ISSUE FOURTEEN

MENTAL SKILLS TRAINING WITH U.S. ARMY ROTC:

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A SYSTEMATIC FOUR-STEP PROCESS

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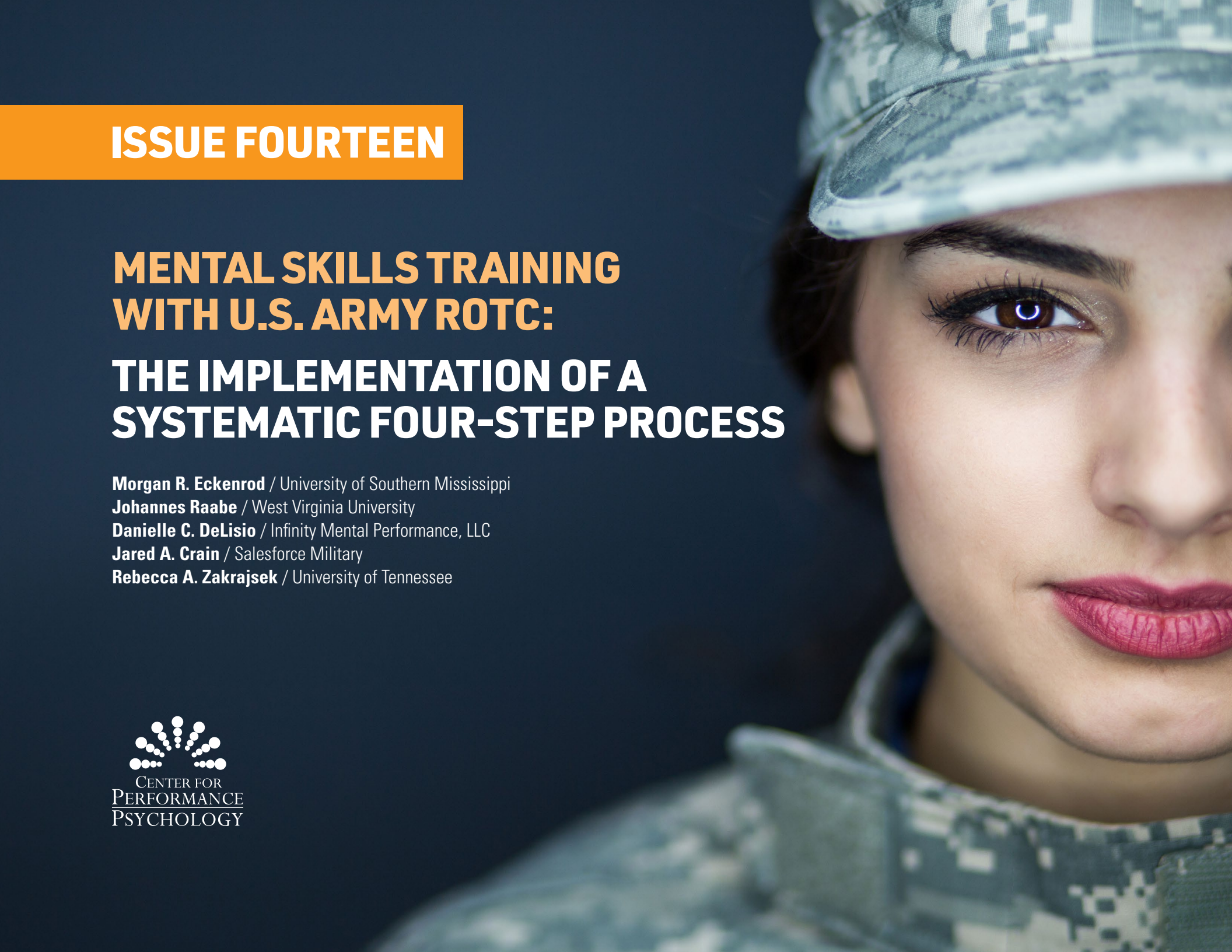

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ABSTRACT

The Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) represents the largest commissioning source in the United States Army (U.S. Army, 2019b). Accordingly, ROTC offers a valuable avenue for the education of future military leaders about mental skills early in their professional development (Sly et al., 2020). In addition, ROTC programs can provide graduate students in sport psychology with opportunities to gain practical consulting experience in a military environment while completing their degree. The purpose of the current article was to describe a case example that illustrates the implementation of mental skills training in ROTC. More specifically, this case was used to outline the application of a systematic four-step consulting process (i.e., exploration, education, acquisition, practice; see Ravizza, 2001) to address challenges in cadets' physical and tactical training. Furthermore, multiple lessons learned from the authors' years of service delivery in ROTC are discussed. This information may be used to assist sport psychology graduate programs in the development of mental skills training programs with ROTC cadets.

Keywords: case study, military population, performance psychology, Reserve Officers' Training Corps

MENTAL SKILLS TRAINING WITH U.S. ARMY ROTC:

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As the discipline of sport psychology continues to evolve, there has been a significant increase in the application of mental skills training with tactical populations (Mattie et al., 2020). This trend has been particularly prominent within the military (Meyer, 2018). In the U.S., many mental performance consultants (MPCs) have found employment working within the armed forces to equip military personnel with the mental skills that allow them to perform optimally. In fact, the U.S. Army now employs more MPCs than any other professional sport or non-sport organization (Meyer, 2018; Voelker, 2012). A large percentage of those practitioners have been educated and trained in sport psychology (Sly et al., 2020), which seems like a logical extension of the field because:

> Although the magnitude of stressors present in military situations is often greater than those present in sport, issues surrounding pre-performance preparation and training, decision-making, attitudes, stress regulation, teamwork, leadership, situational awareness, and other constructs studied in sport psychology are critical to high-level performance in both arenas. (DeWiggins et al., 2010, p. 459)

With over one million soldiers in the U.S. Army (i.e., active duty, National Guard, and Reserve combined; U.S. Army, 2017), it appears virtually impossible to directly train all members' mental skills. Thus, it may be particularly beneficial to focus the application of sport psychology services on Commissioned Officers who "are responsible for leading and training enlisted soldiers, planning missions, and organizing the internal and external affairs of the Army" (U.S. Army, 2019a, para. 2). Instilling knowledge about mental skills in these military leaders can complement the work of MPCs because Commissioned Officers can relay information to their subordinates (i.e., non-commissioned officers and enlisted soldiers) and also reinforce mental preparation in their daily training. In sport settings, MPCs often educate coaches about mental skills and help them incorporate that knowledge into their training with athletes,

especially if an MPC is not consistently available (Arthur et al., 2019). By using a similar approach in ROTC, Commissioned Officers could initially learn more about mental skills, develop a better understanding of how to apply them to military contexts, and, ultimately, teach them to subordinates in the absence of an MPC (Arthur et al., 2019).

While there are different paths to becoming a Commissioned Officer in the U.S. Army (e.g., Officer Candidate School), the Reserve Officers' Training Corps—better known as ROTC—represents the largest commissioning source with over half a million alumni since its inception in 1916 (U.S. Army, 2019b). In ROTC, individuals progress through four years of Military Science (MS) curriculum in that they receive military education and training from their cadre who are active-duty, commissioned and non-commissioned officers who oversee the program operations and deliver military content (U.S. Cadet Command, 2011). Simultaneously, cadets work towards an academic degree at their host university. Accordingly, there are four classes of cadets (i.e., MSI, MSII, MSIII, and MSIV) that typically align with individuals' academic standing (e.g., people in their first year in the program are considered MSI and are most commonly freshmen; U.S. Army, 2019a).

Despite the prominent role of ROTC in the structure of the U.S. Army, to the authors' knowledge, few people have provided applied sport psychology services to cadets in those programs. Hence, a chance is missed to educate a group of individuals that represents approximately 60% of all future Commissioned Officers (U.S. Army, 2019b) early in their professional development and before being placed in the high stress environment of active duty. Furthermore, there are currently over 20,000 cadets enrolled in 273 ROTC programs across the U.S. (U.S. Army, 2019b), which can provide graduate students in sport psychology interested in working with the armed forces with an opportunity to gain practical consulting experience in a military environment while receiving their formal education. Such experience can help those students prepare for potential employment within the U.S. Army following the completion of their degree. Therefore, the purpose of the current article was to share a case example that illustrates the implementation of mental skills training in ROTC. More specifically, this case was used to outline the application of a systematic four-step consulting process to address challenges in cadets' physical and tactical training, such as remaining present focused on security, coping with stress when completing a mission, and mentally preparing for a ruck march. In addition, multiple lessons learned from the authors' years of service delivery in ROTC are discussed. This information may be used to assist sport psychology graduate programs in the development of mental skills training programs with ROTC cadets. Using a case study approach to understand the application of mental skills to the military context can help practitioners improve their accuracy of knowledge (Kulak

& Newton, 2015), more effectively apply information to a unique training setting (Perin, 2011), and encourage peer collaboration in making decisions or developing mental skills training programs for cadets (Hartfield, 2010).

BACKGROUND OF THE CURRENT CASE

The case depicted in this article was situated at a university in the Southeast of the U.S. At the time of the case, the first, second, and third authors were all students in the institution's sport psychology graduate program. As the Professor of Military Science (PMS) at the university, the fourth author oversaw the military operation of the respective ROTC program. To gain buy-in from the PMS, we (the first three authors) regularly observed training exercises in order to get an in-depth understanding of the environment (Shigeno et al., 2019), asked questions to further understand cadets' physical and tactical demands, and designed our consulting plan to align with the ROTC program structure (Sharp et al., 2015). After establishing a relationship with the fourth author in his role as the PMS, we began implementing applied sport psychology services for all cadets on campus. Over the course of five years , we—with the support of other graduate students in the sport psychology program—provided systematic, evidence-based mental skills training to over 100 cadets per year. The fifth author was—and still is—a faculty member at the university and a Certified Mental Performance Consultant® through the Association for Applied Sport Psychology who supervised these services.

IMPLEMENTING A SYSTEMATIC MENTAL SKILLS TRAINING PROGRAM WITH A U.S. ARMY ROTC

There are many similarities in the mental performance demands of the sport and military contexts (DeWiggins et al., 2010). For example, both athletes and cadets must learn to cope with performance pressures, anxiety, and adversity in order to be successful in their respective achievement context (Fitzwater et al., 2017; Hanton et al., 2005; Jones et al., 2002; Mattie et al., 2020). As a result, the mental skills we implemented with cadets did not differ significantly from those we have discussed with clients in the athletic setting. We aligned our consulting process with Ravizza's (2001) three-step approach to psychological skills training (i.e., education, acquisition, and practice) to directly address challenges in cadets' physical and tactical training. However, we added "exploration" as an initial step in our systematic four-step process to identify unique challenges cadets experienced. Especially since none of us had prior experience working with this population, this additional step allowed us to specifically tailor our services to fit the context and training demands of ROTC (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Compared with services we have provided in sport, we used a meaningfully different approach with respect to the delivery and, in particular, the application of this knowledge (i.e., how

cadets used mental skills). Practically, our approach was structured to align with the "crawl-walk-run" model of interaction used in most military training to learn, practice, and implement specific training exercises (Goldberg et al., 2017).

First (exploration), we continuously inquired about challenges in cadets' physical and tactical training. Throughout every semester, we regularly talked with cadets in each MS class to find out what they were currently focusing on in their training, allowing us to identify areas where they wanted to optimize their performance. We also had conversations with the respective cadre to learn more about the specific expectations placed on cadets. Lastly, we reviewed ROTC military programming (e.g., U.S. Cadet Command, 2011) to further understand the unique training content of each MS class as well as the respective learning objectives. We quickly learned that each MS class faces their own unique challenges and, therefore, it was important for us to tailor our mental skill sessions to address cadets' varying needs in their physical and tactical training. For example, MSI cadets are challenged with transitioning into a new and unfamiliar environment, building relationships with the cadre and cadets while managing stressors associated with balancing their academic and ROTC responsibilities, whereas MSIII cadets are tasked with leading less experienced cadets through planned training activities for the battalion. Thus, this initial exploration allowed us to avoid a "one-size-fits all" approach in our service delivery and, instead, tailor our mental skills training specifically to the current challenges of the cadets with whom we worked (Henrikson et al., 2014). Table 1 highlights the main challenges of each class based on our experience as well as associated recommendations for MPCs wanting to work with ROTC cadets. It is important to note that the information presented in Table 1 was based on our experience working with one particular ROTC program; however, it seems reasonable to think that there are meaningful similarities across battalions. For example, all ROTC programs require cadets to earn a Bachelor's degree in the major of their choosing, pass all military science and leadership courses in the ROTC curriculum, and complete Advance Camp and the Enhanced Skills Training Program (Wiedemann, 2005).

Second (education), for each challenge that was identified in step 1, we conducted an introductory session with cadets to discuss basic information about a mental skill we believed would ideally help cadets cope with the demands they experienced. This allowed cadets to become familiar with a skill that could positively impact their performance (Ravizza, 2001). In choosing the skill, our service delivery was conceptually grounded in an attentional control framework (see Wrisberg, 2007). This framework allowed us to help cadets "focus on only those thoughts, feelings, or environmental information that are essential for effective performance" (Wrisberg, 2007, p. 60) by addressing essential attentional processes

(e.g., emotional control, attentional capacity) and antecedents (e.g., feedback, instruction; Wrisberg, 2007). In military training, this step (education) is often referred to as "crawl," whereby cadets receive thorough explanations and step-by-step instruction when learning a new skill (Goldberg et al., 2017).

This basic introduction served as the foundation for step three (acquisition), in which we implemented more complex activities, and allowed cadets to extensively apply the strategies in order to gain familiarity with them before implementing them into their physical and tactical training (Ravizza, 2001). In this process, cadets were encouraged to take previously learned strategies and connect them with the one they were currently utilizing (e.g., implementing diaphragmatic breathing while using self-talk). We also discussed how cadets could implement the learned strategies before, during, and after ROTC physical and/or tactical training or into other domains (e.g., academic course work). In military training, this is the "walk" phase of cadets' learning, in which they continuously practice the new skill and eventually begin to incorporate it into previously learned training methodology (Goldberg et al., 2017).

In the fourth stage (practice), we accompanied cadets during ROTC training exercises and helped them integrate strategies taught in the classroom to specific tasks in the "field" (e.g., ruck march). This final step was used to allow the cadets to implement their acquired mental skills into actual performance situations (Ravizza, 2001). Similarly, the "run" step of the military training approach is focused on cadets implementing and executing particular skills in training scenarios (Goldberg et al., 2017). This process allowed cadets to not only practice the implementation of the learned strategies but to also recognize how they can facilitate their performance.

CASE EXAMPLE: STRESS DURING RANGE SHOOTING

While we used our systematic four-step consulting process to work with all MS classes, we will highlight a case example in which we specifically addressed training challenges of MSIII cadets in this article to illustrate our consulting approach.

STEP 1: EXPLORATION

Every year MSIII cadets attend Advance Camp, a 32-day training where they are evaluated on various physical and tactical tests. Since this event represents an important cornerstone in ROTC, we always comprehensively debriefed it with cadets upon their return to campus for the Fall semester in order to identify challenges that we could address in our mental skills training with future MSIII classes. One year, the cadre reported observing many cadets struggling with the range shooting test where cadets shoot at targets of varying distances and are required to meet a certain score before they can move on to the next training exercise. Accordingly, in step 1 (exploration), we inquired in more depth about cadets' experiences of shooting on

the range. It became apparent that cadets appraised this exercise negatively because of the associated pressure of being assessed by high-ranking officers, the high failure rate among participants, and the fear of becoming mentally and physically exhausted from spending multiple hours trying to pass the shooting evaluation. This negative primary appraisal coupled with a perceived inability to cope with the situational demands (i.e., secondary appraisal) resulted in a meaningful level of stress for most cadets and, in turn, a decline in performance (see Lazarus, 2000). Yet, in their research, Ohlson and Hammermeister (2011) concluded that controlling one's anxiety may not be as important as having the ability to maintain focus when it comes to range shooting as performers can only "consciously attend to one thing at any given snapshot in time" (p. 107). Thus, we felt it was best to teach cadets techniques that not only help them appraise their performance context positively but also allow them to maintain an optimal focus during task execution. Based on our in-depth assessment of cadets' experiences, and in line with our attentional focus framework, we developed a uniquely tailored approach for steps 2, 3, and 4 that we believed would best help MSIII cadets optimize their performance on the shooting range.

STEP 2: EDUCATION

For step 2 (education), we chose box breathing, which helps performers cope with stress and anxiety in a given moment (Sellakumar, 2015). Box breathing, also known as rhythmic breathing, requires individuals to, for example, inhale for a count of four, hold their breath for a count of four, exhale for a count of four, and pause for a count of four (Hanton et al., 2015). Utilizing a structured breath count can help an individual slow their breathing down while stabilizing bodily movements because the harmonious breathing patterns align with the ebb and flow of a particular task in a given moment (Edwards & Edwards, 2007; Mohamed et al., 2014). As such, the structured and steady breath count gives cadets more time to prepare to fire and allows them to exert the energy necessary to execute the task (Ortega & Wang, 2018). Box breathing also allows performers to maintain a present focus (i.e., on the task without outside distraction; Hanton et al., 2015) by aligning the inhale, hold, and exhale of their breath with important task-related (e.g., shooting) cues (Mohamed et al., 2014). Additionally, we believed that box breathing would be an ideal strategy to complement imagery, which is the process of creating or recreating the performance of a skill in the mind with no related overt actions (Vealey & Forlenza, 2015) and the more complex strategy we chose for step 3 (acquisition). That is, by reducing stress or anxiety and directing focus to a particular task, performers are able to enhance the effectiveness of imagery. In turn, when individuals engage in vivid imagery, their brains interpret images as identical to the actual situation (i.e., functional equivalence), sending the same neurological signals to the muscles as if

one was physically performing the task (Holmes & Collins, 2001; Jeannerod, 1994).

For our introductory session (step 2), we decided to change the breath count for box breathing from the standard 4-4-4-4 to 4-2-4-2 for cadets (Hanton et al., 2015). This decision was made to better align cadets' breath count with their trigger pull and because we received feedback from the cadre that cadets are typically only able to steady their breath for roughly two seconds. The cadets were supportive of this decision and believed it was important to match the trigger pull with that short period of steadiness, which could be done using a 4-2-4-2 count.

STEP 3: ACQUISITION

Step 3 (acquisition) began with a brief recap of the introductory session and a discussion about cadets' experience with the technique. Many cadets reported practicing box breathing numerous times before this session in order to better understand and execute the strategy while others had been using this technique regularly. Cadets who did not practice asked if we could do a box breathing activity to re-familiarize themselves with the technique before moving to the next skill. Once we had guided the cadets through a brief box breathing exercise, they reported feeling comfortable with the skill and were ready to move to imagery.

When using imagery, it is important that performers include numerous senses and emotions in order to make the image functionally equivalent and as close to the actual experience as possible (Vealey & Forlenza, 2021). To illustrate our point, we had cadets engage in the lemon imagery activity. Specifically, we guided them through a script in which they imaged themselves in their kitchen seeing, smelling, touching, and tasting a lemon. We used this activity to reinforce the importance of including as many senses as possible, primed them for our imagery discussion and script activity, and were given consent to move to the session discussion and activities.

We utilized Holmes and Collin's (2001) Physical Environmental Task Timing Learning Emotion Perspective (PETTLEP) imagery protocol to help cadets include the senses and emotions necessary to make their image as specific as possible (see supplemental Table). Following the PETTLEP model, we began by actively reflecting on shooting at the range with the cadets, the process leading up to them pulling the trigger while including the senses and emotions needed to simulate the scenario. For example, cadets reported needing to feel the weapon in their hand with their finger on the trigger to align with the physical nature of the movement, smelling the smoke from the bullets and feeling nervous while hearing

themselves inhale or exhale during the trigger pull to connect to their anticipated emotions during the activity. They also believed information was needed describing the shooting range (e.g., visual details) and the steps taken to assume the shooting position, which were added to the script. We encouraged cadets to include this additional information and/or adjust their image to best meet their individual needs when at the range.

We were unable to secure a large enough space for the imagery activity where cadets could assume the position they would be in at the range, so we had cadets sit in their chair with their feet flat on the floor with a prop gun positioned on their desk with the barrel pointed forward and their finger on the trigger. We then asked cadets to close their eyes and engage in box breathing before guiding them through an imagery script that we created with the help of the cadets. Specifically, we instructed the cadets to visualize being at the shooting range, preparing to fire their weapon. We asked the cadets to feel their finger on their trigger, hear their breath, and smell the smoke from the gunshot residue around them. Then, while in their imagery, we instructed cadets to again perform box breathing (using a 4-2-4-2 count), connecting the trigger pull and release with the two second hold at the top or bottom of their breath. We chose to implement a guided script for the acquisition step to demonstrate the importance of including as much information and as many senses in the process as possible to closely mirror the actual task (Vealey & Forlenza, 2021). Once the script concluded, cadets asked if the timing of the script could be slowed to better align with their pace when assuming the shooting position. This change was made to the final script.

STEP 4: PRACTICE

Step 4 (practice) was conducted directly on the shooting range during a semi-annual physical and tactical training weekend [i.e., Field Training Exercise; (FTX)]. In the weeks leading up to FTX, we encouraged cadets to consistently practice box breathing and imagery to prepare for the upcoming training exercise, including arriving at the range, waiting with other cadets before entering the range, entering the range with their weapon in hand, pulling the trigger during the pause at the top or bottom of their breath, and successfully hitting the target. Throughout FTX, we were given full access to the shooting range before and during testing, which allowed us to support the cadets with their mental preparation. We helped them steady their breath (using box breathing) and execute the trigger pull during the pause at the top or bottom of their breath (Sellakumar, 2015). Once the trigger was pulled, cadets were instructed to release their breath and the trigger simultaneously (Mohamed et al., 2014). It is important to note that this training exercise requires cadets to fire continuous rounds, leaving little time in between shots to make major adjustments. Whenever we saw

cadets struggling with pacing their breath and the trigger pull, we had the cadets take a step back from their assumed position after completing a round of shots and practice box breathing to help them better align their breathing pattern with the steady and pull of the trigger (Edwards & Edwards, 2007). Subsequently, cadets stepped back up to the range and prepared to continue shooting. Before assuming the position and firing their weapon, we counted their inhale, hold, exhale, and hold out loud once. These instructions resulted in improved accuracy and highlighted the value of conducting step 4 in the actual practical setting.

REFLECTION

The purpose of this article was to share one case example that illustrates our systematic four-step consulting process for the delivery of mental skills training to ROTC cadets. Overall, cadets shared with us that they felt the mental skills sessions were beneficial and believed the strategies they learned helped them improve their physical and tactical training. As illustrated by step one of our consulting approach, we always inquired about cadets' input and the informal feedback we received allowed us to tailor our instruction toward the individual class with whom we were working (MSIII cadets) and, thus, deliver better services. The following section will outline several lessons that we learned while working with ROTC for multiple years.

LESSON 1: DEVELOPING RAPPORT AND HAVING OPEN COMMUNICATION WITH CADRE

We believe a key component in our ability to establish this mental skills training program was our consistent service delivery and the strong relationships we developed with various stakeholders in ROTC. In order to build this rapport, we had open and honest communication between the consultants and cadre (Zakrajsek et al., 2013). We also purposefully and regularly met with the cadre both formally (e.g., scheduled meetings) and informally (e.g., stopping by offices during open periods) to ask for feedback regarding session delivery, and attend physical and tactical training events to connect with cadets and the cadre while better understanding training demands (Sharp & Hodge, 2013; Sharp et al., 2015).

One aspect of rapport building that we were initially unaware of but quickly recognized as extremely important in the ROTC setting is the development of relationships with all incoming cadre. Spending more time with the new cadre could have allowed us more time to educate them about our services and how they integrate into all aspects of ROTC. ROTC cadre rotate in and out of the program quite frequently and, depending on the cadre rank, experiences, and perceptions of mental skills training, they could meaningfully change the structure of the entire consulting program by, for example, increasing or decreasing the number of mental skills sessions we conduct. We made assumptions that all

new cadre would simply abide by the existing consulting relationship and support our services; therefore, we believe investing more purposefully in building strong relationships with new cadre would have strengthened the consistency and delivery of the mental skills program.

LESSON 2: FITTING MENTAL SKILLS TRAINING INTO CADETS CURRENT TRAINING REGIMEN

We learned that cadets already have many competencies they must master while attending MS classes, labs, and physical training (PT) as well as managing a full course load in their academic major. The fourth author suggested using the metaphor of a "puzzle" to describe the role of mental skills within the ROTC structure, which proved to be extremely helpful. In essence, in order to be successful in the U.S. Army, cadets need to become proficient in many areas, which represent different puzzle pieces in their professional development. Rather than adding a "mental skills training piece" to the puzzle, the fourth author characterized mental skills training as the glue that holds all the other puzzle pieces together. In other words, mental skills training is not an additional discipline to consider but should be integrated into all other aspects of their ROTC training. Researchers have previously suggested that organizational commitment to mental skills training can be improved when practitioners are consistently available, align their approach to meet the unique demands of the performance environment (Zakrajsek et al., 2013), and work around the schedule provided by the organization (Shigeno et al., 2019). Accordingly, to demonstrate our commitment to serving the cadets and cadre, we connected our service delivery to the ROTC programmatic structure and adjusted our schedules in order to deliver mental skills sessions during cadets' existing class periods (Sharp et al., 2015).

LESSON 3: PARTICIPATING IN ROTC TRAINING EXERCISES

We spent an extensive amount of time observing PT and tactical training exercises, which lead cadre and cadets to encourage us to participate in different exercises, some while cadets were in training (e.g., ruck march) and others after our mental skills training sessions concluded (e.g., range shooting). It is important to note that we ensured at all times that professional boundaries (e.g., focusing on the delivery of mental skills training services and not providing physical training recommendations) were not crossed when participating in training exercises by engaging in regular reflection with other graduate students and our faculty supervisor. Since none of us had previous military experience, engaging in these exercises allowed us to learn about the training activities, gave us an opportunity to use military language, and helped us better tailor our mental skills sessions to meet the demands of specific exercises.

LESSON 4: LEARNING ROTC LANGUAGE

We quickly realized the value, if not necessity, of learning the ROTC language. In a newsletter

published by the Association for Applied Sport Psychology, Susannah Knust (2016), a Certified Mental Performance Consultant® who has been working with the military for many years, reported that early on she "felt frustrated because [she] was not fully fluent in 'Army'" (p. 2) and it was only after she "… was relatively proficient with the Army language and better understood the nuances of the culture, I was more deliberate with units [of soldiers]" (p. 2). Therefore, we spent time learning military ranks, titles, and relevant language and, in particular, acronyms that cadets and cadre used in physical and tactical training. Learning the cadets' language and using it in conversations helped us connect with them more effectively and allowed us to better understand the language used in training exercises.

LESSON 5: PROGRAMMATIC EVALUATION

At the end of every academic year, we asked cadets to provide responses to open-ended questions to evaluate (a) the quality of our mental skills training sessions, and (b) their understanding and implementation of learned skills into training exercises.

Cadets acknowledged one of the greatest strengths of the program was how each session built upon another because, as one person reported, that "helped in understanding how the skills could be used together." Cadets also enjoyed the refresher activities that were introduced before learning the new skill. For example, one cadet said, "I liked that we did a reminder activity that allowed us to practice the skill learned in the previous sessions, so we were able re-familiarize ourselves before we discussed the new skill." Overall, cadets impressions of the program were positive and they believed the learned information could be applied to their professional careers and personal lives. For example, one cadet said, "I really enjoyed the mental skills sessions and learned a lot of techniques I can use in my military training and personal life." They also shared recommendations for the future, which included the consultants attending and participating in more training exercises (e.g., Advance Camp) and adding additional practice exercises for more difficult skills (e.g., imagery). For example, one cadet said, "I wish we would have practiced imagery more. It was a harder skill to learn and having more time or doing more activities related to imagery could have helped us better understand how to use it."

Across the five years that we provided these mental skills training services, cadets usually reported using box breathing, imagery, and goal setting most frequently and in various training exercises. For example, one cadet said "I used box breathing while on security because counting my breath helped me to remain alert and if I lost count I recognized I lost focus and re-started box breathing." A particular point of emphasis for our services was MSIII cadets' preparation for Advance Camp due to the importance of this event in individuals' time in ROTC. Most cadets reported using box breathing and imagery regularly in physical and tactical training

exercises to help them reduce stress, refocus thinking, or prepare for upcoming training events. They also utilized goal setting regularly to enhance their motivation and improve focus. For example, one cadet said, "I set a personal goal every morning before I began training to help me dial in on what I needed to accomplish in order to be successful during that day's testing." Overall, formal and informal evaluations allowed us to better understand cadets' experiences and adjust future course outlines and activities to enhance their understanding and implementation of skills.

At the end of every academic year, we gathered information about cadets understanding and implementation of learned skills, strengths of the mental skills sessions, and recommendations for service delivery. Although we received valuable feedback from cadets, we believe implementing a more systematic and regular evaluation process could have allowed us to gather information more consistently to help us improve our session development, planned activities, and service delivery. Another limitation was not using a quantitative evaluation tool to assess cadets understanding and application of learned information, which may have allowed us to further improve our session content, activities, and in turn, the program.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, following our systematic four-step consulting process allowed us to teach cadets about mental skills and apply them to a specific physical or tactical training domain. We believe learning the details of the ROTC program structure and aligning our consulting approach with the needs of each cadet class helped us gain buy-in and build relationships with cadets and the cadre, which further enhanced our service delivery. This, in turn, helped the cadets learn how to apply mental skills to specific physical or tactical training exercises, which led to improved performance.

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Table 1: Recommendations for Mental Skills Training for Each Class of ROTC Cadets

Class	Background information	Main challenges	Recommendations for MPC

MSI	• Transition into college from high school
	• Usually freshmen academically
	• May not have any military-related experience or background
	• The focus of MSI is to familiarize cadets with the culture, structure, and expectations of ROTC
	• Typically no knowledge of mental skills training
		• Transition to a new environment (personally, academically, and ROTC)
		• Feeling overwhelmed with the responsibilities of ROTC
		• Unfamiliarity with other cadets and cadre
		• May not be confident about their purpose in and motivation for ROTC (e.g., "Why am I here?")
			• Help cadets identify their personal values and how they connect with their purpose in and motivation for ROTC
			• Build cohesion among the class
			• Begin teaching some initial mental skills:
			  • Stress management
			  • Time management
			  • Goal setting

MSII	• Usually sophomores academically
	• Cadets are given basic leadership responsibilities within the battalion (they are typically in charge of one or two MSI cadets)
	• The focus of MSII is to learn about and experiment with different leadership styles
		• Finding a role in ROTC
		• Expectations to act and perform more independently
		• Exposure to first leadership experiences
			• Introduce more complex mental skills:
			  • Focus
			  • Imagery
			  • Performance routines
			  • Resilience
			  • Relaxation (e.g., breathing, PMR)
			• Provide background about different leadership styles

MSIII	• Usually juniors academically • Considered non-commissioned officers (NCO) within the battalion • In charge of the day-to-day operations of the battalion • Lead major training components of ROTC (i.e., lab and physical training)	• Given significant leadership responsibilities within the battalion (have to shift primary focus from themselves to other cadets) • Handle day-to-day operations of the battalion • Are expected to perform as a cadet (Advanced Camp at the end of the year)	• Help cadets apply the mental skills they learned during the previous year • Develop cadets' ability as leaders • Teach effective communication strategies
MSIV	• Usually seniors academically • Considered commissioned officers within the battalion • Structure and organize all aspects of the battalion • Oversee the training of the other classes • Commission into the U.S. Army at the rank of Second Lieutenant upon graduation (where they will most likely be in a position to lead a platoon)	• Plan "big picture" of the battalion • Faced with the transition to the U.S. Army (i.e., active duty, National Guard, or Reserve)	• Integrate all aspects of mental skills training from the previous three years • Train cadets to teach mental skills to fellow cadets and, in their future profession, soldiers • Provide cadets with strategies to motivate younger cadets • Help cadets identify a vision for what they want to accomplish as an officer in the U.S. Army • Help cadets develop their personal leadership philosophy • Use case studies to practice leadership

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