Stress in the Indian Armed Forces: how true and what to do?

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Dear Editor,

I am writing to you in response to an article titled 'Stress in the Indian Armed Forces: how true and what to do?' published in *MJAFI* 2011;67:209–211.

1. I am writing to you in the context of 'Stress in the Indian Armed Forces' a subject which has been scarcely discussed and researched with very few large scale studies to date.^{1–6} Does the available epidemiological data support the contention of a stress epidemic in the Armed Forces?⁷ The authors need to be complimented on bringing this important issue of military psychiatry to the fore.
2. The Indian soldier is unlikely to be differentially immune to the impact of stress-related to combat while literature from experiences from other Armed Forces like UK and USA is flooded with such reports.
3. While operating in counter insurgency operations (CI Ops) under constant threat to life, inhospitable terrain and climate and uncongenial environment, a soldier may face mental ill-health and morbidity while living in a changed socio-economic setting. At times possibly, a small insignificant or trivial stressor may actually work like a last straw on the 'depleted' coping capacity of the soldier. Most who have witnessed such incidents 'wondered' why did he do it? Some early and indirect indicators of combat fatigue and stress like absent without leave (AWL), road traffic accidents (RTAs), indiscipline, and insubordination are also important in assessing impact of combat stress.
4. I have had the privilege of serving with one of the authors in CI Ops. It is good to note that the authors have advocated 'Combat Psychiatry' initiatives which I had also suggested to the author during my discussions on the subject.
5. I was very fortunate to be part of a project on control measures launched in one of the formation where I worked with one of the authors. It was quite evident that given the right commitment and support by the 'sensitive' and 'sensible' command, it is feasible to reduce the most 'tragic' consequences of combat stress like 'suicides and fratricides' to a

large extent. I do agree that Armed Forces have one of the 'lower' rates but 'even a single suicide is too many when it happens to a soldier'.

6. During my stint on 'Siachen' I observed that the 'toughest' of the soldiers 'crumble' under the stresses of combat. Combat stress is an inevitable part of combat especially under changed scenarios of deployment in unconventional warfare like low intensity conflict (LIC) or CI Ops. We have a sacred duty towards the men we command keeping in mind the 'Chetwode Motto'. We must study it, research it, and reduce it.

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