

Army fights new front: Stopping rise in soldier suicide

BY ALAN GOMEZ • USA TODAY • MARCH 25, 2009

BAGHDAD - In Maj. Thomas Jarrett's stress management class ringed with concrete blast walls, American troops are urged not to accept post-traumatic stress disorder as an inevitable consequence of war.



A U.S. Army soldier stands guard next to a weapons seized by Iraqi security forces during recent operations near Baghdad, Iraq, March 19. The Army is boosting efforts to help soldiers deal with the aftermath of deployments. (Associated Press)

Instead, Jarrett tells them to strive for "post-traumatic growth."

During a 90-minute presentation entitled "Warrior Resilience and Thriving," Jarrett, a former corporate coach, offers this and other unconventional tips on how troops can stay mentally healthy once they return home. He quotes Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, "Paradise Lost" author John Milton and German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, among others.

Walking through the crowd of young GIs in the makeshift classroom, Jarrett urges them to fight

The overriding theme of the course: Troops have the power to determine how they react to the horrors they may experience in Iraq. They can either accept them as traumatizing events, or transform them into learning, even empowering, experiences.

"Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional," says Sgt. Michael Venutto, a member of Jarrett's team of instructors.

The class is part of an urgent initiative aimed at halting an epidemic of suicides, which has killed almost as many American troops this year as combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan combined. The trend has left top military psychologists puzzled and resulted in a new emphasis on programs that alleviate stress and prevent possible suicides while troops are still on the battlefield, where doctors say many mental

health problems begin.

To that end, every soldier arriving in Iraq is now handed a card detailing the warning signs for depression and suicide. Two-star generals appear on the Armed Forces Network talking about their experiences with mental health specialists and how it helped. And mental health experts are spending more time on the front lines to make the counseling process informal and accessible to troops who may be reluctant about seeking out a psychiatrist.

The challenge is to get soldiers to open up about their troubles and to break what Lt. Col. Peyton Hurt, the senior psychiatrist in Iraq, calls the old Army way: "You suck it up and drive on."