reinforcing norms of resilience and discipline. Daily monitoring of soldiers' behaviour enables early identification of stress indicators such as fatigue, withdrawal, irritability, or performance decline, allowing timely intervention through counselling, rest, or peer support before issues escalate.

Commanders can encourage open communication, creating a culture where soldiers can express concerns without fear and receive empathetic responses. Promoting team cohesion through group activities, shared mission ownership, and cooperative engagement strengthens unit resilience (Arifin, 2024). Coordinating access to counselling or clinical psychologists and welfare schemes ensures that personnel have adequate support. Furthermore, recognizing and rewarding effort reinforces positive behaviour, while stress management awareness and coping strategies enhance adaptive capacity (Boga, 2023). In sum, maintaining an appropriate work-rest balance prevents burnout, ensuring sustainable operational effectiveness.

Through proactive leadership, empathy and structured support, commanders in the NA can serve as the first line of defence against stress, safeguarding the well-being of personnel, and maintaining professional readiness under the demanding conditions of military service.

Recommendations

Effective stress management within the NA requires a multidimensional, comprehensive, and institutional approach that integrates clear policy direction, active command engagement, and

the application of contemporary stress management practices. A systematic stress management strategy should emphasise early identification, prevention, and timely support (Pande et al., 2024). At the unit level, trained psychosocial support teams can assist in screening persons experiencing stress, facilitating peer counselling, and coordinating referrals to medical and mental-health services when necessary. In parallel, family welfare initiatives and structured post-deployment counselling will help mitigate the cumulative pressures arising from operational duties and prolonged separation from home.

Commanders at all levels remain pivotal in shaping a psychologically healthy work environment. Leadership that models ethical conduct, discipline, cohesion, and mutual trust contributes to a constructive organizational climate to preventing warriors from becoming worriers. Approaches such as the buddy system enable early recognition and reporting of stress symptoms, while supportive attitudes toward spiritual and psychosocial care can reduce stigma and facilitate help-seeking behaviour (Yogi, 2018). Ensuring that these measures are implemented in a gender-sensitive and inclusive manner further contributes to morale and psychological safety.

In addition, the adoption of *evidence-based stress management practices*, including physical exercise, yoga, mindfulness, breathing exercises, meditation, and progressive muscle relaxation, will enhance emotional regulation and resilience. *The Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (D2t)* informed PLEASE strategy (PL-Treat Physical Illness, E-Balance Eating, A-Avoid Mood-Altering Substances, S-Balance Sleep, and E-Regular Exercise) provides a practical framework linking physical care with mental well-being (Linehan, 2015). Encouraging these practices within training and routine military life may strengthen psychological endurance, teamwork, and mission effectiveness, thereby contributing to the sustained operational readiness of the NA.

Conclusion

Effective stress management is fundamental to sustaining both personal well-being and professional readiness among personnel of the NA. Stress arises from interrelated personal, organizational, and environmental factors that demand structured and timely interventions at the individual, unit, and institutional levels (Chu et al., 2025) and physiological and behavioral changes in response to exposure to stressors constitute the stress response. A stress response is mediated through a complex interplay of nervous, endocrine, and immune mechanisms, activating the sympathetic-adreno-medullar (SAM). Eustress can degrade cognitive functioning, emotional regulation, interpersonal relationships, and ultimately, operational performance (Salleh, 2008). Conversely, sound management initiatives, implemented in a timely manner, strengthen resilience, motivation, and mission efficiency, helping soldiers remain mentally focused, physically prepared, and emotionally stable.

Within this context, commander-led initiatives, psychosocial support services, recreational engagement, and culturally grounded practices contribute to a psychologically secure and cohesive organizational climate. This philosophy is consistent with the statement articulated by Yogi (2018): “Exercise for the body, Pranayama for the soul, Meditation for the mind, and selfless service for the purity of the heart,” which highlights the importance of nurturing the physical, mental, emotional, as well as spiritual dimensions of the military profession.

Integrating such holistic practices with contemporary psychological strategies promotes sustainable coping capacity, strengthens adaptability, and reinforces a disciplined and resilient force. In doing so, the NA is better positioned to protect the well-being of its personnel while ensuring a high level of operational readiness to meet present and emerging security challenges.

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