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SUMMARY

The majority of young male Singaporeans and permanent residents who reach the age of 18 to 23 years are conscripted for about two and half years to serve National Service in the Singapore Armed Forces. A review of research literature indicates that the transition from civilian to military life may be stressful for some, particularly during the first 10 weeks of Basic Military Training. The objectives of this study were to find out the factors that were related to the ability to cope with Basic Military Training, both in terms of psychological well being as well as in physical performance. The sample comprised of a Company of 200 recruits who underwent the enhanced Basic Military Training course. Measurements were made at three points of time; on the first day of enlistment, during the high training stress period, and during the low training stress period. The Eysenck Personality Scale, Ways of Coping Questionnaire, General Health Questionnaire, Personal Problems Checklist and Perceived Social Support Questionnaire were used. Results of the Individual Physical Proficiency Test and pass rates were obtained from the trainer. The data was analyzed using correlational analysis, one-way and multivariate analysis of variance, independent t-test and multiple regression analysis.

The results suggest that personality factors, the use of specific coping strategies and deterioration in health are predictors of psychological distress. In particular, recruits who are high in neuroticism, who use less planful problem solving, and xi
who develop medical problems during the training period are likely to report more psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, somatic complaints and social dysfunction.

This study also showed that National Service posed as a stressful event which resulted in a significant decrease in the use of several coping strategies such as confrontative coping, self-control, seeking social support, accepting responsibility, escape-avoidance, planful problem solving and positive reappraisal. This decrease in coping was also accompanied by a significant increase in psychological symptoms. The study further shows that certain individuals may be vulnerable to facing psychological distress. Personality factors such as neuroticism, introversion and impulsiveness may predispose individuals to use certain maladaptive coping strategies. In both civilian stressful events and during the 10 weeks of Basic Military Training, recruits who had higher levels of neuroticism used significantly more escape-avoidance and self-controlling of emotions; introverted recruits used significantly less planful problem solving and impulsive recruits used significantly more escape avoidance.

The implications of these findings are discussed, with recommendations on how health professionals and trainers in the Singapore Armed Forces can address the problem of stress in the military. These include pre-enlistment psychological screening, teaching stress management and effective coping techniques, and early therapeutic interventions to minimize medical and psychological symptoms.