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STRATEGY Research Project

COPING WITH DEATH AND GRIEF: A STRATEGY FOR ARMY LEADERSHIP

BY

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ii

ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: LTC Albert L. Smith, USA

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DATE: 7 April 1999 PAGES:34 CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified Death is a fact of life in the military culture given the potential lethal nature of the profession of arms. The military as a whole is not psychologically prepared to deal with death and grief. Military leaders and soldiers have learned from society that it is not okay to openly express their grief, which has a profound impact on morale in the Army. This paper looks closely at death and grief, and how the Army's senior leadership can foster a positive attitudinal change in the Army towards death. It shows the value of establishing an effective death and grief training strategy for leaders, and how such a strategy can enhance the morale of soldiers, which can enable them to prevail in the face of war and peace.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstractiii
Table of Contentsv
Introduction1
Impact of Death on American Society
Theoretical Understanding of Grief7
Army Leadership and Morale14
Conclusion
Endnotes
Bibliography27

The purpose of this paper is to examine the effectiveness of Army Leadership in dealing with death and grief and how grief reactions affect Army morale. Leaders have the ultimate responsibility for maintaining good morale in a command. This paper will focus on leaders and soldiers because they are the ones mostly affected during a death situation in an Army environment. During Fiscal Year 1997, there were approximately 235 deaths of active duty These deaths occurred through accidents, soldiers. illnesses, suicides, and homicides. The deaths of these soldiers affected the morale of the units to which they were assigned. After a death in most Army units, the command conducts a memorial ceremony or memorial service. Normally, the memorial to the soldier is conducted for the command but little attention is given to the grief reactions of leaders and soldiers. They don't take enough time to work through their grief reactions following the death of a fallen comrade because of traditional attitudes toward death.

Today, we are living in a world where there is a lot of uncertainty; and soldiers are being called to serve everywhere during military conflicts, humanitarian and peacekeeping missions, and overseas tours. During some of these military operations and tours, a few soldiers are going to die through accidents, suicides, and hostile fire. The death of any soldier is going to have a profound impact on the morale of a unit.

The leadership of the Army must refocus its attitude towards death and grief. According to the Gander Military Air Disaster Summary Report in 1987, the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research highlighted the following:

The loneliness at the top is never more evident in times of senior leaders than among They suffer great pain organizational tragedy. and have the fewest external resources in bearing This condition the sadness of their units. accumulated because of their age, exists leadership position, and ongoing experience, responsibilities. With respect to the commands, they are simultaneously the principal mourners, main players of solemn ceremony, and symbols that life must go on.¹

Adjustment of attitudes towards death and grief on the part of senior leadership can foster very good morale in a command. Senior Army leaders must train subordinate officers and noncommissioned officers on how to deal with death and grief in a meaningful way. There are too many leaders who do not know how to deal with death situations, which create a lot of tension within an organization.

Death has a profound impact on Army morale when a death occurs within a unit or a soldier is notified of a death of significant person. Many military communities fail

to realize that when a person dies, someone survives and feels a sense of loss. Some soldiers are afraid to confide their real feelings to others and admit those same feelings to themselves. After the death of a loved one or a significant person, a person feels guilt, anger, and self pity, and wants to share these contradictory emotions with someone who understands. Normally, there is a tendency to be afraid because the person feels that no one understands. These conflicting feelings sink deep inside of the grieving person. The Army culture as a whole, has no time for death and those who face death. Death must of necessity be quickly dealt with and forgotten. But the grief of many soldiers remains and creates a puzzle that needs to be worked out.

In the midst of death and grief situations, senior leaders have invaluable assets at their hand. These assets are chaplains and mental health professionals. They can aid the commanders in maintaining good morale during critical times.

IMPACT OF DEATH ON AMERICAN SOCIETY

In order for us to fully understand the grief process, we need to explore the impact that death has on American society. Many people today are unwilling to communicate

their feelings about the reality of death. Death is not only a cessation of body organs functioning but a real personal event in a person's life. Dying takes place within a social context, and a person's view of death is influenced by the social context in which he finds himself. Every culture within America has its own ideas, beliefs, values, and practices in dealing with death. An individual learns the orientations of his culture toward death, which gives him a meaning of death. The military culture is no exception.

All of us face the fear of the unknown. We must cope with losing that which we have known in life. But to each of us, death means different things depending upon our social upbringing. This is the reason why the process of dying causes different reactions on the part of the dying and the bereaved. The ways of the past and today point to how we can take on different social meaning when looking at the biological processes of life and death. Every attempt to get at the meaning of life must inevitably face the question of death.² When we don't deal with death, we hinder the process of coming to an understanding of life. Many people lose their will to live because they are so overwhelmed by a fear of death. Some people become

impotent in the face of important life crises because their anxiety possessed them so completely that their fear of death made them afraid to live.³

For centuries, the center of the image of death has been the dying individual. As death became a part of the natural process in the nineteenth century, the image of death changed. This view has continued into the twentieth century, and science and technology now influence the contemporary image of death. In the process of death losing its sacred meaning, the emotionally based nature of society is being eclipsed by heterogeneous life in cities and towns. Cooperation and kinship are beginning to be replaced by competition and contracts. The material goods are pursued in order to provide the emotional comfort and security once found in community and religion. The religious rites which once focused our attention upon the meaning of death fade in popularity as we seek to avoid the reality of death. The techniques used by the funeral service industry to protect us against the reality of death are in great demand as a way of sanitizing death into an acceptable event. Death has become less of an everyday event within a family. Statistics point to the fact that the average American Family can somewhat expect that a death of a loved one in an immediate family will not take

place but once within a twenty year period.

For many of us, death is un-American. This creates the avoidance of death in our lives. There are four reasons why people try to avoid death. First, the death of any person reminds us that we will die someday. This tells us that mortality exists in all human beings. Robert W. Bailey wrote:

Frequently when persons refer to death, they do not speak of it in terms of "my" death but only when "one" dies or when "they" die. There are many solemn remainders of death all around us such as cemeteries, accidents, wars, auto fatalities and famine.⁴

A person has to accept the fact that he doesn't live forever, in spite of his own efforts to escape its reality by denying his own mortality.

Second, death points to an end of all activities of life. There is a cessation of movement associated with death. The heart stops beating, breathing ceases and the brain no longer functions. Then life has departed and cannot come back. Third, death threatens people by its ultimate victory over science. It is the ultimate winner no matter how long the fight or what it might cost. Robert W. Bailey wrote:

There has been such a rapid advancement of medical science that people have been encouraged to deny death. After all, when we get sick, all

we have to do is to go to the doctor in order to be made well! If our condition appears to be terminal, the expectation is that a new discovery on the horizon can still eliminate death.⁵

Fourth, death causes a separation that conflicts with the image of America, which holds to the value of intimate relationships to meet our emotional needs. Death threatens all of our relationships, exposing us to the dangers of a impersonal, cold, and competitive world. This is the reason why we find ourselves feeling helpless during the grief process and having no one to turn to for support. Our reaction to the dead is dreadful. It just doesn't fit into our way of life. As the reality of death confronts us, we react to our growing anxiety by repressing the subject of death.

THEORETICAL UNDERSTANDING OF GRIEF

Grief is a reaction to death of a loved one or significant person. The grief process is the normal process by which an individual makes a healthy recovery following the loss of a significant person in his life. It normally takes from one to two years to run its course. There are two types of grief. First, there is anticipatory grief. It is a process in which a bereaved person experiences all the phases of grief in advance, as a

protective measure against the impact expected when the death really takes place. Second, acute grief is the process in which a bereaved person experiences all the phases of grief due to a sudden or unexpected death of a significant person in his life.

There are many variables involved in the grief process, which have a great impact on how an individual experiences the death of a significant person. I would like to highlight four of these variables which have the greatest impact on the grief process. First, the length of the relationship with a deceased person has a profound impact on an individual's grief. A person who experiences significant loss through death has to work through the memories of the deceased individual. The length of time that a person has known another has great significance in how an individual will experience the loss of the other.

The second is the quality of the relationship with the deceased person. Normally, it is the quality of the relationship, which will determine the quantity and quality of grief. If the relationship between two individuals was negative, it would produce little or no grief at death or there might be a morbid grief reaction involving inappropriate guilt. The quality of the relationship may be one of serene respect and unswerving devotion. It may

be one involving open communication and realistic joint planning for the future. Death in such instances can alter the character and depth of the grief.⁶ The timeliness of a death is the third variable. The degree of timeliness of a death is an important variable and has a great impact on how a loss will be experienced. Lastly, the nature of the death is a very important factor to consider when grieving the loss of a person. The manner in which a person died plays a great part in how an individual will grieve the loss of the person.

In going through the grief process, a person can experience grief in various degrees. Chronic grief is the state of mind, which takes the loss of a loved one or significant other very hard and cannot move through the grief process at all. Delayed grief is the state of mind, which doesn't allow a person to grieve the loss of another because he becomes so active and preoccupied with outside affairs. He doesn't allow himself time to let go and give into his grief. There is an avoidance of dealing with his inner feelings of loss. Pathological grief is the state of mind in which one seems to come unglued and thrown into a psychiatric state by grief. During the grief process, there are ten stages that an individual may experience in

working through grief. The process does not necessarily follow in sequence. There is a possibility that a person can experience two or more stages at the same time during the process. These stages are as follows:

1. State of Shock. After a loss of a significant person or loved one, the initial reaction is normally mild or severe shock. A person becomes somewhat speechless and cannot accept the fact of the loss. It is a temporary escape from reality. The initial stage of shock is one of disbelief. During this period, a person becomes emotionless, unable to respond in a positive way.

2. Expression of Emotions. Irrational fears and emotions come to the surface. An individual often feels physically ill and fears he is going to have a nervous breakdown. Although unable to give way to any emotion initially, emotions later pour out. It is important to reach this point, otherwise one may experience emotional damage.⁷ The emotions felt should be expressed. People should express what they feel and should not try to hold back.
3. Depression and Loneliness. This stage involves the feeling of depression and isolation. It seems as if God is against you and is no longer on your side. Depression is a normal response when something you cared for has been taken away from you. The grieving person turns inward and feels

very lonely and depressed. Too many times, the reality that death has claimed their loved one, who will never return, is all but overwhelming. Like the clouds that temporarily block the sun from view, depression will normally pass away. Time will help to heal this wound of grief.⁸

4. Physical Symptoms. The physical symptoms of unresolved grief many emerge anytime during the grief process. Normally, people who have physical symptoms of distress are stuck at one of the stages in the ten-stage process. The following emotional symptoms are experienced by people during this stage of grief.⁹

Insomnia	Blurred Vision
Trembling	Difficulty in Swallowing
Coldness	Nervousness
Indigestion	Depression
Constipation	Panic
Coughs / Colds	Anxiety
Lapse of Memory	Sweating
Fatigue	Fear of Breakdown
Loss of Appetite	Fear of Illness
Lack of Concentration	Headaches
Irritability	Dizziness
Fullness in Throat	Lack of Interest

Normally, when these symptoms appear a person will panic. Grief has a tendency to weaken one's resistance to illness. A person should be mindful of these symptoms when experiencing grief.

5. Panic. During the grief process people reach a point

where their agony seems intolerable. They concentrate on nothing but the loss. Mourners become paralyzed with their fear. The fear of going crazy is often fear of the unknown that puts them into this panic state. Panic is a very normal response following the death of a person. 6. Guilt. This is a very difficult stage in which there is a powerful force that many people have to deal with. Guilt can be both neurotic and normal. The first is felt beyond proportion to what we should feel, whereas normal guilt is real. Either way, if it is unresolved, guilt can create more physical symptoms and block reentry into life.¹⁰ It is very necessary for people to face both their normal and neurotic guilt. People should not feel bad about talking about their guilt with trained professionals because this would enable them to overcome their feelings. 7. Anger and Resentment. The emotion that upsets and shocks many people is the feeling of anger. This anger normally arises out of fear. When a person is grieving, the world seems to become a very frightening place, and the reaction is to fight back. People have the tendency to blame themselves in some way for the death and take their grief out on someone else. It can be very helpful for a person grieving to vent his anger and resentment. Anger

and resentment are normal feelings of every human being.

8. Resistance to Normal Functioning. Because of the pain that people feel during their grief, it hinders them from normal functioning within their families and on the job. They have too much pain to work it out in the normal way. There is a tendency for people to become too comfortable in their grief, which hinders them from moving on in life. Society's attitude about death hinders a person from grieving a loss. The society that we live in forces people to carry their grief within themselves. This causes people not to talk about their grief.

9. Hope. It is the state of mind in which people feel that life can be meaningful again. When they have been given the time to work through their grief, both for themselves and in memory of the one who has died, they are able to feel hope that their lives can assume new meaning and strength. For Christians, hope is expressed both for the deceased person and the grieving person who affirms that God will never forsake him.¹¹ Grief lasts from weeks to years. We don't know exactly how long grief is going to last. People need to express their emotions and receive the warm affection and encouragement from others. This affection creates a feeling that life can be meaningful again.

10. Affirmation of Reality. This is the final stage of the grief process. People finally begin to affirm life. They become new individuals after going through the process. There is a struggle to readjust to reality and develop new relationships. The experience of the loss has been worked through. Normally, people who are spiritually fit seem to be able to deal more effectively because their religious conviction that God is with them. They feel deep inside of them that God will be with them in the present and future. In essence this final step is the psychological death, burial and resurrection. We move back into life, though we still carry the wounds of grief indefinitely.¹² People who successfully complete the grief process can emerge stronger from the experience.

ARMY LEADERSHIP AND MORALE

Army morale is the reaction of soldiers to the conditions of their environment. Having good morale in the Army is a very important quality of a soldier. It creates a quality of understanding and spirit, which encompasses courage, self-discipline, and perseverance. Cheerfulness and unselfishness are characteristics of good morale. Maintaining troop morale is the responsibility of a commander and is very important. A command with good morale

can prevail under good or bad circumstances. Good leaders have to consider their own morale before they can consider their soldiers' morale. Jooast A.M. Meerloo wrote:

It is very easy for us to forget that a leader must have his own morale nurtured if he is to meet the need of his subordinates. These demands are very heavy: We are becoming more and more aware of how important leadership is in boosting morale. The leader is the embodiment of the valued human relationships for which we are willing to offer our energy and even, when needed, our lives. Through identification with him we borrow his fortitude The leader must be both a scapegoat and a giant. Our own inner strength will grow depending on the leader's guiding personality.¹³

A leader knows that his soldiers look to him for leadership and he is supported by their concern in doing so. Setting an example for soldiers is the ultimate goal for a leader, which brings out the best in him. Leaders have to believe in what they are doing and translate their belief into deeds

During every war and conflict which the United States has participated in, leadership was among the most important qualities for inspiring soldiers under difficult circumstances. The effectiveness of leaders to command men was tested. Outstanding commanders inspired and maintained good morale and fulfilled the needs of their men. However, the most inspiring commanders had the ability during combat

to reach through several levels of command toward the individual soldier. Senior leaders, commissioned and noncommissioned officers, had to be ready to make life and death decisions on the battlefield.

During World War II, leadership at the highest levels had an indirect impact on morale. The admired General D. average soldier Dwight Eisenhower and respected General Douglas Mac Arthur, although few of the troops recognized any definite and direct influence of either of these General Patton directly affected the commanders. soldiers' everyday lives, as in the enforcement of strict helmet and necktie regulations. He visited the units of his command and made his He polarized opinions. presence felt. Most soldiers either loved him or hated him, but few felt indifferent. Patton's influence permeated down through every echelon of command.¹⁴

General Patton had a profound impact on the morale of his command.

The health of soldiers is very important to soldier morale. Leaders must be concerned about the health and welfare of their soldiers. This is the reason why the Army leadership must change its attitude towards death, dying and grief reactions. They have the ultimate responsibility to ensure the safety of their soldiers and maintaining of good morale. The Army culture is going to experience death, dying and grief reactions during the coming years, and our leadership needs to focus on the needs of our soldiers. Many soldiers are becoming psychologically unfit

because they don't have the opportunity to grieve when they have lost a significant person in the unit or back at home. some soldiers are afraid to grieve because of the attitude of the Army community towards death and the grief process. Too often we spend more time ensuring that family members are being taken care of but fail to take care of the leadership and soldiers of the unit.

During the Gander Military Air Disaster on 12 December 1985, in which 248 members of the 101st Airborne Division (AA) were killed returning home from a 179 day mission. The After Action Report conducted by the Walter Reed Institute of Research stated:

During crisis times attention focuses on the bereaved immediate family, but not on the large number of others who suffer but are neglected. They are also subject to substantial performance disruptions. For example, the Gander tragedy revealed two groups of the neglected who could profit from professional consultation: Troops in the units and senior leadership. Both tend to be difficult to access, and are likely to be neglected again the next time a crisis event occurs.¹⁵

Army leadership should encourage the expression of grief during these kinds of situations, which will emphasis the normality of grief and necessity for grieving.

In World War I, the health of soldiers was very important to good morale in combat. The health of soldiers was evaluated by two factors.¹⁶ First, hygiene was a

necessity for good morale.

Good units ensured that buildings and burying refuses were clean. The commands also ensured that trenches were kept clean. Everything was foul enough as it was with mud, dead bodies, flies and all the unavoidable filth rats, everywhere, to make things worse by carelessness was inexcusable. A battalion which could care so little about the fate of its successors that it could leave its trenches unnecessarily filthy was one which had sunk towards really low morale. То do so was a mixture of apathy and selfishness, which are signs of bad morale.17

Second, the number of soldiers that went on sick call was another indicator of the heath of soldiers and the morale of the unit. Units with good morale had fewer soldiers going on sick call.¹⁸

During World War II, the rate of psychological casualties was higher in units with unqualified commanders, all other factors being equal. Army doctors repeatedly found that unusually high rates of battle fatigue could be traced to the cowardice, incompetence or breakdown of the unit commander.¹⁹ Many suffered from the fear of being killed or maimed, the fear of killing and the fear of personal failure.²⁰ The doctors helped many of these soldiers and some went back into combat. Army mental health professionals have provided and still provide outstanding support to commanders in taking care of the needs of their soldiers.

Today, Army mental health personnel are part of the Combat Stress Team, which goes into combat with units and are located on every military installation to assist leaders during critical events. These personnel are available for Army commanders to help them in crisis events involving death, dying and grief reactions of leaders and soldiers. The usage of these individuals by commanders can help them in the maintenance of their unit morale.

Religion plays a very important part in the lives of leaders and soldiers, and is a strong force in sustaining them during combat and in times of peace. Leaders and soldiers find confidence, satisfaction and courage from their religious beliefs. The Army Chaplain Corps has been the avenue for leaders and soldiers to get in touch with their God. As representatives of God, the Army Chaplain Corps has provided and still provide exceptional ministry to leaders and soldiers since its beginning. Army chaplains have served during every war and conflict in which the United States has been involved. They have been where the soldiers were. Chaplains are also additional force multipliers for commanders, and they can aid in the maintenance of unit morale. During every war, chaplains were busy serving in the roles of comforter and

spiritual advisor to leaders and soldiers.

Chaplains' activities conducted during war ease the loneliness, boredom, fear and anxiety of soldiers.²¹ Faith and hope helped to sustain the soldiers and reduced the fear. Army chaplains can help commanders to provide a positive atmosphere and environment for soldiers to deal with death, dying and grief reactions.

To make a change in the Army culture's attitudes towards death, dying and grief reactions, Army leaders can use the mental health professionals and chaplains. However, the ultimate responsibility is the commander in any command. Leaders set the examples for the Army culture and their attitudes toward death and grief influence the soldiers. Soldiers reactions are patterned after their leaders.

Army leadership needs to refocus its attention on educating Army leaders during Pre-Command Course on the impact of death and grief on the Army culture and how they can maintain good morale in spite of critical events. They need to know the resources which are available to help them and how to use them. This training will enhance our leaders understanding of death and grief and how it affects soldiers and morale. The Gander Military Air Disaster Summary Report said:

Formal classes on grief leadership should be instituted at appropriate leadership training The focus should be on coping with courses. death in Army units to include sharing about it is like experiences what to lose soldiers to death, how units react, how leaders restore cohesion and morale, how newcomers get integrated, how to counsel buddies of the victims, and how to manage one's own sense of loss.²²

Leadership is the most important factor in changing the Army culture's attitudes towards death and grief, and maintaining good Army morale. By training our leaders, the Army can create an environment, which can prevail in times of peace and war. We can have an Army in which leaders and soldiers can be proud to serve in during the 21st Century.

CONCLUSION

Army Leadership is the key to maintaining high morale in a command during the death of a soldier. After a death, the Army community normally conducts a memorial ceremony or memorial service for the fallen comrade. However, little attention is given to the grief reactions of the leader and soldiers. They don't spend enough time on working through their grief because of their perceived attitudes toward death and grief.

The Army culture has its own ideas, beliefs, values and practices in dealing with death. Leaders and soldiers

learn the orientations of their culture toward death, which give them a meaning of death. But to each of us, death has a different meaning depending upon our social upbringing. This is the reason why the process of dying causes different reactions and attitudes on the part of the dying and the bereaved.

Death threatens all of our relationships, exposing us to the dangers of a impersonal world. This is the reason why leaders and soldiers find themselves feeling helpless during the death of a fallen comrade and have no one to turn to for support. The grief becomes very difficult to handle in a meaningful way.

Grief is a person's reaction to the loss of a significant person or thing. A person experiencing grief needs to go through the grief process. Grief process is defined as the normal or natural process by which we make a healthy recovery after the loss of a significant person. It takes an individual from one to two years to work through the stages of grief in a meaningful and positive way. Some people get stuck in the process and experience psychological affects, which require grief counseling from mental health professional and chaplains. The length and quality of a relationship, and timeliness of

the death have a profound impact on the grief of an individual. People who complete the grief process in a meaningful way emerge stronger from their experience.

To actively change the Army culture's attitude towards death and grief, Army Leadership must train its leaders how to effectively deal with death and grief. Education of the Army leaders can create an environment with a positive attitude towards death and grief at the top. This will send a positive message to soldiers that it is okay to have grief reactions. The leadership of the Army needs to instill in leaders that they have the overall responsibility to maintain good morale in spite of a death situation. Leaders need to know how death and grief affect unit morale and way to overcome it, so that the unit can continue to have good morale.

I recommend that commanders going into commands at battalion level and above receive death and grief awareness training during the Pre-Command Course. The training should focus on the affects of death and grief on morale. It should include the following areas:

- Impact of death on the Army culture

 Explore society 's attitudes toward death.
 - b. Share personal attitudes.
- 2. Grief Process
 - a. Define grief.
 - b. Explain the different stages of grief.

c. Give affects on unit morale.

d. Highlight the Army referral agencies for grief counseling.

- 3. Crisis Response Team
 - a. Give purpose.
 - b. Composition of team.
 - c. Activation of team after a death.
- 4. Critical Event Debriefing
 - a. Purpose of debriefing.
 - b. Explain the different phases of debriefing.
 - c. Resources for execution.
- 5. Memorial Tribute
 - a. Purpose of memorial tribute.
- b. Explain the difference between memorial ceremony and memorial service.
 - c. Commander's responsibility.
 - d. Chaplain's responsibility.
 - e. Execution time.

The death and grief awareness training will enable commanders to get in touch with their own attitudes toward death and grief. It will also broaden their knowledge and understanding of how grief reactions affect soldier morale. Leaders would gain an awareness of the available resources that they can call upon for assistance during critical events. This training will create an environment whereby commanders can have a positive influence upon soldiers, which enhances morale. Having a training strategy for Army leaders on death and grief awareness can prepare our leaders for the uncertainty of the future.

WORD COUNT= 5,727

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