

Chapter 2

Body Armor for the Mind: Preparing Mentally for Emergency and Disaster Management

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ABSTRACT

This chapter looks at the often overlooked yet vitally important steps of mental preparation for first responders, emergency and disaster management personnel, and command center staffs. This chapter will delve into the importance of using simulations and exercises to focus on the mental well-being of our responders to prevent future incidents of post-traumatic stress disorder and other health issues. The past 19 years of war against terrorism starting with the attacks on 9/11 coupled with the recent outbreak of COVID-19 has brought to the forefront the necessity to mentally prepare our warriors, our first responders, and our medical personnel to operate effectively in the toxic environment of a disaster or emergency. This chapter aims to help build that awareness and facilitate planning.

INTRODUCTION

*Whatever you would make habitual, practise it; and if you would not make a thing habitual, do not practice it, but habituate yourself for something else. - Epictetus
1st century A.D.*

You do not rise to the occasion in combat, you sink to the level of your training (Grossman, 2008).

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I started my career in the Army after graduating from West Point in 1994. I had never worn body armor during my time at West Point nor in my first assignment as an infantry lieutenant. It was not until we were training up to deploy to Kosovo in mid-1999 that I first experienced wearing body armor. Unlike the old “flak jackets” of the Vietnam era, our unit was issued Ranger Body Armor (RBA)...a combination of ceramic protective plates strategically placed on the chest and back, encased in a weave made of Kevlar. The plates were designed to stop bullets and protect vital organs. But here’s the thing...the body armor was heavy! I recall the first day I wore the body armor as we conducted pre-deployment training. It was exhausting. Even though I was in good shape and conducted physical training every day, I would rapidly find myself out of breath while walking or running in body armor. After our first day of training, I remember thinking to myself, “I will never adjust to wearing this heavy body armor.”

I knew its protective nature was critically based on the threats we would face when we went to Kosovo. The body armor was designed to stop bullets and shrapnel, but how would I ever adjust to wearing this extra 10 pounds of gear, which felt incredibly restrictive? The Army already had a solution to my problem: we trained in body armor constantly. Whether marching to training, firing at the range, or practicing vehicle movements, we were always encased in our body armor. Before long, wearing it became second nature. My mind and body adjusted to the extra weight, and before long, it felt strange when I *did not* have the body armor on.

Since 9/11, I’ve worn body armor to all of our deployments to places such as Iraq and Afghanistan. We train with it in the United States, and it becomes a part of us, despite the extra weight and heat it adds to a combat load. I could not imagine today going into a combat zone without that vital protection: body armor saves lives.

BACKGROUND

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how there is a need for “body armor for the mind” as practitioners prepare for Emergency and Disaster management. Just like that young captain back in 1999, it is hard to imagine ever getting used to the chaos and human suffering first responders encounter in emergencies. However, through practice, repetition, and training in realistic conditions, we can develop body armor for the mind and become more effective in disaster responses. Just as a soldier has to prepare for the crucible of combat mentally and physically, so do first responders and those working in the Emergency Management field. Let us look at how inoculation and developing realistic simulations can help build a strong suit of body armor to protect our minds.

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