

PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID (PFA) FOR COMBAT TROOPS IN THE FRONTLINES

(A Proposal for Adaptation by the Nigerian Military)

BY

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Psychological First Aid (PFA) is a structured approach designed to offer immediate support to individuals facing traumatic events. It focuses on addressing acute distress, promoting stabilization, and providing basic emotional support. PFA is rooted in principles that can be adapted flexibly, making it particularly suitable for high-stress settings, such as the frontlines where Nigerian military troops confront insurgency and banditry. Here's how PFA can be adapted to serve combat troops effectively:

1. Core Components of Psychological First Aid for Combat Troops

- **Safety and Stabilization:** Combat zones inherently carry physical and psychological risks. A PFA intervention here prioritizes stabilizing the troops, helping them feel safe, and assessing immediate needs. This might involve grounding techniques to manage anxiety, promoting rest when possible, and providing clear and concise situational information.
- **Connection with Social Supports:** Social support is crucial in combat environments where isolation, fear, and uncertainty prevail. PFA can facilitate peer support among troops, fostering a sense of camaraderie and encouraging open, judgment-free communication about their experiences and feelings.
- **Empowerment and Practical Assistance:** Encouraging troops to participate in problem-solving and offering them resources to cope with immediate challenges (e.g., managing distress, enhancing resilience) can foster a sense of control. This approach helps them focus on achievable actions, like short-term goals in their mission or relaxation techniques they can use during rest.
- **Normalizing Reactions:** Combat can induce intense emotions, and PFA can help troops understand that many reactions—shock, fear, anger—are normal in response to traumatic experiences. Normalization helps mitigate stigma, encouraging those struggling to seek support without fear of judgment.
- **Linking to Further Resources:** When feasible, connecting troops with resources like on-site counseling, telemedicine support, or scheduled downtime to meet with trained personnel ensures continuity of care.

2. Adaptation Strategies for Frontline Conditions

Given the constraints and challenges of frontline deployment, PFA must be adapted for brief, impactful interventions that fit within operational demands. Here's how:

- **Brief, Structured Interventions:** PFA for combat troops should be adapted to fit short intervals, like moments before or after missions, during brief lulls, or even on breaks. This allows soldiers to receive support without needing extensive time away from their duties.
- **Incorporation of Military Personnel as Peer Supporters:** Training selected military personnel in PFA basics can empower them to support their peers in the field. Combat personnel often feel more comfortable sharing their emotions with someone who understands the immediate challenges of combat firsthand.
- **On-the-Spot Techniques for Managing Acute Stress:** Techniques like controlled breathing, grounding exercises, and progressive muscle relaxation can help troops manage their stress during critical moments. These techniques can be taught and reinforced through PFA interventions and repeated in brief on-site training.
- **Use of Resilience-Building Modules:** Incorporating resilience-focused elements, such as visualization exercises and positive reframing, can bolster soldiers' mental fortitude, helping them reinterpret difficult experiences in ways that emphasize their survival skills and purpose in their roles.
- **Ensuring Privacy in Support Encounters:** The stigma associated with mental health support can deter troops from seeking help. PFA adaptations must respect this by ensuring that PFA sessions are private and confidential, reinforcing trust and encouraging open communication.

3. Key Psychological Support Skills for the Military Context

Military-focused PFA requires special attention to empathy, non-intrusive support, and quick rapport-building. Skills that would be beneficial include:

- **Listening with Empathy and Respect:** Troops often benefit from being heard without judgment, especially when discussing traumatic experiences or fears. This helps build rapport and reassures them that their reactions are valid.
- **Observation Skills:** Observing changes in behavior, mood, or performance among troops can help identify those who might benefit from PFA. Signs of withdrawal, difficulty focusing, or hypervigilance may indicate distress that needs attention.
- **Non-Intrusive Questioning:** Asking questions in a manner that allows troops to open up at their own pace can make support sessions less confrontational and more comforting. Simple questions like, “How have things been feeling recently?” or “Anything on your mind?” can provide a gentle prompt.

4. Challenges and Considerations

- **Limited Access to Specialized Mental Health Support:** In resource-poor settings, PFA might be the primary psychological support available. Ensuring that more troops have access to this basic support and encouraging field commanders to support its use is essential.
- **Cultural and Situational Sensitivity:** The PFA approach should be adapted to consider the socio-cultural context of Nigerian soldiers, as well as the hierarchical structure of the military. Emphasizing respect, loyalty, and collective identity can be beneficial.
- **Mental Health Stigma:** Mental health concerns may still carry stigma, particularly in military settings where strength and resilience are valued. Training personnel to recognize and respect vulnerability as a strength can help shift this perspective.

5. Follow-Up and Referral Systems

When PFA identifies soldiers needing further mental health support, it's crucial to have a referral system, even if it's informal. Liaising with off-site military mental health professionals, creating downtime schedules for further counseling, and using telemedicine for follow-up can provide essential continuity.

In conclusion, PFA's flexible, trauma-informed approach aligns well with the unique psychological needs of combat troops on the frontline. For Nigerian soldiers facing high-risk environments, tailored PFA can provide crucial immediate support and contribute to mental resilience, potentially mitigating long-term mental health challenges.