



**DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE  
UNITED STATES AIR FORCE EXPEDITIONARY CENTER (AMC)**

10 May 2023

MEMORANDUM FOR USAFEC COMMAND TEAMS

FROM: USAF EC/CC  
5656 Texas Avenue  
Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst NJ 08640-5403

SUBJECT: Forging Warrior Hearts

1. Since 2004, Air Force mental health clinic utilization has tripled while the preponderance of those seeking help do not carry diagnosable conditions. Despite numerous programs instituted over the last few decades, Air Force suicide rates on average have risen slightly, or at best remained consistent. Undoubtedly, these programs have saved multiple lives and put Airmen back on a healthy path. However, these numbers suggest we are on the backside of a power curve applying significant resources for relatively little—if any—gain. Our approach has been a slew of programs and activities wrapped in the buzzword of *resilience*, ultimately corrupting the term by applying it as a catch-all for quick-fix solutions to a long-term problem. We believe it is time to rethink our narrative, and ultimately our approach, to addressing mental health and suicide. Leaders at all levels have done everything we have asked them to do. *Therefore, we have not done anything wrong, but we may not be effectively doing the all the right things.*

2. If we utilize the CSAF's Spectrum of Resilience as a framework which offers recommendations for addressing mental health, ranging from self-care on the left side of the spectrum to clinical health options on the right, we argue that our efforts have reactively leaned towards the right side of the mental health spectrum (i.e., support entities, clinical/medical health). The prevailing narrative is that we have a mental health crisis and need more mental health providers and resources to combat this problem. This narrative is powerful and easily adopted but it has corralled our thinking into believing the only solutions reside in reactive programs and treatments. Indeed, narratives have the power to shape our thoughts, actions, and beliefs. They become a lens through which we view the challenges before us. If we don't think critically and broadly enough on complex issues—such as mental health—the manifestations of those thoughts, actions, and beliefs may very well be ineffective at addressing root causes. We simply end up in a perpetual and exasperating game of “whack-a-mole” and wonder why our efforts are not achieving desired progress. Our belief is that the Air Force cannot hire enough mental health providers, counselors, and chaplains to lead us out of this crisis.

3. Ultimately, mental illness and suicides are symptoms—manifestations of something much deeper and complex. Have we asked ourselves what might be causing this? What day-to-day conditions reside left of those manifestations we might be able to influence? Have we been reactively patching up symptoms or proactively strengthening our Airmen's bodies, minds, and spirits for the adversity they will ultimately face in life and on the battlefield? Far too often we are willing to develop another program before doing the hard things that get us left of center on the mental health spectrum. Are we willing to do the things necessary that proactively *forge* mental health rather than reactively treat mental illness?

**AIRPOWER...FROM THE GROUND UP!**

4. We offer a complementary narrative to shift our gaze left on the aforementioned spectrum and look “upstream” to identify proactive solutions to forge physical, mental, spiritual, and social *strength* in our Airmen to raise their stress tolerance levels (and their confidence), thereby reducing the systemic strain upon mental health resources. It is a narrative that challenges our Airmen to be *strong*—one that hardens and tempers them—and goes beyond resilience to *hardiness*. It is a narrative that uses winning language to forge a warrior mindset rather than a conditioned mentality of learned helplessness.

5. Many lament we do not have any control over the “upstream” since many of the mental health challenges our Airmen face come to us through accessions. We disagree. We can better own our culture, we can better strengthen our culture, and we can better challenge our Airmen to live up to it. Our Airmen are inherently grittier than the current narrative suggests. We believe they are looking for that challenge—the “productive struggle”—which is why many of them joined the *profession of arms*. Let us think boldly about what we accept as being out of our control. Let us think critically about what we tolerate as conditions. The conditions set the environment in which our Airmen work and live—and we have ownership over a vast majority of these conditions. Therefore, we have significant potential to shape how our Airmen see themselves and interact with the world around them. How might we leverage our influence as leaders to strengthen the culture of our organizations, thereby strengthening our Airmen? *We believe strong Airmen are built with a strong culture.*

6. Since early in his tenure COMAMC has spoken of Warrior Heart. It has struggled to get traction because there have been no programatics behind it—the current lens through which we attempt to provide solutions to the Air Force’s mental health and suicide challenges. *It was never intended to be a program!* It is intended as a cultural and mindset overhaul to prepare our Airmen for the adversities they may face in war. Strong culture does not happen on its own, though weak, fragmented culture will. Strong unit culture must be consciously cultivated and intentionally engineered—not with words, but with actions. This is why we are taking liberty by expanding the term Warrior Heart to *Forging Warrior Hearts* to drive intentionally engineered actions aimed at building strong unit culture and strong Airmen.

7. What we may be asked to do as a force in the coming years will be incredibly hard—therefore, we must do hard things. We offer the following list of no cost/low cost initiatives and activities as example means to intentionally forge warrior hearts and a sense of belonging in the *profession of arms*. Many of you may recognize some of them as activities inherent to our Air Force in the past. They are not programs—they are tools in the hands of able leaders and clearly fall within the command team’s scope of responsibility. We offer the following for your consideration:

#### **Elementary**

- Scheduled unit visits
- Unit formation runs/PT
- Unit roll calls/formation
- Reveille and Retreat formations
- First Fridays (including families)
- No email Fridays
- Weekly heritage room calls
- Heritage briefings
- Robust unit identity (e.g., SWAG)
- Equipment inspections led by NCOs
- Dorm and blues inspections led by NCOs
- Face-to-face awards boards/BTZ panels
- *Uniform* squadron uniforms

**Ambitious**

- Unit PT 2-3 days per week
- Weekly Sergeants' Time
- Monthly GI parties followed by BBQs
- Training days
- Unit ruck marches
- Wing parades
- Helping agency/life skills training for front line supervisors
- Mandatory life skills classes for all first term Airmen (e.g., those offered by MFRC, Med Group, Chapel, etc.)
- Professional development sessions to reinforce officer/SNCO/NCO roles
- ALS Day 0 trng/Commandant's Time
- First Term Officers Course

**Bold**

- Double dorm occupancy
- Robust onboarding programs with graduated incentives
- NCOs sitting CQ in the dorms
- Overhaul of front line supervisor leadership training at ALS

8. These are but a few *examples* and certainly not all inclusive. Although not currently mandated, you can expect proactive, left-of-center *Forging Warrior Hearts* initiatives to become a significant line of effort in the USAFEC FY24 Strategy and ensuing Campaign Plan. *Command teams at all echelons* are encouraged to get a head start by using their knowledge and creativity to intentionally engineer actions aimed at building strong unit culture and strong Airmen immediately. Though not intended to be programs, per se, many such activities will require institutionalization through frequent recurrence and creative integration (e.g., unit formation + retreat + Sergeant's Time). These efforts are a means to build strength not only in our Airmen, but in our institution. Expected demonstrations of strong unit culture manifest in the form of good order and discipline, dress and personal appearance, customs and courtesies, physical/mental/spiritual/social fitness, work area cleanliness, positive attitudes, and a tangible sense of purpose, pride, and connectedness. *We'll know we are succeeding when our Airmen individually feel as if they have the best job in the Air Force and they are part of the best unit in the Air Force—this* should be our goal.

9. We need a complementary narrative—one that pulls our discussions, our thinking, and most importantly, our actions left of the problems we face as a force. We believe many of the solutions lie in a back-to-basics approach that intentionally builds *strength and confidence* into our Airmen and forges true warrior hearts. How senior leaders talk about our profession—and what we talk about—has an impact upon how our Airmen perform their duties and how they find their way. Never forget, *they* are tomorrow's Air Force—*this* is our institutional imperative.



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