

Mental Health and Religion in the US Military: Army's "Spiritual Fitness" Test Comes Under Fire

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An experimental, Army mental-health, fitness initiative designed by the same psychologist whose work heavily influenced the psychological aspects of the Bush administration's torture program is under fire by civil rights groups and hundreds of active-duty soldiers. They say it unconstitutionally requires enlistees to believe in God or a "higher power" in order to be deemed "spiritually fit" to serve in the Army.

Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF) is a \$125 million "holistic fitness program" unveiled in late 2009 and aimed at reducing the number of suicides and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) cases, which have reached epidemic proportions over the past year due to multiple deployments to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the substandard care soldiers have received when they return from combat. The Army states that it can accomplish its goal by teaching its service members how to be psychologically resilient and resist "catastrophizing" traumatic events. Defense Department documents obtained by Truthout state CSF is Army Chief of Staff George Casey's "third highest priority."

CSF is comprised of the Soldier Fitness Tracker and Global Assessment Tool, which measures soldiers' "resilience" in five core areas: emotional, physical, family, social and spiritual. Soldiers fill out an online survey made up of more than 100 questions, and if the results fall into a red area, they are required to participate in remedial courses in a classroom or online setting to strengthen their resilience in the disciplines in which they received low scores. The test is administered every two years. More than 800,000 Army soldiers have taken it thus far.

But for the thousands of "Foxhole Atheists" like 27-year-old Sgt. Justin Griffith, the spiritual component of the test contains questions written predominantly for soldiers who believe in God or another deity, meaning nonbelievers are guaranteed to score poorly and will be forced to participate in exercises that use religious imagery to "train" soldiers up to a satisfactory level of spirituality.

Griffith, who is based at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, took the test last month and scored well on the emotional, family and social components. But after completing the spiritual portion of the exam, which required him to respond to statements such as, "I am a spiritual person, my life has lasting meaning, I believe that in some way my life is closely connected to all humanity and all the world," he was found to be spiritually unfit because he responded by choosing the "not like me at all" box.

His test results advised him, "spiritual fitness" is an area "of possible difficulty for you."

"You may lack a sense of meaning and purpose in your life," Griffith's test said. "At times, it

is hard for you to make sense of what is happening to you and others around you. You may not feel connected to something larger than yourself. You may question your beliefs, principles and values. There are things to do to provide more meaning and purpose in your life. Improving your spiritual fitness should be an important goal.”

In an interview, Griffith, who was not speaking on behalf of the Army, said he was “deeply offended” by the spiritual questions he was forced to answer.

“It seems like my destiny is all messed up and that I am unfit to serve in the United States Army, if you believe the results of this test,” said Griffith, who has served in the Army for five years. “When I think of the word spirituality I go to the root of the word: spirit. I don’t believe in that.”

Lt. Greg Bowling agreed that the test “asks rather intrusive questions about soldiers’ spirituality – coming perilously close to violating the 1st Amendment.”

“There was no option to avoid the questions, leaving our atheist soldiers to wonder if their beliefs are tolerated in today’s increasingly religious Army,” he said.

According to a copy of the test, the Army maintains that the “spiritual dimension questions ... pertain to the domain of the human spirit: they are not ‘religious’ in nature. The Comprehensive Fitness Program defines spiritual fitness as strengthening a set of beliefs, principles, or values that sustain a person beyond family, institutional and societal sources of support.”

Brig. Gen. Rhonda Cornum, the director of the CSF program, has said, “The spiritual strength domain is not related to religiosity, at least not in terms of how we measure it.”

“It measures a person’s core values and beliefs concerning their meaning and purpose in life,” she said. “It’s not religious, although a person’s religion can still affect those things. Spiritual training is entirely optional, unlike the other domains. Every time you say the S-P-I-R word you’re going to get sued. So that part is not mandatory. The assessment is mandatory though and junior soldiers will be required to take exercises to strengthen their other four domains.”

But despite the verbal gymnastics Cornum seems to engage in over the meaning of “spiritual” and “religious,” it has been established that the spiritual component of CSF is deeply rooted in religious doctrine.

A press release issued by Bowling Green State University (BGSU) in January 2010 said renowned “Psychology of Religion” expert Dr. Kenneth Pargament was tapped to develop the spiritual portion of the test in consultation with Army chaplains, BGSU ROTC cadets, graduate students and officials at West Point.

Cornum’s claims that soldiers are not required to participate in remedial training if they score poorly on the spiritual portion of the test were not articulated to Griffith and other soldiers, who told Truthout they feared they would be disciplined by their superior officers if they didn’t act on the recommendations they received after taking the exam. In fact, nowhere on the test does it state that such training is voluntary.

Moreover, Cornum’s attempts to replace the word “religious” with “spiritual” as a way to avoid a lawsuit was not lost on one civil rights organization.

Last week, the Military Religious Freedom Foundation (MRFF) sent a letter to Secretary of the Army John McHugh and General Casey, the Army's chief of staff, demanding that the Army immediately cease and desist administering the "spiritual" portion of the CSF test. (Full disclosure: MRFF founder and President, Mikey Weinstein, is a member of Truthout's board of advisers.)

"The purpose of the [spiritual component of the test] though couched in general and vague language, is to strengthen a soldier's religious conviction," says the December 30, 2010, letter signed by Caroline Mitchell, an attorney with the law firm Jones Day, who is representing MRFF. "Soldiers who hold deep religious convictions routinely pass the spirituality component of this test while atheists and nontheists do not. The Army cannot avoid the conclusion that this test is an unconstitutional endorsement of religion by simply substituting the word 'spiritual' for 'religious.'"

"The majority of the spiritual statements soldiers are asked to rate are rooted in religious doctrine, premised on a common dogmatic belief regarding the meaning of life and the interconnectedness of living beings," the letter further states. "The statements in the tests and remedial materials repeatedly promote the importance of being a believer of something over electing to be a nonbeliever. Moreover, the images that accompany portions of the CSF Training Modules make clear the religious aspects of the spirituality training."

Mitchell says the Establishment Clause of the Constitution prohibits such religious testing.

"And it's not just the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment which is being blatantly violated here," Weinstein said. "Clause 3 of Article 6 of the body of our nation's Constitution specifically prohibits any type of 'religious test' being used in connection with any government service. Thus, this 'spirituality' portion of the Army's CSF test completely savages this bedrock Constitutional prohibition."

Weinstein said MRFF currently represents more than 200 Army soldiers who are "vehemently objecting to this clearly transparent 'religious test', the majority of them practicing Christians themselves."

He said he does not expect the Army to stop administering the spirituality portion of the test. Weinstein and his legal team intend to pursue legal remedies if they are rebuffed, he said.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has also sent a letter to McHugh calling on the Army to stop assessing soldiers' spiritual fitness.

Additionally, Jones Day filed a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request last week on behalf of Griffith and MRFF, seeking a wide range of documents related to the development of the spiritual portion of CSF. Truthout is also a party to the FOIA request.

A Defense Department spokesperson did not return calls or emails for comment.

"Dr. Happy"

CSF is based entirely on the work of Dr. Martin Seligman, a member of the Defense Health Board, a federal advisory committee to the secretary of defense, and chairman of the University of Pennsylvania's Positive Psychology Center, who the Army calls "Dr. Happy."

Seligman, who once told a colleague that psychologists can rise to the level of a “rock star” and “have fame and money,” is the author of “Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment.” The Penn Resiliency Program, upon which the Army’s CSF is based, “teaches cognitive-behavioral and social problem-solving skills and is based in part on cognitive-behavioral theories of depression by Aaron Beck, Albert Ellis” and Seligman.

Despite his “happy” reputation, in some circles, Seligman is best known for developing the theory of “Learned Helplessness” at the University of Pennsylvania more than four decades ago. As psychologist and torture expert Dr. Jeffrey Kaye noted in a report published in Truthout last year, Seligman and psychologist Dr. Steven Maier developed the concept of Learned Helplessness after they “exposed dogs to a situation where they were faced with inescapable electrical shocks.”

“Within a short period of time, the dogs could not be induced to escape the situation, even when provided with a previously taught escape route,” Kaye wrote. “Drs. Seligman and Maier theorized that the dogs had ‘learned’ their condition was helpless. The experimental model was extended to a human model for the induction of clinical depression and other psychological conditions.”

Seligman’s work in this area influenced psychologists under contract to the CIA and Defense Department, who applied the theory to “war on terror” detainees in custody of the US government, according to a report published in 2009 by the Senate Armed Services Committee.

In May of 2002, the timeframe in which the CIA began to use brutal torture techniques against several high-value detainees, Seligman gave a three-hour lecture at the Navy’s Survival Evasion Resistance Escape school in San Diego. Audience members included the two psychologists – Bruce Jessen and James Mitchell – who have been called the architects of the Bush administration’s torture program.

Five months earlier, Seligman hosted a meeting at his house that was attended by Mitchell, along with the CIA’s then-Director of Behavioral Science Research, Kirk Hubbard, and at least one “Israeli intelligence person.” Seligman claims he was totally unaware his theory on Learned Helplessness was being used against detainees after 9/11 and denied ever engaging in discussions about the torture program with Mitchell, Jessen, or any other Bush administration official.

“Learned Optimism”

Seligman, a past president of the American Psychological Association (APA), began consulting with General Casey in September 2008 about applying the research he and his colleagues have conducted over the past decade to the benefits of his theories on “Learned Optimism” to all of the Army’s active-duty soldiers. Seligman then met with Cornum in December 2008 to discuss creating the foundation for CSF as a way to decrease PTSD.

“Psychology has given us this whole language of pathology, so that a soldier in tears after seeing someone killed thinks, ‘Something’s wrong with me; I have post-traumatic stress,’ or PTSD,” Seligman said in August 2009. “The idea here is to give people a new vocabulary, to speak in terms of resilience. Most people who experience trauma don’t end up with PTSD; many experience post-traumatic growth.”

According to a report published in December 2009 in the APA Monitor, Seligman believes that positive thinking methods taught to schoolchildren who “were [conditioned] to think more realistically and flexibly about the problems they encounter every day” can also be taught to Army soldiers and the results will be the same.

Seligman said he is basing his theory on a series of 19 studies he conducted, which found that teachers who “emphasized the importance of slowing the problem-solving process down by helping students identify their goals, gather information and develop several possible ways to achieve those goals,” increased students’ optimism levels over the course of two years “and their risk for depression was cut in half.”

But unlike studies conducted on schoolchildren, there is no research that exists that shows applying those same conditioning methods to the Army’s active-duty soldiers will reduce PTSD. Seligman, however, seems to be aware that is the case. That may explain why he has referred to Army soldiers as his personal guinea pigs.

“This is the largest study – 1.1 million soldiers – psychology has ever been involved in and it will yield definitive data about whether or not [resiliency and psychological fitness training] works,” Seligman said about the CSF program.

“We’re after creating an indomitable Army,” Seligman said.

Positive Psychology’s Critics

While positive psychology, a term coined by Seligman, has its supporters who swear by its benefits, the movement also has its fair share of critics. Bryant Welch, who also served as APA president, said, “personally, I have not been able to find a meaningful distinction between [positive psychology] and Norman Vincent Peale’s *Power of Positive Thinking*. Both emphasize substituting positive thoughts for unhappy or negative ones.”

“And yet the US military has bought into this untested notion to the tune of [\$125] million,” Welch said. “This money, of course, could have been used to provide real mental health care to our troops. Instead, it is being used to tell military personnel that they can (and, thus, presumably should) overcome whatever happens to them on the battlefield with the dubious tools of Positive Psychology.”

Other notable critics include authors Chris Hedges and Barbara Ehrenreich, both of who say the practice has thrived in the corporate world where the refusal to consider negative outcomes resulted in the current economic crisis.

Hedges, author of the book *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle*, wrote, “positive psychology, which claims to be able to engineer happiness and provides the psychological tools for enforcing corporate conformity, is to the corporate state what eugenics was to the Nazis.”

“Positive psychology is a quack science that throws a smoke screen over corporate domination, abuse and greed,” Hedges said. “Those who fail to exhibit positive attitudes, no matter the external reality, are seen as maladjusted and in need of assistance. Their attitudes need correction.”

Hedges added that “academics who preach [the benefits of positive psychology] are awash in corporate grants.”

Indeed, Seligman's CV shows he has received tens of millions of dollars in foundation cash to conduct positive psychology research.

According to a report published in the Chronicle of Higher Education, "People credit a large part of positive psychology's success to the solid reputations of the field's leaders - and Seligman's ability to get science-supporting agencies interested."

"The National Institute of Mental Health has given more than \$226-million in grants to positive-psychology researchers in the past 10 years, beginning with just under \$4-million in 1999 and reaching more than nine times that amount in 2008," according to the Chronicle of Higher Education.

Seligman has equated his work for the Army to assisting the "second largest corporation in the world."

Multimillion-Dollar Contract

Seligman's biggest payday came last year, when the Positive Psychology Center received a three-year, \$31 million, no-bid, sole-source Army contract to continue developing the program.

According to Defense Department documents, "the contract action was accomplished using other than competitive procedure because there is only one responsible source and no other supplies or services will satisfy agency requirement[s]. Services can only be provided from the original source as this is a follow-on requirement for the continued provision of highly specialized services."

In 2009, several months after receiving the green light from Casey to develop the CSF program, the Army paid Seligman's Positive Psychology Center \$1 million to begin training hundreds of drill sergeants to become Master Resilience Trainers (MRTs), "certified experts who will advise commanders in the field and design and facilitate unit-level resilience training across the Army."

More than 2,000 MRTs have been trained since CSF was rolled out in October 2009. The Army intends to certify thousands more MRTs.

The Defense Department's justification for the no-bid contract said Seligman's program "possesses unique capabilities, in that, [it is] the only established, broadly effective, evidence-based, train the trainer program currently available which meets the Army's minimum needs."

Seligman's program was "explicitly designed to train trainers (teachers) in how to impart resiliency and whole life fitness skills to others (their students)," the contracting documents state. "Other existent programs are designed to simply teach resiliency directly to participants. The long-term outcomes of [Seligman's program] have been examined in over 15 well documented studies."

"Without the Army's Resiliency Master Trainer Program [as taught by Seligman and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania] the exacerbated effects of multiple wars and other stressors result in a weakened corps and this directly impacts the Army's readiness and ultimately compromises the national security of our nation ... This program is vitally important to our forces deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan."

The contracting documents go on to say that “market research ... mostly through a thorough web search and networking with subject matter experts both within the Army, across services and in [academia] into other “positive psychology” programs was conducted between August and October 2008 before the Army decided to award the contract to Seligman because his program met the Army’s immediate needs.

Cornum said in July 2009 that similar resiliency tests used by the University of Pennsylvania for the general public would be “militarized” by the Army.

A Difficult Challenge

But according to Griffith, the atheist Army sergeant, the Army did not do enough to remove the religious connotations from the spiritual section of the test.

Even Seligman’s colleagues acknowledge that attempting to separate spirituality from religion is a challenge.

“Mapping the conceptual distinctions between what we refer to as ‘religion’ and what we refer to as ‘spirituality’ can be difficult,” wrote Ben Dean in an article published on the University of Pennsylvania’s Authentic Happiness web site.

Griffith said there’s a simple solution: “Scrap [the] spiritual aspect altogether.”

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