



## 'Total Fitness' seeks unit, troop effectiveness

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10/29/2009 - **WASHINGTON (AFNS)** -- Being fit to fight in today's military means more than simply being physically fit, and through the concept of "total fitness," Defense Department officials hope to build on what many say already is the most resilient force in U.S. military history.

Total fitness strikes a balance between strong minds and bodies, a balance servicemembers today need more than ever, said Army Maj. Todd Yosik, chief of the operational division for the Defense Centers of Excellence.

Major Yosik echoed recent comments by Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates and other top officials, noting that mental readiness has become increasingly important for servicemembers as they continue to deal with the stress of frequent deployments. Even the most optimistic troops have had difficulty staying vigilant over the past eight years in Iraq and Afghanistan, he said.

"This has really challenged even the most resilient and best warriors that we have," Major Yosik said. "Through the last several years, a lot of very resilient folks have struggled with deployments. Warriors today, probably more than ever before, need to possess more strength and stamina than what we've ever really encountered in the history of our military within the U.S. Defense Department."

A servicemember who is in top physical as well as mental shape will be more efficient and effective and, more importantly, better equipped to sustain the rigors of a variety of tough missions, he explained.

It's not uncommon for troops to carry up to 150 pounds of equipment for days and weeks in an operation. Although the physical toll is great, such servicemembers still need to be as stress-free as possible and able to process their task, he added.

"Total fitness is an emerging concept that integrates not only the physical part of being a warrior, but also the mental part, and also that larger part of having a sense of purpose and being connected to something bigger than yourself," Major Yosik said. "The bottom line is you can't do it all on your own."

Family, community, emotional strength and stamina are just as important as physical fitness, Major Yosik said. He said he encourages troops to be open and communicate with their families and units, rather than bottling up their stress.

Also, focusing on good nutritional and sleep habits can lead to positive differences, he said. These practices will culminate into a more well-rounded servicemember and overall force.

"The total fitness concept is really an effort to build on existing strength that are already there to help enhance some of these elements to make warriors stronger, to prepare them better and to help them sustain better," he said, "(and) also, at the same time, enhance their performance and their mission effectiveness."

The Army, Major Yosik noted, recently began a servicewide program to teach Soldiers the value of total fitness. Through its Comprehensive Fitness program, Army officials are implementing online and classroom training in individual units and various levels of leadership education. The program began earlier this month to give Soldiers a means to evaluate their psychological strengths and improve on their weaker areas. Also, Soldiers who are deemed mentally fit through their evaluations learn to educate others.

"Comprehensive Soldier Fitness is a perfect example of a total fitness initiative, and the Army is out in front on that," he said. "It's a commendable effort of bringing together these topics, and that's something that is emerging across the (department)."

As the total fitness idea continues to spread throughout the force, Major Yosik and others recognize the long-term effect psychological fitness can have on troops. More and more servicemembers are being diagnosed with post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury. Research indicates that untreated psychological conditions can lead to drug and alcohol abuse, problems at home, depression and even suicide. At a joint Defense

Department and Department of Veterans Affairs Mental Health Summit here Oct. 26 to Oct. 28, health care professionals gathered to address the emotional wounds of war.

Secretary Gates noted in his keynote address Oct. 26 that more than 6,000 servicemembers from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been diagnosed with psychological conditions. Eight years of fighting terrorism in the two countries has impacted the troops, he said, and Pentagon leaders are cautious about pushing troops to their limits.

But through initiatives such as the total fitness concept and the Army's Comprehensive Soldier Fitness program, Major Yosik said, the force will only get better.

"The Defense Department is really taking an aggressive stance on mental health and resilience," Major Yosik said. "That's very telling when you have the most senior person in the (department) saying this is an important thing.

"I think in order to sustain yourself in full-spectrum operations, you really can't separate the two," he said. "You can't separate the mind and body, because mental stamina (and) physical fitness are so critical for mission success."