

Development and Preliminary Evaluation of a Mental Toughness Training Program for Special Forces Candidates

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Background: Mental toughness is believed to be an important attribute for attaining and sustaining performance excellence in a variety of achievement contexts, including sport, business, medicine, law enforcement, and the military [1]. Research with various populations has shown that mental toughness is characterised by the following attributes: self-belief, optimism, emotional awareness and regulation, success mindset, resilience, attention regulation, and context intelligence [2, 3, 4].

Since 2010, Special Forces Training Centre (SFTC) has been working with DSTO to investigate methods of enhancing candidate preparation for SF selection and training courses in order to reduce wastage associated with attrition. SFTC has identified that mental toughness training is a potential solution to these issues, and a mechanism for maintaining high levels of performance. Accordingly, SFTC requested assistance from DSTO and an external contractor to develop and trial a mental toughness training program that would be suitable for SF candidates.

Aim: The aim of this work was to conduct an initial trial and evaluation of the utility of mental toughness training for SF candidates, in accordance with the client request above.

Method: A mental toughness training program was developed by the authors based on a review of the literature on mental toughness (including similar training programs, [5, 6, 7]), SF training documents, and discussions with SFTC and other specialist staff. The training was delivered to 43 participants in a one-day, face-to-face, workshop format consisting of lessons, written exercises, and small group activities. The training content included: mental toughness characteristics, situations demanding mental toughness, and tools and techniques for enhancing mental toughness in the SF context. At the end of the training, participants completed a survey form on which they provided initial feedback about the perceived value of the training and any suggestions for improving the program.

Results: Based on the survey data, the majority of participants reported that they had a better understanding of mental toughness as a result of the training, and believed that the content was useful and relevant to their future work. The most useful aspects of the training reported by participants were learning about different mental toughness tools and techniques, the small group activities, and becoming more aware of their own mental toughness. Participants also highlighted several areas for improving the training program, such as incorporating more multimedia tools, guest speakers, and running the training over two days.

Conclusions: Preliminary indications suggest that mental toughness training shows utility for SF candidates. Based on participant feedback and the author's observations, the training content was well received and a number of areas for improvement to the program have been identified. Further work will be required to evaluate the longer-term effects / benefits of such training programs, including the conduct of randomised controlled trials.

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