

# Army's new bid to promote mental health: 170 questions.

**Starting this fall, every soldier will have to take a test designed to target potential mental or emotional problems caused by repeated deployments.**

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*WASHINGTON* - The Army is set to introduce a new mental-health test of unprecedented size and scope as part of its increasing efforts to improve soldiers' mental wellness amid the strain of repeated deployments.

Come October, the service will require all its active duty, National Guard, and reserve soldiers to take a test that will help identify potential problem areas for soldiers. The 170-question test will look at physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and family issues and then recommend follow-on training as needed.

The program comes as the Army is tackling rising suicide rates, divorce, and depression among thousands of soldiers returning from war. But unlike other programs, which seek to intervene when a soldier's issues have already been flagged by other screening methods, this program aims to be more proactive.

About 4,000 soldiers have already taken the test under a pilot program begun with the help of the University of Pennsylvania.

"We recognized that we did not have a good preventive and strengthening model for psychological health," said Brig. Gen. Rhonda Cornum, chief the Army's Comprehensive Soldier Fitness program. "We talk about it a lot – we say all the time, being 'Army Strong' is not just being physically fit, it's about mental and emotional maturity, compassion and all those great qualities. But we didn't know how to measure them and improve them."

Cornum is particularly well-suited to lead the effort. During the 1991 Gulf War, she was riding in a

helicopter that was shot down inside Iraq. She was held captive for eight days and experienced the indignities of being a female prisoner of war, including sexual assault.

For an institution that molds warriors, the program will test the ability of the rank and file to move beyond the natural stigma of talking about feelings. James Quick, a fellow at the American Psychological Association and a retired Air Force colonel, says such a program aims for more thorough wellness.

"Most people understand the physical rigor that is required of combat troops," he said. "But the mental-health attributes are equally as important."

The results of the assessment will remain confidential – withheld even from soldiers' commanders. The results are intended to help the soldier find appropriate training or counseling.

The effort is a good one, but it doesn't get to the root of the problem, says Larry Korb, a former Pentagon official and now a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress. "The fundamental problem that they're not dealing with is that they're not giving people enough rest between deployments," he says.

The military has long pushed its force to the brink and must take substantive steps to give its force the rest it needs, he says.

That seems unlikely as the Obama administration girds for a surge of forces in Afghanistan.

"I understand they have no choice, but somebody's got to say enough is enough," Mr. Korb adds.