

CHAPTER 8

FIRST AID FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL REACTIONS

INTRODUCTION

During actual combat, military operations continue around the clock, at a constant pace, and often under severe weather conditions. Terrible things happen in combat. During such periods the soldier's mental and physical endurance will be pushed to the limit. Psychological first aid will help sustain the soldier's mental/physical performance during normal activities, and especially during military operations under extremely adverse conditions and in hostile environments.

8-1. Explanation of Term "Psychological First Aid"

Psychological first aid is as natural and reasonable as physical first aid and is just as familiar. When you were hurt as a child, the understanding attitude of your parents did as much as the psychological effect of a bandage or a disinfectant to ease the pain. Later, your disappointment or grief was eased by supportive words from a friend. Certainly, taking a walk and talking things out with a friend are familiar ways of dealing with an emotional crisis. The same natural feelings that make us want to help a person who is injured make us want to give a helping hand to a buddy who is upset. *Psychological first aid* really means nothing more complicated than assisting people with emotional distress whether it results from physical injury, disease, or excessive stress. Emotional distress is not always as visible as a wound, a broken leg, or a reaction to pain from physical damage. However, overexcitement, severe fear, excessive worry, deep depression, misdirected irritability and anger are signs that stress has reached the point of interfering with effective coping. The more noticeable the symptoms become, the more urgent the need for you to be of help and the more important it is for you to know HOW to help.

8-2. Importance of Psychological First Aid

First aid can be applied to stress reactions of the mind as well as to physical injuries of the body. You must know how to give psychological first aid to be able to help yourself, your buddies, and your unit in order to keep performing the mission. Psychological first aid measures are simple and easy to understand. Improvisation is in order, just as it is in splinting a fracture. Your decision of what to do depends upon your ability to observe the soldier and understand his needs. Time is on your side, and so are the resources of the soldier you are helping. Making the best use of resources requires ingenuity on your part. A stress reaction resulting in poor judgment can cause injury or even death to yourself or others on the battlefield. It can be even more dangerous if other persons are affected by the judgment of an emotionally upset individual. If it is

detected early enough, the affected soldier stands a good chance of remaining in his unit as an effective member. If it is not detected early and if the soldier becomes more and more emotionally upset, he may not only be a threat to himself and to others, but he can also severely affect the morale of the unit and jeopardize its mission.

8-3. Situations Requiring Psychological First Aid

- Psychological first aid (buddy aid) is most needed at the first sign that a soldier cannot perform the mission because of emotional distress. Stress is inevitable in combat, in hostage and terrorist situations, and in civilian disasters, such as floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, industrial and aircraft catastrophes. Most emotional reactions to such situations are temporary, and the person can still carry on with encouragement. Painful or disruptive symptoms may last for minutes, hours, or a few days. However, if the stress symptoms are seriously disabling, they may be psychologically contagious and endanger not only the emotionally upset individual but also the entire unit. In such situations, you may be working beside someone who cannot handle the impact of disaster. Even when there is no immediate danger of physical injury, psychological harm may occur. For instance, if a person is unable to function because of stress, it may cause that person to lose confidence in himself. If self-confidence cannot be restored, the person then may become psychologically crippled for life.

- Sometimes people continue to function well during the disastrous event, but suffer from emotional scars which impair their job performance or quality of life at a later time. Painful memories and dreams may recur for months and years and still be considered a normal reaction. If the memories are so painful that the person must avoid all situations which arouse these memories or if he becomes socially withdrawn, or shows symptoms of anxiety, depression, or substance abuse, he needs treatment. Experiences of police, firemen, emergency medical technicians, and others who deal with disasters has proved that the routine application of psychological first aid greatly reduces the likelihood of future serious post-traumatic stress disorders. Thus, applying psychological first aid as self-aid and buddy aid to all the participants, including those who have functioned well, is beneficial.

8-4. Interrelation of Psychological and Physical First Aid

Psychological first aid should go hand in hand with physical first aid. The discovery of a physical injury or cause for an inability to function *does not rule out* the possibility of a psychological injury (or vice versa). A physical injury and the circumstances surrounding it may actually cause an emotional injury that is potentially more serious than the physical injury; both injuries need treatment. The person suffering from pain, shock, fear of serious damage to his body, or fear of death does not respond well to joking,

