
Coping with Difficult Military Schools

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The unique opportunity to attend elite and challenging military schools such as Airborne, Air Assault, Ranger, Sapper, Sniper, or Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape (SERE) School can offer tremendous opportunities to learn, grow, and challenge oneself. However, one cannot grow without discomfort and stepping outside of one's comfort zone. Thousands of service members have graduated the military's most challenging courses, yet many schools remain shrouded in fear. This article intends to provide prospective students a toolkit of coping skills to help mitigate anxiety and optimize performance at some of the military's most elite and feared schools.

Preparation

Consider the timing. As you decide whether or not to attend a difficult military school, you may want to consider its wise for you at that time. While there may be no such thing as a "good time" to attend the most stressful military schools, they can be even more challenging if you are experiencing acute mental health concerns, such as anxiety, depression, or grief. Practice self-compassion and be mindful that your best may look different when you are going through a difficult time. If needed, and if you have the flexibility, it may be wise to first focus on getting your mental health back to baseline prior to exposing yourself to the additional stress of a difficult military school.

Address addictions. Consider if you have any addictions which could impede your success. Your access to addictive substances such as alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine may be limited or non-existent. Tapering your dependence on these substances prior to attending will help prevent withdrawal symptoms that could distract you from the course. As you may not have access to technology, it may be helpful to consider the extent to which you are dependent on your cell phone. You can practice tolerating boredom without using technology prior to reporting.

Have your affairs in order. As previously discussed, you may not have access to technology. Having your life at a good "pause" point will allow you to focus your full attention on the course without worrying about life outside. This includes discussing what to expect with your loved ones. In many courses, you will have no communication with the outside world for weeks or even months. Advance preparation can give you peace of mind. It may be helpful to remember that while at a difficult military school, your entire purpose and focus is to successfully navigate the course and graduate.

Complete readings related to the school you are attending. There are numerous books that make excellent reading as you prepare to depart. Perhaps some of the best known are *The Things They Carried* (1990), a collection of short stories by Tim O'Brien about his experiences in Vietnam; *Five Years to Freedom* (1984), written by LTC Nick Rowe, SERE school's founder; and *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946), written by psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl. These books, among others, may help to you contextualize your difficult military training.

Physical conditioning. Many of the military's most challenging courses are incredibly physically demanding. The course may feel more difficult as your body deconditions, which one can mitigate to some extent by starting in a strong position. Additionally, adequate physical preparation can help with psychological coping.

Mindset Shifts

Prior to your arrival at a difficult military school, you can also begin practicing the below mindset shifts and coping skills. Take note of your mindset. Pay attention to thoughts and emotions that arise. Note if they are helpful or unhelpful toward your goal of completing the course. If the thought or feeling is unhelpful, experiment responding with alternative and more helpful thoughts. Below are some, but not all, mindset shifts that may prove helpful.

This is temporary. Put the course in perspective. It is a training event to prepare you for extreme circumstances. Although time may seem to pass more slowly, students have the comfort of knowing the course will indeed end. And for better or worse, your time spent at the course will likely be some of the most memorable of your life. You may even want to take a moment to savor it, however bitter the taste may be. Eventually the course will be over, and you will be left only with some of the most significant memories of your life.

I have already invested significant time and energy into this goal. Once you begin preparing for a difficult military school, you have already begun your investment into this goal. You can make the most of your investment by seeing it through to the end. The quickest way to get your goal of attending a military school in the rearview mirror is to keep putting one foot in front of the other. As Winston Churchill said, "If you're going through hell, keep going." By delaying or quitting, you are only prolonging the experience or jeopardizing your

broader career goals. If you see other students quit, instead of viewing this as permission to quit, allow it to fuel your resolve to stay. It may also be helpful to remember that no one back home will delight in seeing you come home early. Everyone invested in you and your development wants to see you be successful there.

It is okay to make mistakes. There is no such thing as performing perfectly at the military's most difficult courses. You will make mistakes there, just as you make mistakes in life. You are more likely to be successful if you focus on rebounding from your mistakes successfully, rather than striving to make no mistakes. This is a great opportunity to practice self-compassion. Very few people feel they were at their best while at these schools. You may be tired, hungry, stressed, and uncomfortable. You will feel pushed toward your limit. Practice showing yourself and your team grace, and then getting back in the fight.

Peer evaluations do not define me. Peer evaluations are a required part of many courses. Even if your teammates are all stellar, you may have to rate them from first through last. Take the task seriously and remain objective. If rated lower than expected, remember that you are not defined by your peer evaluations. Your peers saw you perform for a certain period of time, within a certain context. They are not a global reflection of who you are as a person. Squeeze as much learning as you can from the feedback, then pick yourself up and strive to be someone of whom you are proud.

This is a valuable learning opportunity. Few ever have the opportunity to attend the military's most difficult courses. They are unique courses that put you in unique situations. You may have the opportunity to meet a side of yourself you have never seen before. It is not uncommon to hear someone say "you learn a lot about yourself" at these courses. You may learn what your body is capable of and who you are under extreme stress. You may even learn about human nature. This hard-won knowledge is empowering. We can shift our focus from the stress we are enduring to the wisdom we are acquiring. Stay curious and engaged. If you are going to suffer, you can at least gain some knowledge and experience from it.

I can do difficult things. These are difficult schools. And you can do difficult things. Remind yourself that while these courses are not easy, they are doable. Balance mentally preparing for worst case scenario while also being mindful of cognitive biases, such as catastrophizing.

This is important/meaningful to me. When military schools get tough, consider why you enrolled. For many, the course may be required as part of a larger goal (e.g., pursuing a career in aviation, Ranger Regiment, or special operations). Keeping that broader goal in mind can be helpful while tackling the task at hand, as can making personal meaning for why you are pursuing a goal. Consider how you want to represent yourself, your family,

and your unit. As Friedrich Nietzsche said, "He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how."

I may not be able to control this situation, but I can be someone I am proud of within this situation. When in distress, we often cope by trying to control or change the situation. At many military schools, this is not realistic. You will have minimal control over your circumstances. Instead of focusing on controlling the situation, it may be wise to focus your attention on being someone you are proud of within the unique circumstances. Consider and stay committed to your personal and professional values. Consider what you want to stand for. You may need to redefine what success and optimal performance looks like in the context of a particular military school.

This is an opportunity to be courageous. Without fear, we cannot be courageous. Difficult military schools offer us an opportunity to be courageous. As Franklin D. Roosevelt said, "Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the assessment that something else is more important than fear." Your courage may pay off by widening your window of distress tolerance.

Interpersonal Coping Skills

In addition to these mindset shifts, there are a number of individual and interpersonal coping skills one can utilize at difficult military schools. Interpersonal coping skills focus on building, supporting, and relying on your teammates.

Build your team. As you arrive at your school, you can make active efforts to get to know your team. You can learn your teammates' names and get to know them by asking them questions about themselves. While this may seem simple, it may not be your natural focus initially. Consider taking conscious, active efforts to build and get to know your team.

Support your team. There are innumerable ways you can help your peers at difficult military schools. You can check in with them if they are having a tough time. You can lift the mood by joking and laughing with your team. You can help develop a collective team motivation, such as "we will all get to the end of this together." Helping your team can also help you find meaning in your experience. Altruistic behavior in stark circumstances is something of which to be proud. As discussed above, living your values and being proud of yourself in difficult circumstances can be a helpful coping skill.

Rely on your team. It may be helpful to talk and share with your team. Sharing can help distract you from distressing experiences or help you to process them. Interpersonal openness also helps set the tone for a supportive team atmosphere. Interpersonal vulnerability provides your teammates with an opportunity to provide support, which can bring meaning to their experience as well.

Maintain healthy boundaries. When taking care of others, one must not forget to care for themselves as well.

This can take shape through establishing healthy interpersonal boundaries. In other words, we can define the left and right limits for how we are willing to support others. For example, we may choose to support our teammates by talking to them when they are in distress; however, certain topics may actually increase your own level of distress. If talking to someone about a certain aspect of the course (e.g., chronic pain, sleep deprivation, or hunger) is not helpful, then it is okay to politely redirect or discontinue the conversation. Likewise, if certain comments or topics (e.g., catastrophizing future components of the course) are having the opposite effect of what's desired (i.e., increasing anxiety, hopelessness, or other negative emotions) then you do not have to engage. We can hold ourselves to this same standard. Military schools are already enough of a challenge without introducing additional challenges for ourselves or our teammates. You can contribute to your team by striving to not introduce unnecessary negativity.

Individual Coping Skills

Even with a strong team, there will be times when your teammates will be unavailable or otherwise engaged. The below coping skills are offered as potential methods you can use to cope with the stressors of difficult military schools on your own. These coping skills may help you to take care of yourself on your own, without the support of your team. Each coping skill may not work for everyone. They are provided as options to fill your "tool kit" for coping with distress as it arises.

Basic self-care. Sleep and eat when you can. Drink water. Take deep breaths. Stretch your body. Tense and relax your muscles to relieve tension.

Grounding. Remain grounded. While you may be uncomfortable, you are safe. Recall that you are at a military school. If you find yourself spiraling about how awful the course is, recall that these courses are meant to be difficult. You may be able to maintain perspective by mentally removing yourself from the situation and looking in on the situation as if from the outside. This could also be another opportunity to use your coping skill of humor, finding amusement in how awful some of the situations can be.

Mottos. Having a motto or mantra to repeat can also be helpful to soothe a turbulent mind. You can derive one from your unit motto or the mindset shifts discussed above. Examples include: "Just keep putting one foot in front of the other" or "I've been through worse, and I can get through this too." It could even be something as simple as: "Don't die, don't quit."

Take it one day or moment at a time. You build a house one brick at a time; take it one step at a time. Focus on each day and task as it comes. Often the anxiety of what is to come is more distressing than the actual event. While it may seem counterintuitive to stay in the moment with distressing moments, present moment awareness can help you cope with stress and distressing emotions (Mindfulness, [2022](#)). For example, you can be

nonjudgmentally mindful of pain as a physical sensation which will pass in time. You can also savor the enjoyable moments, take note of novel moments, and "ride the wave" during difficult moments. Imagine yourself like a buoy, bobbing along the waves of emotion as you re-focus your attention on the next small victory.

Control your emotions. There may be moments during the course that are so distressing or exhausting, you may feel overwhelmed by emotion. You may feel on the verge of tears, shouting, or reacting with aggression. In these moments, "riding the wave" of your emotions, or being present with your emotions may not feel attainable. In the event of strong, overwhelming emotions, it may be helpful to re-frame your goal as controlling your emotions. It is okay to be sad or distressed. Notice them, label them (i.e., accurately identify what is happening), and then re-focus your attention on helpful coping skills. Wallowing in despair or losing control of your emotions is not likely to be helpful toward goal of graduating a difficult military school.

Compartmentalize. Handling intense emotions at a military school may look different than it does typically. While compartmentalization is not typically a helpful long-term coping tool, it may serve you in the more short-term context of getting through a challenging school. It may not be helpful to express or process each thought, emotion, or physical sensation that arises. You may even treat your time at the military school like a sort of silent retreat. If a thought or feeling does not contribute to you or your team's goal to graduate the course (e.g., complaining or a desire to quit), then place that thought or feeling to the side and shift your attention to something more helpful.

Find your happy place. When the present moment feels unbearable, try going to your "happy place," or a detailed memory, situation, or activity that mentally soothes you. You can sing a favorite song in your head, imagine a favorite photo or image, recall a favorite memory, imagine what you might say to your loved ones if you could talk with them, or think about how you could make your friends laugh with your stories from the course. By making your happy place as detailed as possible, you can disconnect from the distress of the present moment in an adaptive manner, allowing time to pass by subjectively quicker. Your detailed happy place could also be the future, in that you could envision how proud you or your loved ones will be of your future self.

Self-compassion. Be kind to yourself. Military schools are tough enough without you piling on disparaging thoughts about yourself and your reactions. Instead of attributing all negativity to yourself as a person, you can attribute some of it to the extreme situation or school you are in. Consider reasonable expectations given the extreme circumstances.

Self-discipline. You can be kind to yourself while maintaining high standards for yourself. Often the kind thing

to do is not what's most comfortable in the moment. Rather, the kind thing is to do what will make you most proud of yourself in the long-term. Envision yourself in the future, perhaps on graduation day or in old age, and consider what would make you most proud of yourself.

To conclude, there is no "right" way to cope with difficult military schools, or life for that matter. This article intends to give you options for different coping tools to add to your coping toolkit. Take what serves you and leave the rest. Best of luck to you as you tackle the military's most challenging schools!

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