

Operational Stress Reactions: Most Common Stressors and Associated Indicators

Operational stress reactions (OSRs) are expected temporary behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and physical changes (i.e., “indicators”) resulting from the experiences or consequences of repeated exposure to a single stressor, or multiple stressors, in combat or non-combat operational settings.

A review of the literature found 159 studies that linked operational stressors to indicators. This table shows how many studies were identified for each specific stressor (e.g., high workload), and the number of studies linking these stressors to each listed indicator (e.g., agitation, poor job performance). The color categories show the percentage of identified studies for each stressor that linked that stressor with the listed indicator: *1–25 percent of studies †26–50 percent of studies †51–75 percent of studies †76–100 percent of studies	STUDY COUNT (N)	INDICATORS: NUMBER OF SUPPORTING STUDIES (N)										
		Agitation	Poor job performance	Suicidality	Cognitive deficits	Anxiety or fear	Burnout	Depression or grief	Frustration/ anger	Difficulty sleeping	Fatigue	PTSD symptoms
STRESSORS												
Mission and Job Stressors												
High workload (e.g., long work hours and high task demands)	53	6*	8*	1*	7*	5*	16†	10*	3*	10*	5*	7*
Experiencing or witnessing harassment, bullying, or work-related interpersonal conflict	32	–	2*	12†	1*	3*	3*	7*	4*	3*	2*	3*
Inadequate support from leadership, unit, or others	18	2*	–	2*	2*	3*	2*	5†	4*	2*	2*	6*
Ambiguity or inconsistency in mission and rules of engagement	12	–	1*	1*	1*	2*	1*	3*	3*	2*	1*	–
Lengthy, multiple, or uncertain deployment demands	14	1*	3*	–	2*	3*	–	4*	–	2*	3*	4*
Malfunctioning, inadequate, or uncomfortable equipment	8	1*	–	–	2*	2*	2*	2*	–	–	2*	1*
Negative career events, including legal or administrative problems	18	1*	–	15†	–	1	–	2*	–	–	–	3*
Repetitive or monotonous work	12	–	–	–	1*	–	3*	–	2*	–	–	1*
Mission not consistent with training	6	–	–	–	–	–	1*	–	–	–	–	1*
Conditions Leading to Insufficient Sleep												
Sleep disrupting work conditions (e.g., shift work, overnight work)	32	4*	4*	–	16†	5*	7*	8*	4*	7*	8*	3*
Traumatic Stressors												
Exposure to trauma, danger, and loss in combat and operational settings	56	10*	7*	4*	7*	14*	8*	20†	11*	10*	4*	19†
Target of physical or sexual abuse/assault	16	–	1*	11†	–	1*	–	2*	1*	–	–	3*
Physical Hardships												
Illness, injury, or pain	12	1*	1*	5†	–	2*	–	4*	1*	1*	1*	3*
Inadequate access to food, water, and sanitation	7	–	1*	–	3†	1*	–	1*	2*	1*	2*	1*
High physical demands	8	–	2*	–	4†	–	–	–	–	–	5†	–
Work-Life Conflicts												
Separation from loved ones and friends	10	3†	–	1*	1*	1*	–	2*	2*	1*	2*	1*
Financial difficulties	23	1*	–	15†	–	1*	1*	3*	1*	1*	–	4*
Stressful events involving loved ones or friends (e.g., marital problems, illness, or death)	36	3*	1*	15†	–	6*	–	7*	3*	3*	–	6*
Competing career priorities versus family/domestic responsibilities	10	1*	–	–	–	1*	3†	2*	1*	2*	–	1*
Environmental Stressors												
Difficult living and working environment (e.g., isolation, extreme climates/surroundings, or sensory stressors)	36	3*	3*	–	15†	10†	4*	9*	4*	5*	9*	2*
Cultural stressors (e.g., adapting to new culture or language)	3	1†	1†	1†	–	1†	1†	1†	3†	–	1*	–