

Mental Health in the Greek Armed Forces: Prevention & Intervention

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Abstract

Mental health is valuable at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence, through adulthood. The same applies to the Greek armed forces. This is evidenced by the many prevention and intervention programs that have been established over time, and which aim to shield and restore mental health, as it is essential to the proper functioning of the overall military system. Typical prevention programs are the annual interviews with specialists who detect various difficulties, the workshops and talks organized on various kinds of psychosocial issues, as well as the staff support lines. An important position for the mental health of the armed forces is occupied by the interbranch mental health center of the armed forces, which is both a prevention and intervention center, through the departments, treatment and counseling programs which it contains. With the 24-hour telephone line of psychological support of this center, the counseling provided and the referrals made, automatically make it a direct intervention agency. Other methods of intervention are the psychosocial care teams of the army, where their scientific team carries out therapeutic/consultative work, but also liaison/referrals to hospitals and psychiatric clinics. Psychopharmacological intervention carried out in military hospitals could not be absent from the armed forces either, as it is the most frequent way of intervention in the rest of society. Finally, the informational/educational actions that take place, such as seminars and speeches, focusing on one psychosocial issue at a time, and presenting ways to effectively manage it, also constitute a competent way of intervention that contributes to maintaining the functionality of the army.

Keywords

Mental Health, Greek Armed Forces, Prevention

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Introduction

With the psychiatric reform in Greece in 1995, the “Psyhar-gos” program paved the way for innovative changes in the field of mental health. Typically, such were the deinstitutionalization of patients, their psychosocial rehabilitation, outpatient care, as well as the inclusion of their care within general hospitals. Influenced by this, the structure of armed forces mental health services is initially aimed at primary mental health care, which is staffed by the unit doctor, the commander, and the psychosocial care team. Next, it aims at secondary care, consisting of small health units with a responsible psychiatrist officer, and finally, it also aims at tertiary care with the large military hospitals and their psychiatric clinics across the territory [1].

The above levels show us the staggered way in which all procedures for mental health care are done, from the minor problem to the maximum issue that may arise. In particular, it is observed in the first phase, that a massive effort to prevent mental health takes place by all the agencies, and then, depending on the conditions and circumstances, all this evolves into a dynamic intervention, which aims to strengthen it even more. This article will present the ways in which the prevention of mental health in the Greek armed forces is achieved, as well as the intervention in it, with the ultimate goal of protecting it and shielding it from potential risk factors that may lurk in everyday life. The purpose of this research is to highlight the field of Mental Health of the Hellenic Armed Forces and the high level at which it is. In addition, its purpose is to present all Mental Health prevention programs in the Greek Armed Forces, the forms, and methods of intervention for its rehabilitation and strengthening, as well as its human-centered character.

Methodology

For the writing of this article, information was collected using the bibliographic review method. Mainly Greek and foreign language books related to military psychiatry, electronic/on-line sources, as well as scientific articles published on PubMed & academic platforms dealing with the researched topic were utilized.

Dimension of mental health prevention in the armed forces

“Prevention is better than cure”, something that the founder of medical science, Hippocrates, had supported with this well-known saying. The same could be said for the field of mental health. The armed forces, knowing very well the benefits that can come from this, have developed a strong way of preventing and guarding the mental health of its officers and personnel.

The detection of anxiety, depression, various emotional difficulties as well as maladaptive manifestations that undermine the mental strength of the soldier, is, at an initial level, a reliable way of action. This is carried out through the annual

health examination of the executives as well as the periodic psychological examination of the soldiers (every two months) through a clinical interview given by the examinees to the psychologist. Through questions, verbal, and non-verbal communication, as well as body posture, the experienced specialist can perceive if he needs to intervene [2].

The speeches and workshops that are organized from time to time in various units and formations of the armed forces are, in turn, very important means of mental health prevention. They deal with many important and sensitive issues of daily life and can attract attention in several cases. Such speeches concern:

Drugs and the use of generally prohibited and illegal substances. In these conferences, a more thorough report is made on the categories of psychoactive substances and their functions on the human brain areas they affect. The risk factors that can push someone to this behavior are highlighted, and the protective factors that could act as a deterrent shield in such an eventuality are also presented. An important reference is also made to the consequences that the use of substances has on the life and functionality of the individual, as well as to the penalties that he may receive from his service, due to the military environment in which he lives or works [3].

Also, the equality of the two sexes and the prevention of intergender violence and domestic abuse, is a fairly modern and innovative theme, which has recently entered the armed forces dynamically as well. Conferences and speeches of this type reflect the cries of the state, which shouts about the fight against sexism and femicides that have been observed recently. With these speeches, the personnel of the armed forces are sensitized and sexist or violent tendencies towards the female gender or, more rarely, the male gender are prevented, with the ultimate goal of full equality [3].

Another issue facing the armed forces, as well as society in general, and a necessary topic of speech, is suicide and grief management. Such conferences will highlight these problems in all their guises and forms, as also highlight those elements that help us recognize someone's suicidal ideation, self-destructive tendencies or immersion in pathological chronic mourning, and give us some basic guidelines on how we can act in time, in order to prevent situations and events [3].

The bridge between prevention and intervention in the mental health of the Greek armed forces: Interbranch Center for Mental Health of the Armed Forces (DKPSYED)

The Interbranch Center for Mental Health of the Armed Forces is a first-level structure for the provision of mental health services, which is addressed to the military community. It aspires to reach both reserve and permanent Armed Forces personnel, as well as their family members, providing information, support, and treatment. The philosophy of the Center departs from the classical medical treatment of mental illness, which wants the person to be a passive recipient of medical instruc-

tions but focuses on an active mobilization and participation. It seeks to educate the members of the military community so that they can recognize and contribute to the treatment of psychological problems [1].

The goals of DKPSYED are the prevention of mental illnesses in the military community and problematic behavioral manifestations. Also, the assistance of conscripts in the smooth adaptation and completion of their term of service, the support of the families of active and retired military personnel and civil servants of the Ministry of Defense. Finally, it takes care of the prevention and management of daily stress, work stress as well as stress due to military operations [1].

A prominent position is occupied by the 24-hour telephone line for psychological support, which is addressed to all the Greek armed forces and the security forces of the country, as apart from prevention, the counseling carried out during the calls constitutes an intervention at the same time. The telephone line for the Army as well as the Air Force has been operating daily since February 2003, while since 2012 the single operation of the lines was established for all three branches of the Greek armed forces. [4]. The operation of the psychological support line of the Armed Forces is considered necessary, as many units are remote and there is no possibility of providing direct psychological and counseling services, so that the caller can turn to a mental health structure for further help [5].

Most of the callers feel intense loneliness and lack of human contact which can lead to despair and impasse. They feel helpless and want to share their stressful thoughts. The requests expressed range from personal and mundane matters of everyday life to the expression of self-destructive thoughts. The caller is often looking for emotional support, support and advice. Apart from regular one-line callers, most calls are one-way. The telephone line operates on a daily basis, 7 days a week and on holidays. The confidentiality of personal information is respected, and the confidentiality of the line executives is emphasized regarding users and their requests [5].

According to the statistics of the total number of calls for the year 2020, the most common issues that concern the callers are problems related to family relationships, their emotional state as well as issues of anxiety and depression. They are also concerned with other types of issues, such as issues of interpersonal relationships, issues of living within a military unit and relationships that develop in it, issues of leave and pressure from services, various additional military issues that arise, as also issues of suicidal ideation and self-destructiveness, but these two have very low rates of occurrence [4].

Through the statistical search of the calls, where expressions were used: "pandemic", "quarantine", and "lockdown", it appears that of the total number of calls for the year 2020, 4.2% were calls related to Covid-19. No further increase in the search for psychological support was found on all calls [4].

From prevention to intervention: Telephone Counseling

As mentioned above, the 24-hour SOS telephone line for psychological support of the Armed Forces is the bridge that, in addition to prevention, also intervenes in crises and difficult incidents that the counselor will be called upon to deal with. Telephone counseling is the service in which a trained counselor works with a client or a group of clients over the telephone, so that the client (user of the service) can explore and work through personal situations, problems or crises in the context of a single session, of a short-term or long-term therapeutic relationship [5]. In the present case, the role of counselor is assumed by the highly trained staff of the DKPSYED officers and conscripts who hold a university degree related to mental health. The consultees who receive the services of the Center respectively, are all members of the country's armed forces, permanent and enlisted personnel, their family members, the security forces of Greece as well as the civilian staff of the Ministry of Defense.

At this point it is worth mentioning that from 2016 onwards, they were established by the Army General Staff [6], the General Staff of the Air Force [7] and the General Staff Navy [8] the respective servicemen's support offices in their sector (soldiers, and sailors), providing them with emotional support, a framework for recording complaints and complaints as well as legal advice.

The intervention in the mental health of the Greek armed forces

Early detection of issues and psychological difficulties, both in the context of the armed forces and in our society in general, is not enough to protect the mental health of the individual seeking help. Assessing the nature of the difficulties is very important as well, as it helps the specialist to prioritize the needs of his patient. The most important part of the entire therapeutic process, however, is the intervention in the difficulties faced by the person, and the way the specialist will manage them, in order to restore the treated person to functional levels of everyday life and strengthen him in such a way that to protect him from a corresponding future difficulty that may arise in his life.

In the Greek army, one of its best-known institutions for mental health intervention is the Psychosocial Care Teams. The O.P.S.M. as they say, it is a network established in 1997, revised in 2003 and based on the principles of community and military psychiatry. The principles of Community Psychiatry include the principle of the therapeutic continuum and the principle of segmentation, while the principles of Military Psychiatry are additionally based on immediacy, proximity, expectation, simplicity, centrality and brevity.

In addition to investigating and detecting psychological difficulties, Psychosocial Care Teams intervene by addressing those factors that affect the mental health and training

of military personnel. An additional concern of these groups is intervention in psychological crises. A typical structure of psychosocial care teams includes a psychologist or psychologists, a sociologist, a social worker, a medical officer (psychologist or lay doctor) and a military psychiatrist as supervisor. This network is supported by the unit commander, by the administrative manager of OPSM, by the director of the small regional health units, by the military psychiatrists and by the psychiatric clinics [1].

The unit of the D.K.P.Y.E.D. also holds an important position in the intervention. In addition to the 24-hour SOS telephone line, which provides psychological support and intervenes in crisis situations, the Interbranch Center dynamically intervenes in the mental health of the armed forces with a multitude of actions. Such are the counseling of administrations for the handling of special incidents and situations, the work and operational stress management program, the formation of a team to deal with psychologically traumatic stress and teams to deal with combat stress, which are formed only during war operations. In addition, psychiatric monitoring of adults is carried out, individual and group psychotherapies are provided as well as individual-couple-parent-family counseling. Also important are the clinics for eating disorders and sexual disorders that intervene in respective issues, as well as the counseling office for addictions [1].

A common way of intervention in our society, and consequently also in the armed forces, is the referrals made by the respective health doctor or psychologist to a more specialized scientist or to a hospital institution, which possesses more means and methods, in order to act in any level of psychological dysfunction or difficulty. Charged with this role are the country's military hospitals, their psychiatric clinics, as well as their regular outpatient clinics. Usually, the predominant way of intervention of all of these is psychopharmacological intervention, which is often simultaneously combined with appropriate psychotherapy by specialized psychologists or, as a last resort, by admissions and hospitalizations within clinics.

In conclusion, a last but equally valuable way of intervening in the mental health of the armed forces personnel is the educational and informative actions, which aim to promote mental health in the military community, and to raise awareness regarding issues of a psychosocial nature. Such actions are the speeches, the workshops, the stress, anger or bereavement management seminars, as well as in general the various similar intervention programs, which have as their direct aim to relieve any crisis and tension that has been created, and to restore balance and functionality of the military system [1].

Discussion – Conclusion

Taking into account all of the above, it becomes clear how necessary it is to have both prevention and intervention in the mental health of the Greek armed forces, but also in the rest of society in general. Many of the practices mentioned have a dual role, and contribute constructively to both prevention and intervention. Some of them are the lectures, seminars,

workshops and groups that are held from time to time. The topics they deal with and the content of the information they present on critical issues (suicide, gender-based violence, drugs, mourning, anger, etc.) can be modified appropriately, depending on the situation and context, and can also be used as intervention program to deal with a crisis, but also as a means of preventing it.

At the same time, the 24-hour psychological support line of the Armed Forces has a dual role of prevention and intervention. It becomes necessary for both projects, as many units are remote and there is no possibility to provide direct psychological and counseling services. Its operation helps to prevent and deal with crisis situations. Targeted interventions are made on a specific goal/problem that only needs one session or even function as an antechamber/"familiarization framework", so that the caller can turn to some mental health structure for further help [5].

According to studies, the most common problem reported by callers concerns interpersonal relationships both within and outside of the military environment. In many cases the problems found in soldiers during their service are an extension of problems that pre-existed during their civilian life. Also noteworthy is the percentage of calls from relatives, who mainly ask for information and advice, while there is an increase in phone calls before and during the first weeks of ranking [5].

From the aforementioned, the value of the Psychological Support Line is rapidly emerging, as through it the best possible integration of the individual into the specific military environment is sought, supporting and further utilizing the existing potential of the caller, while at the same time strengthening the human-centered character of the Armed Forces [5]. At the same time, this character of the Armed Forces is also strengthened by the presence of their military hospitals and psychiatric clinics, which with their special intervention programs are helpful in protecting the mental health of all their personnel and people.

In conclusion, to improve the general operation of the Armed Forces telephone line and each line, it is highly recommended that the service is networked electronically, that the line be continuously advertised and the public informed of its existence, purposes and operation, as also continuous training, cooperation and co-training with other hotlines and with mental health organizations [5].

In closing, regarding the rest of the mental health prevention and intervention agencies in the Greek armed forces, it is suggested that the state encourages and strengthens their actions. Advertising them, state financial support of all programs and providing incentives to specialized health personnel to get even more involved, introducing new innovative ideas/actions, are some of the ways that could contribute to highlighting and strengthening mental health in general. Finally, having as an example and guide the functioning of mental health in the Greek armed forces, the overall Mental Health system of the country could also receive its positive influences and strengthen any weaknesses.

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