



LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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The Centre for Army Leadership (CAL) is the British Army's custodian of leadership debate, thinking and doctrine. It seeks to stimulate discussion about leadership and to further the institution's knowledge of best practice and experience. Leadership Insights are published periodically by the CAL to feed and shape the leadership debate within the Army through a range of themes and ideas designed to inform and challenge its readership. The views expressed in Leadership Insights are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official thinking of the British Army or the Ministry of Defence. Series editor: Dr Linda Rissi

Calm under pressure Why mental fitness matters for JNCOs

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"You can't lead from the front if you struggle to keep it together."
Centre for Army Leadership Conference, 2024

In the Army, we give great importance to physical fitness, which is integrated into everything we do. However, when it comes to mental fitness, there is not the same level of attention or awareness, and it is easy for it to slip through the cracks. As leaders, we need to start recognising the importance of mental wellbeing and act on it early. In my experience, it is not always the most physically challenging moments that test you; it is when you need to stay calm under pressure, think clearly in times of crisis, and lead confidently when others are watching that are the most difficult. This is when mental fitness manifests itself. This *Insight* examines the critical importance of mental fitness as a key component of resilience and its significance to Junior Non-Commissioned Officers. This *Insight* explains how we can cultivate mental fitness for ourselves and for our teams. Some of the ideas shared here were shaped by my personal reflections following the [2024 CAL Annual Conference on Leadership and Mission Command](#), and they are viewed through the lens of a JNCO.

What are mental fitness and mental resilience?

Mental fitness allows you to stay calm when things do not go as planned. It helps you stay focused in stressful moments and keep your team on track when everything else feels chaotic. The term 'mental fitness' is different from the more common 'mental health'. While the latter refers to a person's general emotional and psychological wellbeing, mental fitness is about the proactive attempt to keep your mind and your thoughts in a healthy, controlled shape. Much like physical health, mental fitness requires constant attention and care,

which may include emotional regulation, structured cognitive development, and stress management. Mental fitness is linked to mental resilience, which is reactive. Mental resilience is how well you bounce back from adversity or trauma, how successfully you adapt to change, and how effectively you can operate under stress (Hackfort and Kloppel 2020). Mental resilience is often associated with sustained mental fitness. Just as physical training prepares your body to handle strain and injury, mental fitness equips your mind with the tools and strength to deal with negative situations and builds resilience. Mental fitness and resilience are two sides of the same coin. One helps us show up every day with clarity and focus. The other helps us bounce back when things go wrong.

The British Army, through leadership and training programmes such as Op SMART, places strong emphasis on building mental resilience, defined broadly as the ability to adapt positively to stress, adversity, and challenge while maintaining performance and wellbeing. This applies not only to operations but also during exercises, on camp, or when personal pressures affect focus and morale. For Junior Non-Commissioned Officers, who are often the first line of support for their teams, understanding and developing both mental fitness and resilience is essential. These qualities enable leaders to stay composed, make sound decisions under pressure, and maintain cohesion when others may be struggling. The [*Army Leadership Doctrine*](#) reinforces this, stating, 'Leaders must know and understand the pillars of mental resilience to be able to understand where they themselves may be struggling as well as where the people they lead may require support. Leaders must set the climate that allows open and honest discussion about mental well-being, dispelling the stigma that has been attached to mental health in the past.' (ALD 2021, 4-3).

Why does it matter for us?

As JNCOs, we are the first rung of leadership. When a soldier is struggling, whether it is mentally, physically, or just feeling overwhelmed, they come to us first. We are also expected to keep steady when things start to wobble. We deal with pressure from both above and below. We are required to support our teams, deliver under pressure, and keep everything running smoothly, even when we are carrying our own personal burdens. However, if our mindset is off, if we struggle, then our state of mind will impact how we lead, how we make decisions, and how well we support the team. For us JNCOs, both mental fitness and mental resilience are essential.

Mental fitness and resilience feed into each other. Every time you stay calm under pressure, manage your emotions or bounce back from a setback, you are not just getting through that moment; you are building your ability to cope better the next time it happens. Like physical training, it is the repetition that matters. The more often we stretch our mental capacity, reflect, and reset, the more resilient we become. The next time you are tested, you will find yourself a little steadier, a little clearer, and a little more prepared, because you have already built the foundations to carry yourself and your team through it. And when we are resilient, we are more likely to lead with patience, make clearer decisions, and carry our teams through high-pressure situations without losing our grip. Resilience also keeps us consistent. A steady leader builds trust, which people lean on when the pressure is on. That is why the habits we build now matter. It is not about waiting for a crisis to react; it is about building a mental foundation before you need it. The [*Army Leadership Doctrine*](#) rightly describes resilience as something that can be developed over time rather than something you either have or do not. It comes from experience, reflection, support, and knowing when to pause and reset. The more we train our mental fitness, the stronger our resilience becomes.

Mental fitness refers to the everyday habits and mindset that support psychological health. Resilience is the outcome: the ability to recover quickly and effectively from stress or setbacks. Both are essential for Junior NCOs, who often lead from the front while supporting others and managing their own challenges. Crucially, guidance from the NHS and Ministry of Defence affirms that mental resilience is not an innate trait but a skill that can be developed over time. The NHS [*Every Mind Matters*](#) initiative highlights how resilience can be strengthened through daily practices such as reflection, self-awareness, and personal growth. Similarly, MOD guidance in [*Management of Health and Safety in Defence*](#) (JSP 375, Vol 1, Ch 17) emphasises proactive development, early intervention, and leadership-led support as key strategies for building resilience across Defence. This reinforces the idea that, like physical training, resilience grows through intention, repetition, and consistent effort.

The British Army promotes this approach through initiatives like Op SMART, which offers stress management and resilience training grounded in cognitive behavioural therapy, mindfulness, and military psychology. The MOD's [*Mental Health Annual Summary*](#) (2024) also emphasises the importance of leaders engaging in mental resilience training, not just in response to challenges, but proactively. This is particularly

relevant for JNCOs, who may face stress from multiple angles without always having the wider support structures available to officers.

How JNCOs can build resilience

Leadership under stress demands composure. Resilience helps JNCOs remain steady even when tired, under-resourced, or emotionally stretched. It allows us to lead from the front without crumbling under pressure, and it sets the tone for our sections to follow. This is not a line from doctrine; it is something I have found to be true in my own experience. It reflects the spirit of the [Army Leadership Doctrine](#), which highlights that resilience develops over time through lived experience, reflection, and support. I have used this phrasing because it is something other JNCOs will remember.

Here are practical ways JNCOs can build their resilience day to day:

- Routine – Consistency brings a sense of control. Start and finish the day with simple habits that anchor you. Even something as simple as making your bed or writing down three priorities for the day can help you feel more in control.
- Rest – Tired minds make poor decisions. Prioritise sleep, even in harsh conditions. Even taking five minutes to breathe deeply or switch off before stepping into a task can help reset your head and avoid burnout.
- Check-ins – Check in on yourself and your section. Small conversations can prevent big problems. For yourself, it can be as simple as asking, 'How am I really doing right now?' If your body feels tense or your thoughts are racing, take a moment to reset by stretching, taking a deep breath, and drinking some water. That moment of self-awareness can make all the difference.
- Support Networks – Lean on your mates, mentors, or welfare teams. The Padre helped me once when I was carrying too much on my own, and it changed everything.
- Mindfulness and Focus – Techniques such as tactical breathing or brief mental resets help build control and calmness.
- Reflection – After tough days or exercises, ask yourself: What did I learn? What worked? What did not work? Reflection turns experience into growth. A practical way to do this is by keeping a shot journal. Writing down your challenges, thoughts, or wins helps create distance and makes sense of what is happening, especially during the quiet moments or at the end of the day. It doesn't need to be long, just honest.
- Purpose – When pressure builds, remember why you are doing this. Your values and goals can keep you grounded.

The NHS also offers a simple model backed by research and widely used in the Armed Forces. It is called the Five Steps to Mental Wellbeing, and it ties in well with what good leadership looks like day to day:

- Connect with other people – Build strong relationships with your team, mates, and family. Leadership starts with listening.
- Be physically active – In the army, we already engage in physical activity, but regular movement also helps clear your mind.
- Learn new skills – Developing yourself through new skills or leadership knowledge keeps your mind sharp.
- Give to others – Support a mate, offer help, or be present; it builds purpose and connection.
- Pay attention to the present moment – Slow down and notice what is going on around you and how you are really doing.

These steps do not need to be done all at once. Building them into your day helps build resilience for yourself and your team.

A new approach to mental resilience

Resilience is what allows us to rise again and again, even on the bad days, through the tough exercises, and in the middle of the night when someone needs us. The Army needs JNCOs who are sharp, reliable, and ready to lead. But we cannot do that unless we are mentally fit. Resilience does not make us invincible, but it does make us dependable. And for a JNCO, being dependable can make the difference between holding the line or losing it. By focusing on mental fitness and cultivating habits that foster resilience, we become better leaders, not just for our teams but for ourselves.

- **It is not about being tough.** There is still a belief that being a good leader means being loud, confident, and always in control. But authentic leadership is often quieter. It is about staying steady, being open when it matters, and having the courage to listen. Mental fitness gives us the edge when pressure builds. The MOD's UK Armed Forces Mental Health Summary (2022) reports that about 1 in 8 serving personnel experience anxiety or low mood every year. We should not ignore this. It does not make anyone weak, but it does mean we need to discuss it more and, as leaders, set the tone that mental health matters.
- **Mental fitness affects performance.** Whether we are on camp, in the field, or deployed, mental sharpness impacts everything: how we process information, how we make quick decisions, and how we respond when plans fall apart. It affects everyone around us. It spreads throughout the section if we are calm, clear, and steady. If we are frantic or shut off, it spreads, too.
- **You do not need to be a counsellor, but you do need to care.** We are not expected to have all the answers; we are not therapists, but we can notice when someone's not right and show that it is okay to speak up. Being mentally fit does not mean you have never struggled. It means you have developed tools, habits, and awareness that help you show up for your team, even when things are tough. Sometimes, the best leadership is that JNCO who checks in, gives their time and listens.
- **Build a mental resilience culture.** Take time to check in on your team and be open to discussing your challenges and level of stress. Acknowledge when something is not right or when you have made a mistake. Actively listen to those who are under stress and seek your presence and help. This will help you create a new, more open and tolerant culture, allowing you to become aware of emerging problems and points of stress.

Always remember: Small routines add up; they help you and your team stay balanced under pressure.

Conclusion

Mental fitness is an essential component of leadership. It is what helps us stay calm when the pressure builds, make decisions in difficult moments, and set the tone for our teams. As JNCOs, we are often the first to respond, the ones others look to, and the ones who keep the momentum when things get tough. That takes more than physical strength; it takes clarity, consistency, and care. You do not need to be perfect. You need to be present, steady enough to lead on the hard days and self-aware enough to recognise when you need to support yourself.

Let's lead by example, not just in our work, but also in rest, reflection, and in the way we take intentional actions to support ourselves and our teams through the daily grind. Because resilience is not built in a day, it is built in the day-to-day. The habits we build now prepare us to face any challenge, tomorrow and beyond.

Questions

1. Think back to a time when it all felt like too much. What helped you regroup and continue leading?
2. What is one change you can make today to improve your mental fitness?
3. How is your team right now? Can you think of an individual with whom it would be beneficial to talk about ways to improve mental fitness?

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