



May 30, 2009

## Army plans mental health training program

### Comprehensive Soldier Fitness rolls out in July

By *RICHARD V. STEVENS*  
*The Leaf-Chronicle*

The Army will begin a program this summer to address the growing number of post-traumatic stress disorder problems by building the mental resilience of its soldiers.

Army Chief of Staff Gen. George Casey discussed the initiative in a speech Thursday to the Atlantic Council, an international affairs think tank in Washington.

"We have been looking very hard at ways to develop coping skills and resilience in soldiers. And we will be coming out in July with a new program called Comprehensive Soldier Fitness," Casey said, according to a transcript.

"What we will attempt to do is raise mental fitness to the same level that we now give to physical fitness, because it's scientifically proven you can build resilience.

"The whole idea here is to give soldiers the skills they need to increase their resilience and enhance their performance."

In 2008, the Army had about 13,000 newly identified cases of post-traumatic stress, Casey said. New studies have estimated between 10 and 20 percent of Iraq war veterans are suffering from PTSD.

An Army doctor, Brig. Gen. Rhonda Cornum, has been named director of Comprehensive Soldier Fitness and discussed the program March 23 at the Reserve Officer Association in Washington, according to a report by the Army News Service.

Cornum said soldiers must be both physically and mentally fit if they are going to be their best on the battlefield.

"If we could improve the resilience of the people before they had some adverse event, we might very well be able to have them view it as adverse, but not traumatic," Cornum said.

Many soldiers who report PTSD-related problems, such as nightmares, also report positive outcomes as well, something Cornum calls "post traumatic growth." Those outcomes can include enhanced self-confidence, enhanced leadership, personal strength, spiritual growth and a greater appreciation of life.

Casey amplified that point in his speech on Thursday.

"A lot of people think that everybody that goes to combat gets post-traumatic stress. It's not true. Everybody that goes to combat gets stressed. But the vast majority of people that go to combat have a growth experience, because they're exposed to something very, very difficult and they prevail," Casey said.

"So the issue for us is, how do we give more people the skills so that more people have a growth experience?"

Comprehensive Soldier Fitness would equip soldiers ahead of time to deal with traumatic events, Cornum said.

"The best way to treat a heart attack is not CPR," she said. "The best way is to prevent the heart attack. It's a lifestyle and culture change. And that's how we should look at mental health. Look at it with a preventative model and enhanced health model, not a 'waiting-till-we-need-therapy' model."

Cornum said a "global assessment tool" is under development by the Army to help assess all elements of a soldier's fitness. The tool is expected to be delivered across the Army this year, she said.

---