



# Making sense of suicide: Insights from hardiness research and theory

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# Overview

- Describe sources of stress in military and security operations
- Discuss psychological hardiness as an important stress-resilience resource
- Detail some countermeasures for ameliorating major operational stress factors
- Present a model of suicide based on hardiness theory
- Describe leader & organizational steps to increase hardy-resilient responses throughout the workforce – and reduce suicide

# Bad news: stress happens

- a part of life (esp. military, police)
- stress can take a toll
- 10-30% of soldiers can experience PTSD, depression, anxiety
- can contribute to alcohol & drug abuse, *suicide*





# Psychosocial stressors in security operations

- 1. ISOLATION:** Can be physically remote, far removed from family; Poor communication lines; Different cultures; Newly configured units, low cohesion
- 2. AMBIGUITY:** Mission Definition unclear; Unclear Command Structure; Role Confusion (Warrior or Peacekeeper?); unknown tour length
- 3. POWERLESSNESS:** Rules-of-Engagement Restrictions; Limited Activity; Cultural/Language Barriers; Red tape; can't get things fixed, repair parts; Relative Deprivation
- 4. BOREDOM or EXISTENTIAL BOREDOM:** Repetition & Predictability; Lack of Meaningful Work and Activities
- 5. DANGER:** Threat of Harm (Terrorists, Mines, Snipers, Disease); Psychological Threat (Exposure to suffering, civilians, refugees)
- 6. HIGH PACE OF OPERATIONS:** Heavy workload, many commitments & fewer available forces means frequent & longer deployments, shorter training cycles, loss of sleep, less time for families



Good news: most people cope quite well with stress!

If we understand this better, we can design:

- more effective training & prevention programs
- healthier work & community environments



“We’re just not reaching that guy!”

# Context: many factors influence resilience

Including:

- Heredity
- Early childhood experiences
- Personality
- Social resources
- Work environment



# Hardy-Resilient Style

- A **generalized** tendency to see the world as interesting & meaningful; to see self as able to exert control; to see change as opportunity to learn and grow
- **Commitment (vs. alienation)**: tendency to feel deeply involved in life – including work activities, social world, physical world, and oneself
- **Control (vs. powerlessness)**: belief you can control or influence events in your experience
- **Challenge (vs. threat)**: anticipation of change as an exciting challenge to further development

**Courage** – to choose the future

**Forgiveness** / Future orientation (can “let go” of past injuries)

**Learning orientation** (past is not forgotten – is lessons)

**Humor** (sense of humor)

# Sample research findings 1

## Hardiness predicts continued good health under stress:

- Middle managers (Kobasa, Maddi & Kahn, 1982; Kobasa et. al., 1985)
- Health care workers (Keane et al, 1985; Rich & Rich, 1987; Topf, 1989)
- Bus drivers (Bartone, 1989)
- Athletes (Maddi & Hess, 1992; Golby et al, 2003)
- U.S. Army casualty assistance workers (Bartone et al, 1989)
- Gulf War soldiers (Bartone, 1999; Bartone, 2000)
- Norwegian Navy cadets (Bartone, Johnsen, Eid, Brun & Laberg, 2002)
- Israeli officer candidates (Westman, 1990)
- Israeli war POWs (Waysman, Schwarzwald & Solomon, 2001)
- Peacekeeping soldiers (Bartone, 1996)



## Sample research findings 2

### Hardiness also predicts:

- Less depression and PTSD in police officers (Andrew et al., 2008)
- Better performance in police shoot/no-shoot scenarios (Barton et al, 2004)
- Higher basal cortisol and beta-endorphin levels, less psychological distress (Zorrilla et al., 1995)
- More robust immune system responses to infection (Dolbier et al 2000)
- Better peripheral vision in football players (Rogers et al, 2003)
- Positive use of emotion / anxiety in athletes (Hanton et al, 2002)
- Retention in West Point cadets (Bartone & Kelly, 2005) and civilian college students (Lifton et. al., 2006)
- Success in Army Special Forces selection course (Bartone et al, 2007)
- Success in Israeli secret service selection course (Zach, Raviv & Inbar, 2007)
- Higher HDL levels (good cholesterol) in NDU students (Bartone et al, 2009)



# Hardy-Resilient Style

- **Commitment (vs. alienation):** tendency to feel deeply involved in life – physical world (*umwelt*), social (*mitwelt*), self (*eigenwelt*)
- **Control (vs. powerlessness):** belief you can control or influence events of your experience
- **Challenge (vs. threat):** anticipation of change as an exciting challenge to further development



# Countermeasures for isolation (alienation)

- Provide advance information on what to expect (including culture and language training)
- Have veterans of the operation give briefings
- Invest in pre-deployment unit activities to build trust and cohesion
- Encourage use of e-mail, phone, fax, newsletters, webcams
- Support media coverage (AFN, TV & Radio, print)
- Seek opportunities to interact with other forces
- Engage with the local culture as much as possible



## Countermeasures for ambiguity (control)

- Clearly define the mission, rules, roles
- Clarify chain-of-command and authorities
- Hold frequent meetings with troops to give info updates
- Hold regular command briefings, “country briefings”
- Encourage questions, spirit of learning
- Remind troops of importance of mission – it is worthwhile



# Countermeasures for powerlessness (control)

- Leaders - explain & justify ROEs
- Info briefs; classes on host culture, language
- Ensure fair access to supplies, services, benefits, and explain any differences honestly
- Focus on fixing the things that can be fixed.... Let go of the rest!
- Focus attention on areas you can control (eg. civic works projects)
- Use “compensatory self-improvement”



## Countermeasures for boredom (alienation)

- Develop creative training programs that maintain interest & skills;
- Use exchange programs with other forces in AO;
- Offer self-development & education programs, distance-learning (“Compensatory Self-Improvement” activities);
- Civic works projects
- Compensatory self-improvement activities



# Countermeasures for threat – danger

(challenge, control)

- Provide good training, equipment, supplies, maintenance (aids survival and also boosts confidence)
- Leaders provide sensible policies (reasonable risks)
- Communicate to soldiers, especially as regards threat
- Expert field medical care and evacuation
- Memorial services
- Conduct regular “defuse” - event oriented debriefs

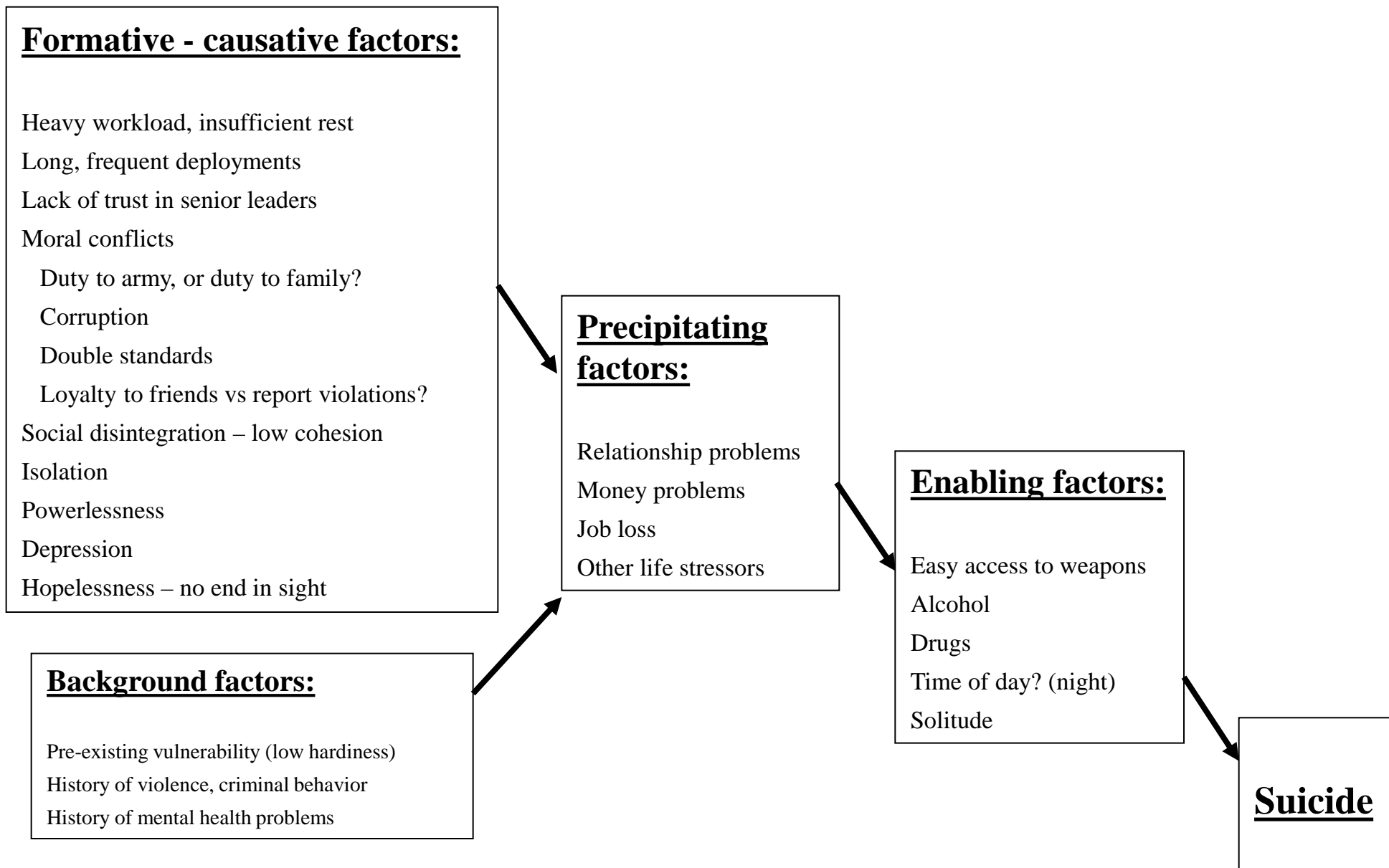
# Countermeasures for high Optempo

(control, alienation)

- Reduce duration and frequency of deployments
- Implement policies fairly – standard deployment lengths
- Avoid deployment extensions
- Mid deployment R&R?
- Volunteers are better than conscripts
- Adequate force sizing and structure for mission commitments

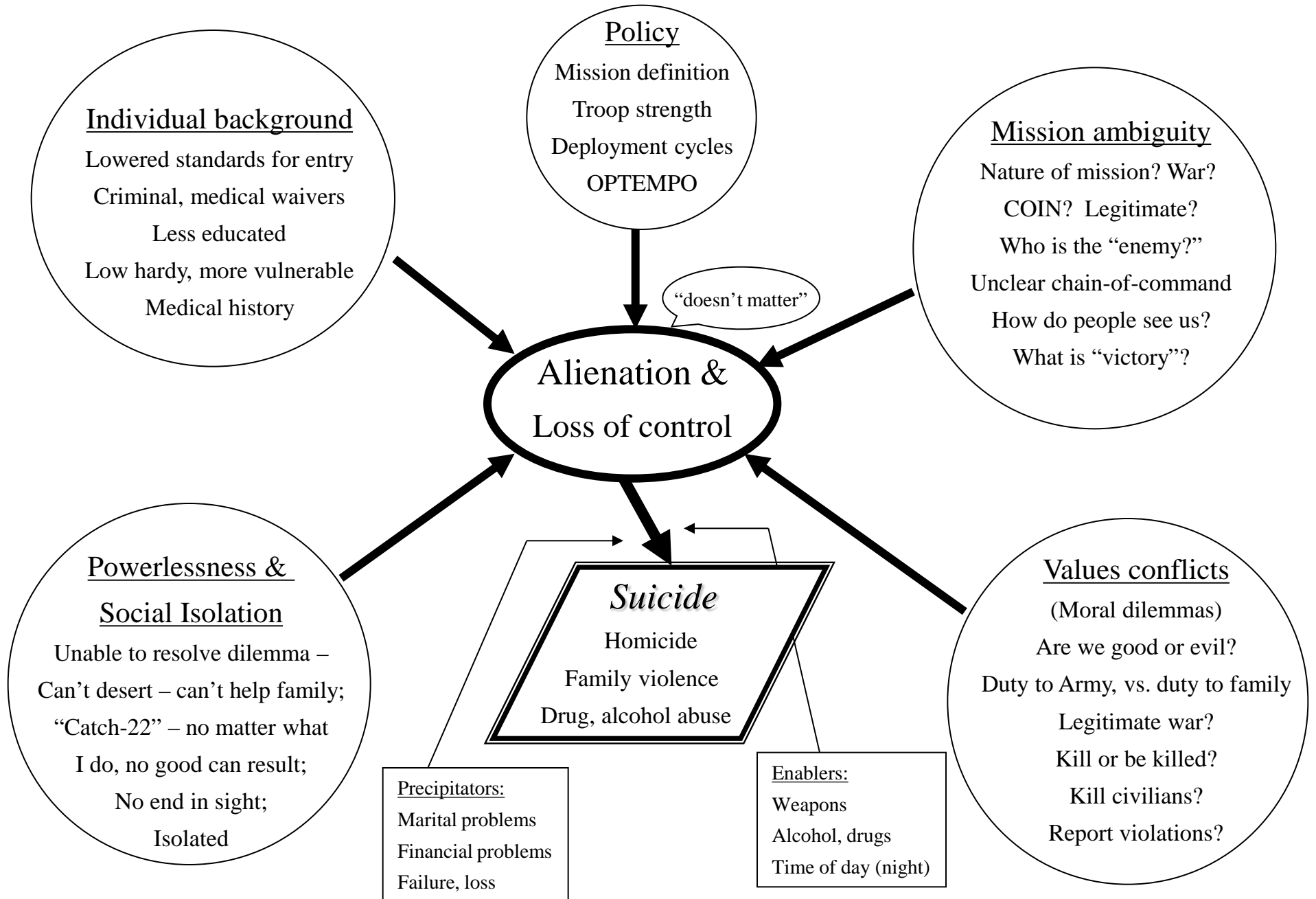


# Clarifying the factors that can lead to suicide



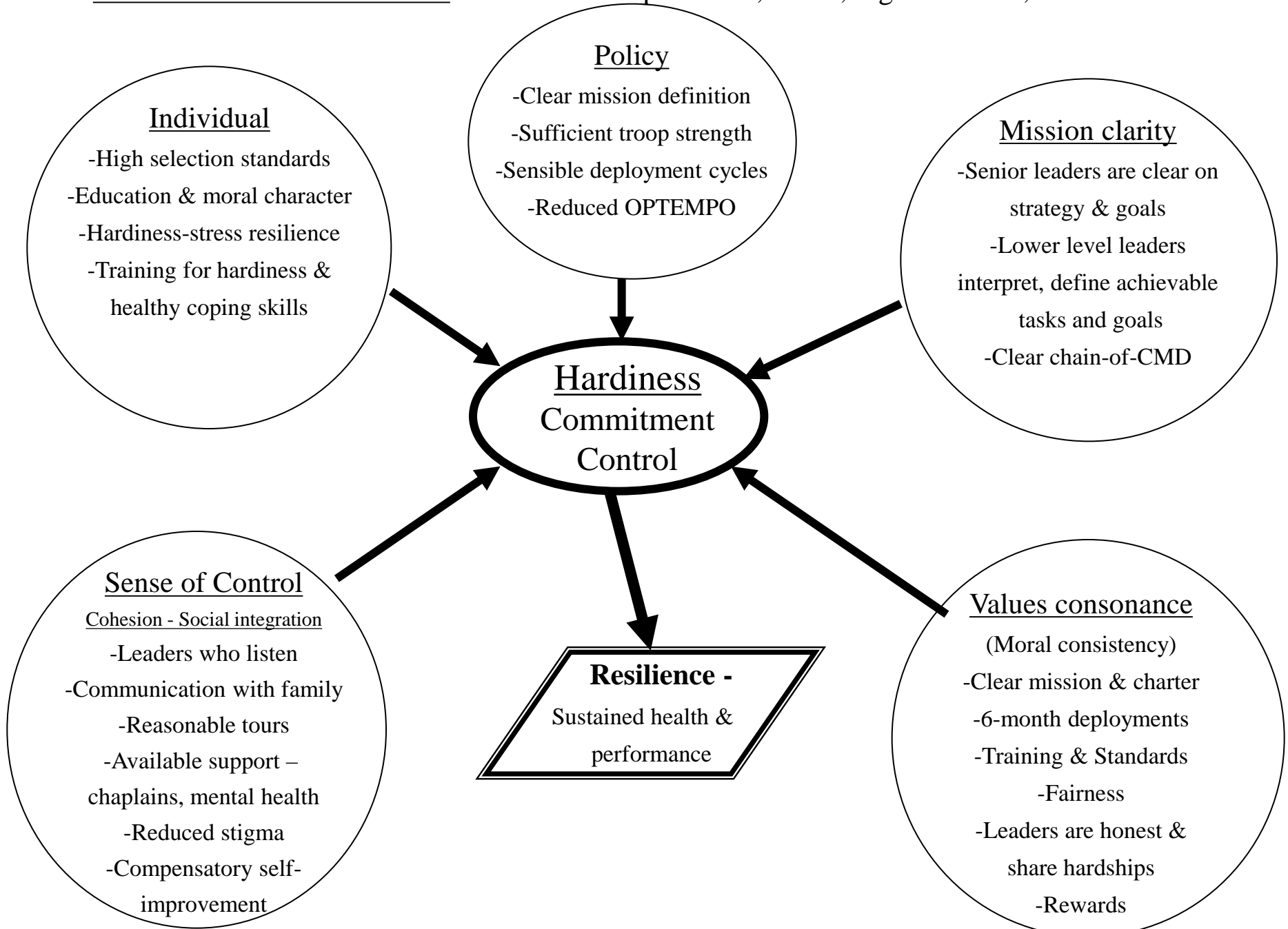
# Military suicide - A “Perfect Storm”

Alienation is the common denominator; social, organizational, & individual factors all contribute



# Preventing military suicide - A holistic approach

Build hardiness - commitment: Focus on multiple levels, social, organizational, & individual



# **How leaders can increase hardiness across the organization:**

1. Lead by example.... Model a hardy approach to life and work, demonstrating commitment, control, challenge (stress is good!)
2. Encourage “hardy” thinking - sense-making of experience
  - in how tasks, missions are planned, discussed, executed
  - in how mistakes, failures, casualties are talked of, interpreted
  - in debriefings, AARs: focus on events & positive constructions
3. Seek out (create) meaningful / challenging group tasks, & then capitalize through reflection and recognition
4. Communicate respect, commitment to unit members

# Focus on the 3-C's of hardiness:

Build Commitment: Provide awards, recognition, community support... tells the troops what they did was worthwhile, and builds a sense of connectedness.... Hold unit / family get-togethers

Build Control: Provide choices... avoid one-size fits all solutions; give troops and families opportunity to have input into programs, what they want to see; remind them they are in control of their own destiny

Build Challenge: Keep pushing the message, this was a learning experience, you have learned and become a better, stronger, wiser person because of what you've been through; foster active, positive problem solving coping approaches

# Conclusion

- Hardiness theory and research provides scientific basis for understanding human resilience, and preventing suicide and other ill-effects of stress in security operations
- Leaders & organizations can increase hardiness in the workforce by:
  1. Reinforcing the *meaningfulness* of activities and events (including loss and failure) (commitment)
  2. Maximize opportunities for *control* and choice (control)
  3. Focus on value of *change* and novelty for learning and development (challenge)