METHODS OF DEVELOPING PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE IN THE MILITARY

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Abstract: In the report it is given the definition of the people’s resilience from the point of view of the psychology. There are analyzed the characteristics of the resilience, many of which can be improved and strengthened. The different ways to build resilience within individuals there are offered. In this connection the basis of the report is the conducted research with the cadets from two military academies in Romania and Bulgaria. The research shows the different methods used of developing psychological resilience by the two populations investigated and the differences between the Romanian students and the Bulgarian ones. The results from the research could be very useful for military specialists, leaders, lecturers for improving military training and psychological preparation of military personnel.

Keywords: PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE, METHOD, RESEARCH, MILITARY PERSONNEL, TWO INVESTIGATED GROUPS.

1. Introduction

Different problems in the society quite often provoke increasing of the stress and tension in people’s life. It is a fact that 21 century is fraught with potential and real threats for people’s lives and health. Uncertainty, instability, risk, inconsistency, unpredictability and fragility are becoming part of our routine, being permanent features of the human life. [1] That’s why to survive every man has to be ready to overcome with extreme situations and to maintain the own psychic health. One of the important factors in this direction is the psychological resilience of the people when they face difficulties and challenges.

The term of resilience enjoys current use in today’s world and it is applied to various fields. We speak of moral, physical, social, communitarian, cultural and ecological resilience, etc. The word “resilience” comes from the Latin word rescindere, which means to annul or to resiliate a convention, an act. Although the term resilience is used in various fields, it appears that the universally accepted definition that easily transcends the various areas of spreading associates resilience with the ability of a system to absorb the changes and reorganize itself, in order to keep the ability to maintain the same running, the same structure and identity of the system. Today there are several resilience research institutes in Netherlands, Resilience Universities in USA and Germany and even a doctoral school at University of South Dakota. In Quebec, the most well-known analyst in the field is the pedo-psychiatrist Michael Lemay, and in France, Boris Cyrulnik, disciple of John Bowlby, specialist in this field, renowned for his researches on human and animal behaviors.

According to the American Association of Psychology, resilience is “the process of adapting to adversity, trauma, tragedy or when faced to significant sources of stress”. [5] Another definition refers to “the quality which determines a system to come back to the initial form or to the initial position after a mechanical intervention or, the recovery from depression, disease, etc”. Resilience, as a possibility of being competent despite the exposal to severe or chronical adversity, seems simple in the beginning, but the definitions offered by the specialists do not cover all the meanings of this concept. Most of them, they have a common idea: passing over traumatic situations and continuing the normal life, without bad effect on the future. Resilience is the capacity for individuals to not only to “bounce back”, “survive” or “cope successfully” in response to adversity, uncertainty, change or risk, but to do so “robustly” and recover more “quickly”. Resilience is not a static state that is inherent in you nor is it a transient phenomenon. Rather, it is a dynamic process that can be cultivated in most individuals. It is not an inborn issue, but everyone is borned with the potential and the possibility to discover and to develop it. This thing is dependable on every persons’ capacity to learn how to change his or hers behavior. For some people, overcoming bad situations represents ways of learning and assimilating new experiences, but also the beginning for the construction of a personal resilience which can help them not to be affected too much by problems when they will meet again with them. It is in everyone’s power to learn how to become stronger, how to keep the energy and the inner strength. Everyone can learn how to be resilient and how to cope with adversity.

Resilience, often used as a substitute for the concept of "protective factors" was researched and studied in conjunction with the traumatic events of life. The enquiries about who are the resilient people and how do they behave are complicated matters. There is no profile of a resilient personality or of a resilient personality, but there are a few characteristics common to all resilient people. For example - a resilient person is able to overcome various psychopathological manifestations such as severe depression, constant sadness, addictive behaviors, without losing the joy of life. These people find strength in their own resources, managing to pass safely over adversity, to make things work in their favor. Such examples illustrate the survivors, those with an extraordinary ability to adapt, to withstand difficulties. These "survivors" are no more different from ordinary people. The only difference is that they are aware of these abilities which help them pass more easily over negative situations, they know how to use them and call them when needed. This is the difference between being resilient and not being. We can all be…but depends on us to discover those traits that help us cope with adversity and find the positive meaning in the negative events of our life. A person cannot be called resilient if he/she doesn’t face difficult moments to lead it to develop skills to overcome and to recover faster from them.

According to many specialists, people are able to learn the steps needed to become more resistant. Researchers have identified several characteristics of resilience, many of which can be improved and strengthened. The most important are:

a) Resilience involves exposure to adversity. A person cannot be considered resilient in the absence of a significant stressor which acts to change the previous state of comfort in one of uncertainty or insecurity.
b) Resilience involves both a biological component and an environmental one. Today, new studies have revealed complex interactions between individual and external factors that influence the likelihood of this feature. Resilience does not occur to a person, it is obtained combining the biological and psychological traits, plus the role of the environment. In the first study on this topic in 2004 realized by Kim-Cohen, he concluded that the environment can alter the biological components. In our opinion there is no need for anyone to possess this trait from birth because everything can be learnt and is routed by the changes that occur at both the interpersonal level and at the external one. In the threshold of the events from 11 September 2001 or after the Hurricane Katrina disaster, many people have demonstrated behavior that illustrates this skill-resilience. While some people seem to be more resistant than others, we must recognize that psychological resilience is a dynamic and not a permanent capacity. [4]

We can generalize that the resilient people have:

- an attitude like “where is will, there is a way”;
- the ability to “jump over trouble” and recover easier;
- the ability to cling tightly to things that provide relief;
- the ability to see small windows as opportunities;
- the ability to manage different types of situations;
- a wide comfort zone;
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training. Behavior - as a complex expression of a person’s personality is dictated by environmental conditions, and soldiers must withstand the impact that some events may have on them. Not only high-intensity conflicts can cause disruptions in the military behavior, but also the peacekeeping or humanitarian actions. It is not necessary for a soldier to take part in the atrocities that happen on the battlefield. It is enough to be a witness and the event may be classified as one with a negative impact on the personality.

All soldiers returning from a combat mission face a paradox. Behaviors and emotions that have kept them alive on the battlefield may not be appropriate in the relation with family and friends. Returning from a harsh environment, physically and mentally demanding, with dangerous and chaotic circumstances where there is no family support, to the normal life - can be considered a very difficult stage. The intervention of specialized people with the capacity to help them readapt to behaviors outside the battlefield must be taken into consideration. Reintegration can be immediate, but there are cases where it took a few weeks or several months for the military to resume their normal life and activities with the family. In this connection we can conclude that the readaptation is consequence from the psychological preparation.

Like a good practice we could point the program called “BATTLEMIND” which is developed from the Department of Military Psychiatry of the Research Institute “Walter Reed” to help soldiers to reintegrate into their normal life after completing the mission in a theater of operations. The objective is to restore priorities and ensure the safety of soldiers and their families. The program outlines key skills learned in combat, showing how they can be used to help soldiers in the transition to home. [2]

The key factor in BATTLEMIND training is that all soldiers have the skills necessary to successfully reintegrate when they return from a mission, but it requires an improvement of them. The role of this program is to intervene to highlight the way in which problems can be avoided when soldiers, in a few hours, leave the battlefield and return to their families. BATTLEMIND is an acronym, in which each letter stands for a different set of coping skills that would help soldiers survive in combat but could prove problematic when carried over to life at home. With the aim of building psychological resiliency and thereby reducing combat stress reactions the Battlemind training is applied in different armies. [3]

2. Research, results and discussions.

This paper is focused on psychological resilience of the military personnel and tries to explain its implication by discovering the similarities and differences between the cadets from Land Forces Academy “Nicolae Balsecescu” in Sibiu, Romania and “Vasil Levski” National Military University in Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria regarding the methods that they use to increase their psychical strength.

In this research, the authors started with the idea that intellectual and emotional demands imposed by the military environment requires that every soldier have specific training and mental strength to help him face the many events that may occur. There is a unique way to cope with difficult situations because people respond differently and are differently affected by what happens to them, so that every person uses different ways to increase his or hers resistance. In the military there is always happening something unexpected… no one can know with certainty when or where the next battle will take place. With the mission to protect the nation, the military personnel must be ready to act at any time, to respond to a broad spectrum of threats. This requires a thorough preparation, both physical and mental. A good soldier must know, besides his mission and the opponent’s one, to manage his feelings and reactions to a variety of events. Thus, military training and its organization require a high level of importance. The battlefield’s requirements are varied, so it is important for every soldier to be aware of the importance of developing mental strength in order not to be affected by the emergence of negative feelings which may affect the ability to concentrate. There are many ways you can develop your mental strength. The role of this paper is to discover and emphasize which are the methods of developing psychological resilience most frequently used in the military, highlighting their importance and applicability for this domain.

The participants in the research were 180 cadets from two countries: Romania and Bulgaria. The goal was to identify the most frequently used methods of developing psychological resilience by the two populations investigated and the differences between the Romanian students and the Bulgarian ones. For this it was used as a research method - the investigation based on a questionnaire and as a research tool - the questionnaire which consists of 45 items. Each item is an indicator for one of the six dimensions on which we have relied on to discover the methods preferred by the students. (fig. 1) To make an interpretation of the results, it was used SPSS program (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) - the most known in statistical analyses of dates.

![Figure 1. Dimensions of the questionnaire](image)

By analyzing the results of the research, there were made some eloquent conclusions about used methods from Bulgarian and Romanian cadets for developing their psychological resilience. (gr. 1)
In the following pages there will be presented the main arguments which helped to prove the truth value of the initial assumptions made.

1st Hypothesis: There are significant differences between the Romanian cadets and the cadets from Bulgaria regarding the methods that they use to increase their psychological resilience.

This hypothesis was confirmed. Analyzing the data obtained, we concluded that Bulgarian subjects believe in a greater extent that, in order to develop their resilience, seeking for the support is very important and necessary and they rely on it when they feel the need. In terms of personal development, Romanian subjects use in a greater extent than the Bulgarians methods involving personal development of their own skills, both physical and mental. In conclusion, both Romanian and Bulgarian subjects rely first on the support of others to improve their mental strength. Thus, despite the differences caused by the country of origin, both girls and boys in the military prefer the same methods that help them cope with negative situations and overcome trauma. (gr. 2)

2nd Hypothesis: There are significant differences caused by the nationality in the methods used to increase the resilience of the subjects investigated.

Romanian subjects, to increase their mental strength rely on: their family’s support in difficult times, prayer, self-suggestion, on analyzing the problems without jumping to conclusions. Bulgarian students, however, rely on: connecting with nature when they need inner peace in difficult situations, on the support of friends, setting small, realistic goals that can be solved step by step, self-training in various fields, as well as on interaction and communication with others, focusing on good things in people they interact with. (gr. 3)
Also, there are some differences between Romanian and Bulgarian subjects regarding the need to use methods to increase their psychological resistance: Romanian military students need in a greater extent such methods compared with the Bulgarian students. (gr.4)

**3rd Hypothesis**: There are significant differences caused by gender, area of origin and year of study in the methods that the subjects use to increase their resilience.

This last hypothesis was also confirmed because, after analyzing the data obtained it resulted that girls, to face various adverse situations and to recover quickly from traumatic experiences. They need in greater extent methods to increase their own psychological resilience than boys. (gr. 5)

Female subjects rely on family’s support to overcome negative periods, connection with nature, on prayer and religious rituals in comparison to male subjects who believe that the acquisition of experience, the use of humor as a way to maintain a strong morale during difficult times and maintaining a realistic thinking will help them develop ways to improve psychological resilience. (gr. 6)
Both Bulgarian boys and Romanian girls use, primarily, cognition control techniques to develop their mental strength. Romanian girls that have been investigated are based first of all on finding positive meanings in stressful situations, seeking family’s support to overcome difficult moments, connecting with nature to overcome difficult periods, the support of friends, prayer and religious rituals, keeping a broader perspective on the situation, the support of colleagues to maintain psychological balance, cultivating positive emotions, setting small and realistic goals, the help of some people that have the ability to help and they rely also on relaxation of the body and mind. Bulgarian boys use humor as a way to maintain a high morale in difficult times, they try to stay as grounded in reality as they can. However, they believe that the acquisition of more experience and the communication with people around are important to improve their ability to cope with various stressful situations.

The cadets from the first and third years of study use methods that are part of cognitions management (controlled breathing techniques to master strong emotions, self-suggestion, self-confidence, joy), cognitive control (finding positive vision in situations that seem to have only negative meanings) mental training (keeping a broad perspective on a situation), personal development (connecting with nature, meditation, development of critical thinking). In contrast, cadets in the second year focus on prayer to face easier the hardships of life, and when they need to control their own strong emotions they use controlled breathing techniques.

Regarding the environment of origin of the subjects, there are some differences between the preferred methods to increase psychological resilience. It was noticed that the investigated subjects from urban areas use in a greater extent than those from rural areas- methods that involve cognitive control.

After the interpretation of the results, it could be drawn some conclusions regarding the need of a specialist’s intervention who can help the students develop ways of actions in order to overcome negative situations. The Romanian students investigated consider that they do not need as much as the Bulgarian ones this kind of help. They think it is easier to pass over difficult situations with a negative impact on the psychic without the implication of a specialist.

Romanian girls use in a greater extent than Romanian boys cognitions’ management techniques (cultivation of positive emotions, recreation), cognitive control’s techniques (identifying positive meanings in personal experiences, setting achievable goals), seeking support in difficult situations (family’s support, friends, colleagues) and personal development (request for help, connection with nature, prayers and religious rituals). (gr. 7)
Analyzing the results of the research, we observed some differences regarding the methods that Bulgarian students use to increase their psychological resilience. The most important one is that Bulgarian boys use in a greater extent than Bulgarian girls cognitive control’s techniques. (gr. 8)

The differences between the three years of study are significant: Romanian cadets from 1st and 3rd year use personal development and cognitions’ management techniques to increase their ability to cope with adverse situations, unlike the Bulgarian students from 4th and 5th year of study who rely on mental training and cognitions’ control techniques. The Romanian students from 1st and 3rd year of study use self-relaxation techniques to remove the effects of stress to a greater extent than those from the 2nd year. Also, they rely on identifying the counter productive personality traits and negative emotions, on expressing emotions and identifying strengths. Comparing to them, the Bulgarian students, to face adverse events, try to keep a larger perspective of situations using meditation techniques to maintain mental balance and they are concerned to develop their critical thinking in order to achieve a more efficient analysis of the situations that can appear in everyone’s life.

Another conclusion of the research is related to differences generated by the environment the Bulgarian students come from. Those coming from urban areas use in a greater extent than those from rural areas methods related to cognitions’ management (the link to reality, identifying the situations that can be controlled, setting goals that can be achieved) and mental training (evaluation of resolutive strategies, maintaining the perspective). Also, the students from urban areas use in a greater extent than those from rural areas: cultivation of positive emotions, achievement of experience and recreation to pass over situations with a negative impact on, both, the psychic and the behavior of the students. (gr. 9)

3. Conclusion.

We can draw a general conclusion from all research. There is no doubt for the military specialists about the need of improving of the psychological resilience of the future officers in the military academies like an important part of their military training. This is a component of the preparation of the soldiers for their best performance in routine or extreme situations.

All the results show that the art of resilience provides a powerful advantage in today's world, given the more frequent transformations that occur. If you learn to apply your own plan to develop your way of being resilient and do not limit yourself to what you read in books, you will discover that in life’s school the learner has the responsibility, not the teacher. When people are hit by a bad event, some of them tend to blame others for what is happening, others are angry and they can not control their way of acting, wounding them and the others with such behavior. But there are also people who find the strength to move forward and pass over difficulties.

For us, resilience means the materialization of human dignity and power in an absolute form. It does not represent something what someone has, but what he or she does, is an interactive process. Being resilient does not mean ignoring feelings or emotions, but dealing with the pain, sadness, anger or disappointment, while maintaining a sense of hope and confidence. Everyone has a unique way of being strong and corresponding to the circumstances they interact with. The effort to survive or overcome adversity can transform a person into a stronger one. Resilience is not inborn, it can be developed and strengthened at any age through self-motivation and lifelong learning.
Literature: