

Operational Stress Reactions: Tips for Providers

Operational Stress Reactions (OSRs) are expected temporary behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and physical changes (i.e., “indicators”) resulting from the experiences or consequences of repeated exposure to a single stressor, or multiple stressors, in combat or non-combat operational settings.¹ OSR stressors can be associated with mission and job demands, sleep-limiting conditions, traumatic events, physical hardships and environmental factors, and work-life conflicts.

MOST COMMON OPERATIONAL STRESSORS AND ASSOCIATED INDICATORS

Operational Stressors	Indicators
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Trauma, danger, and loss in combat and operational settings• High workload• Difficult in living and working environment• Stressful events involving loved ones or friends• Experiencing/witnessing harassment, bullying, or work-related conflict• Sleep-disrupting work conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Depressed mood, sadness, helplessness, or grief• Attention, concentration, or memory deficits• PTSD symptoms• Anxiety or fear• Burnout, emotional exhaustion, or being disengaged• Difficulty falling or staying asleep• Frustration, irritability, or anger

OSRs can have important effects on functioning and fitness for duty, but providers are not always trained to ask about them. Providers should ask assessment questions to address operational stressors and stress reactions, and can leverage organic resources such as chaplains to obtain information on unit stressors. Below are some tips for assessment and intervention to address OSRs.

PROVIDER TIPS

Assessment

- Ensure that you fully understand the service member’s operational responsibilities and duties, as well as how the unit functions.
- Include questions about OSR stressors and symptoms in your intake interview and follow-ups, such as:
 - What are things like in your unit (e.g., any problems with peers, leaders, or the mission)? How is unit morale? What is your leadership like?
 - Are you doing what you were trained to do? Do you feel useful in your job?
 - Are you overworked and stressed?
 - Are you not doing enough or do you feel underutilized, bored, or “useless” in your job?
 - Does your current work involve any special situations? (Examples: field operations, inspections, cramped living or work settings)
 - Does your work schedule allow you enough time to sleep?
 - How has your job performance been? Is it hard to concentrate or to do any of your tasks?

Intervention Options

- Employ empirically supported treatments to address stressors and stress reactions (e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy, person-centered or solution-focused therapy, mindfulness).
- Use role playing or assertiveness training with service member to facilitate productive conversation with command.
- Discuss fitness for duty and the possibility of placing a call together to command to talk about OSRs and ways to reduce stressors, if needed.

Plan for Upcoming OSRs

- Check for pending changes in life and work that could affect functioning, discuss strategies and resources to mitigate potential OSRs.
- If the service member will soon PCS or leave the military, refer to InTransition, a free, confidential program that links service member with behavioral health care. Reach InTransition at 800-424-7877 or 800-424-4685 (international toll-free).

¹Nash, W. P., Vasterling, J., Ewing-Cobbs, L., Horn, S., Gaskin, T., Golden, J., Riley, W., Bowles, S., Favert, J., Lester, P., Koffman, R., Farnsworth, L., & Baker, D. (2010). Consensus recommendations for common data elements for operational stress research and surveillance: report of a federal interagency working group. Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, 91(11), 1673-1683.