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U.S. military revamps mental-health policy

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Senior military officers could be talking about their emotional struggles on YouTube and MySpace this year, in a Pentagon campaign to urge troops into counseling for wartime mental problems.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates announced Thursday that getting therapy "is not going to count against" troops when they apply for national security clearances.

A new policy on security clearances and the idea of a planned national awareness campaign on mental illness are efforts by a Defense Department struggling to care for the many thousands of troops coming home from Iraq and Afghani-stan with emotional wounds.

Part of the problem is changing a military culture that equates such problems with weakness and so stigmatizes those getting treatment.

"It's time for leaders of all stripes to step forward and lead by example, when it comes to mental-health issues," Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters.

"You can't expect a private or a specialist to be willing to seek counseling when his or her captain or colonel or general won't do it," Mullen said.

"I've talked with a number of (senior leaders) already, and we already have folks who are standing up and ready to come forward and tell their story," said Col. Lorree Sutton, an Army psychiatrist who heads a new center for psychological health and post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD.

"We can talk about how important it is," she said. "Ultimately, troops and families — they want to see leaders walking that talk."

The two spoke at a Pentagon press conference after Gates announced at Fort Bliss, Texas, that uniformed and civilian Pentagon employees would no longer be forced to reveal all previous mental-health treatment when applying for national security clearances.

Visiting a recovery center for PTSD, Gates called the illness one of the "unseen wounds" of war. He said there are two issues in dealing with it — the first is the task of developing care and treatment.

"The second, and in some ways perhaps equally challenging, is to remove the stigma that is associated with PTSD and to encourage soldiers, sailors, Marines and airmen who encounter these problems to seek help," he said.

Gates later told a gathering of nearly 900 command sergeants major and instructors at Fort Bliss that they have a special role in encouraging soldiers to seek help.

"Let them know that doing so is a sign of strength and maturity," Gates said, shortly after he toured the base's mental-health treatment facility. "I urge all of you to talk with those below you to find out where we can continue to improve."

The problem

A question on the government application for security clearances — what Defense Secretary Robert Gates called "the infamous Question 21" — has long asked federal employees whether they have consulted a mental-health professional in the past seven years. If so, they are asked to list the names, addresses and dates they saw the doctors or therapists, unless it was for marriage or grief counseling and not related to violent behavior.

The solution

The new question allows them to answer "no" if the counseling was for any of the following reasons and was not court-ordered:

- Strictly marital, family or grief counseling not related to their own violent behavior;
- Strictly related to adjustments from service in a military combat environment.

— The Associated Press

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Up to 20 percent of the more than 1.6 million troops who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan are estimated to have anxiety, depression, PTSD and other mental-health problems.

Yet officials say roughly half don't get help because they fear it will keep them from getting security clearances, will stifle their careers, or embarrass them before their commanders and buddies.

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