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Social Fitness and Resilience

A Review of Relevant Constructs, Measures, and Links to Well-Being

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RAND Project AIR FORCE

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Summary

Positive social connections, when established, can provide important social resources that alter the way individuals experience and respond to stressful events or circumstances. Military families face several unique challenges that can strain the strength and accessibility of these social resources. This report examines several issues related to social fitness.

Social fitness is defined as the combined resources a person gets from his or her social world. This concept encompasses the availability and maintenance of social relationships, and the ability to utilize those ties to manage stressors and successfully perform tasks. Social fitness *resources* are the aspects of those relationships that strengthen a person's ability to withstand and rebound from challenges (e.g., stress, threat, or disaster) or even grow from them.

The key resilience factor associated with social fitness is social support. Central sources of social support for U.S. Airmen include family, friends, co-workers (including military units), physical communities and neighborhoods, cyber communities, and imagined communities (groups with which a person identifies and to which he or she feels a sense of belonging even if he or she has never met others in the group). The structure of one's social networks can also be a source of social support. Social support comes in three primary forms: emotional (e.g., having someone to talk to about problems), instrumental (e.g., a loan, a ride to a doctor's appointment), and informational (e.g., knowledge about which companies are hiring). In this report, we identify several specific scales and indexes used to measure such support. Social support can also be either actual or perceived. In fact, there is some evidence that perceived support is more influential on mental health than actual support.

Emotional, instrumental, and informational support from families, friends, co-workers, fellow unit members, neighbors, and other communities have been linked to higher psychological, physical, and social well-being. However, social relationships can also have negative consequences for well-being. Relationship conflict is linked to poor psychological outcomes, as relationships themselves can be a source of stress. It is strong, *positive* social ties and the constructive support they provide that can enhance a person's adjustment and help protect him or her from the deleterious effects of stress.

Bridges to social support include increased group stability, and more frequent, positive interactions and communication (face-to-face as well as other forms of interaction), while barriers to social support include group discord and conflict, geographic movement, and bullying and ostracism. Therefore, one of the key ways to facilitate social support is to promote positive cohesion and stability in the groups that give such support.

Interventions aimed at increasing the quantity and quality of social support should focus on four factors, including sociodemographic characteristics and dispositional traits (e.g., gender, optimism) that may relate to social support and its benefits in important ways; dynamics that strengthen social groups, support networks, and teams (e.g., social cohesion); practices that improve social skills and promote more frequent and constructive interactions (e.g., communication, mutual exchange); and activities that reduce conflict and group division (e.g., integration). Geographic movement is an especially significant barrier to social support in military populations. For this reason, interventions that utilize cyber or virtual communities (e.g., internet, chat rooms, Facebook, etc.) may be especially useful tools for increasing these populations' social connectedness and social support.