

Background: COVID-19 is a pandemic that threatens not only our patients but ourselves and our sense of safety and control. Like soldiers on a battlefield, our front line staff are coping with ongoing uncertainty about the scope of the threat, concerns about adequate PPE, and worry about the complex decisions that will be required of them. Many of us are experiencing unusual levels of professional anxiety and stress under these “battlefield conditions.” This places all of us at increased risk for burnout and psychological trauma reactions. In order to mitigate these risks, we must develop cognitive and emotional resilience in ourselves and our colleagues. Our goal is to provide you with tools based on the *Anticipate, Plan, and Deter* model fostering resilience in healthcare workers who are deployed in hazardous situations.¹ The first tool is the Battle Buddy system.

What Are Battle Buddies?

The US Army uses the Battle Buddy for peer mentoring and emotional support. Having a Battle Buddy helps you to: 1) Validate your experiences; 2) Identify and address stressors early; 3) Keep work at work; 3) Develop and maintain resilience.

Who Is the Ideal Battle Buddy?

Battle Buddies (BBs) are usually chosen by a third party but in some instances pair up spontaneously. BBs are matched based on a common working environment, clinical responsibilities, level of seniority, and stage in life, but without being close friends. BBs need to be able to be supportive and objective when assessing stress behavior and providing feedback.

What Does a Battle Buddy Do?

The BB is a listener. BBs do a brief check-in as they share their reactions to stressors and anxieties and validate each other’s experiences (e.g. “I’m afraid I’m going to bring the virus home”, “I keep doing chart checks on my patients late into the evening”). BBs understand the daily challenges of a particular unit, provide each other an additional perspective, support resilience and encourage additional help if stresses and anxieties escalate. Listening and validating is not debating or arguing. If this is occurring, it is best to reach out to a mental health professional or to your employee assistance program.

How Do Battle Buddies Help to Find Solutions?

BB’s support resilience: figuring out adaptive ways to cope with challenges so we can all perform successfully in a less-than-perfect environment. Daily BB conversations can also help identify specific issues that need to be addressed locally (within their unit) or that need to be escalated to leadership.

What is The End State for the Battle Buddy Program?

1. A working environment where everyone feels supported and validated. No one is left out.
2. Work stays at work. Home is a place for relaxation and recovery.
3. A cognitively and emotionally resilient team culture.

BATTLE BUDDY CHECK-IN 1-10 MINUTES

- Aim to contact your Battle Buddy 2-3 times per week or more (daily if needed)
- Contact can be a quick text to check in; a short call to debrief; a zoom meeting to hash something out
- Listen, validate, and provide feedback; identify any issues that need more support or attention
- Identify any operational issues that need escalation

Sample questions for your check-in:

- What is hardest right now?
- What worried you today?
- What went well today?
- How are things at home?
- What challenges are you facing with sleep/rest, exercise, healthy nutrition?

The mental health consultant for your unit is:

They can be reached at:

¹ Schreiber et al. Maximizing the Resilience of HealthCare Workers in Multi Hazard Events: Lessons from the 2014-2015 Ebola Response in Africa. *Military Medicine* 184,:114, 2019

Stress Inoculation

Working with Your Battle Buddy to Anticipate and Plan for Specific Stressors

Once the Battle Buddy program is initiated, a mental health consultant will work with each unit or department to engage in stress inoculation: they **Anticipate** and **Plan** for the specific stressors they are likely to encounter. The mental health consultant is also available to help **Deter** more serious mental health problems, by working with individuals who experience escalating or cumulative stressors and whose coping responses are getting overwhelmed.

You can work with your BB to help each other engage in the **Anticipate** and **Plan** phases of stress inoculation on your own. In your BB conversations, support one another to do the following:

Anticipate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anticipate and identify the specific stressors you are likely to encounter • Describe your likely responses to these stressors
Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify the stressors and responses that will be most difficult for you • Describe your personal resilience plan: How will you cope with these difficult stressors? What resources are available to you? What strengths and resilience factors will you make use of?
Deter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you or your Battle Buddy are experiencing escalating or cumulative stressors and coping responses are getting overwhelmed, it is not your job to be a therapist. Please move into the Deter phase by seeking or helping your BB to connect with your dedicated mental health consultant.

Here is a list of potential stressors and resilience factors to help initiate your conversations:

Stressors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experiencing working conditions that are hazardous or have insufficient supplies • Worrying about the safety of your loved ones and/or being unable to return home • Being worried about contracting COVID-19 • Witnessing COVID-19 in coworkers • Being asked to perform duties outside of current skills • Being unable to meet patient needs and/or being responsible for making difficult triage decisions • Being forced to abandon patient(s) • Witnessing an unusually high number of deaths • Witnessing the death of a child, adolescent or young adult • Having direct contact with grieving family members

Resilience Factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling your work was meaningful and contributed to the greater good • Feeling emotionally connected to or supported by someone (family member, friend, coworker, Battle Buddy) • Connecting with your Battle Buddy and receiving validation for your reactions • Getting enough sleep; staying hydrated, having access to food and time to eat • Getting at least 15 minutes of exercise each day • Fostering your positive emotions: expressing gratitude, feeling compassion for self and others; sharing your story; listening to music, spending time in nature, laughing • Spending time with your religious, faith-based, or spiritual practices

For more detail, see Albott, McGlinch, Wozniak, Wall, Gold, Vinogradov: Battle Buddies: Rapid Deployment of a Psychological Resilience Intervention for Healthcare Workers during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Anesthesia and Analgesia, 2020.