Warfighter Resilience, Readiness, & Suicide Risk Reduction: Core Connections

1. Introduction: Strength in the Unit, Not Just the Individual

Every leader knows: **when the team is strong, the mission succeeds**. When it is fractured, the **cracks show at the worst possible moment**.

Maybe you've seen it firsthand. The soldier who starts pulling back. He stops joking around with friends, keeps to himself in the barracks, and disengages in training. He's not a lost cause—he's a teammate who needs the network he once relied on.

Trust is both a cultural value and a tactical necessity. Here's what's at stake: When the pressure is on, **when the mission and lives are on the line, there is no room for error**—you need to know that every member of your team has your back, just like you have theirs. Core Connections is not just about individual coping; it is about strengthening the network's bonds and health so no one falls through the cracks.

2. Core Connections – Strategic Overview

Core Connections (known as Wingman Guardian Connect in the Air Force, Wyman et al., 2020, 2022) is a **scientifically validated program** designed to enhance **unit cohesion, force readiness, suicide prevention, and peer suppor**t. Developed through a 10-year collaboration between the University of Rochester and the Department of the Air Force (DoD-funded 2014–2023), Core Connections is now the official resiliency program of the Air Force.

In light of increased operational tempo and mission demands, the DAF has undertaken a rapid and deliberate expansion of the program across the Air Force. A gold-standard randomized controlled trial (RCT) involving 1,500 Air Force personnel validated the Program's effectiveness compared with standard training (Wyman et al.; JAMA Network, 2020).

- **Suicide risk dropped** significantly in Core Connections-trained groups.
- **Depressive symptoms decreased** and remained lower for six months.
- **Occupational performance improved**, with a 50% reduction in corrective training instances.

Strategically, Core Connections supports **force preservation** and **operational effectiveness by**:

- Reducing operational disruptions from preventable personnel losses.
- Decreasing disciplinary actions and corrective training requirements.
- Strengthening small-unit cohesion and resilience, critical for combat effectiveness.
- Delivering impact through an efficient 8-hour delivery format, avoiding redundant, time-intensive training requirements

3. Prevention Approach and Features:

Core Connections represents a **fundamental shift** from traditional suicide prevention training, long identified as ineffective and inefficient, **with widespread dissatisfaction among service members and veterans** (SPRIRC, 2022).

Through a streamlined 6-8 hours of interactive programming delivered over three sessions, Core Connections maximizes training impact while minimizing operational disruption. Rather than requiring extensive time commitments or ongoing lecture sessions, the program efficiently builds unit-wide protective factors through peer-to-peer learning and practical extensions into daily base activities.

Core Connections imparts critical skills for **personal and professional resilience in the military context.** Rather than focusing solely on individual skills, the program **builds unit-wide protective factors**, reinforcing mission readiness while equipping personnel with practical, experience-based skills.

The program instills concrete skills, structured around four research-validated strengths (Four Cores: Kinship, Purpose, Guidance, and Balance.

- **Kinship**: Strengthening bonds within teams to foster trust, mutual support, and a shared sense of responsibility. Encourages a culture in which members look out for each other.
- **Purpose**: Reinforcing individual and collective commitment to mission readiness and well-being, ensuring that discussions about challenges align with personal and professional goals.
- **Guidance**: Equipping personnel with tools to recognize challenges, seek support, and provide direction to peers who may be struggling.
- **Balance**: Encouraging proactive management of stress, workload, and personal challenges through structured support and adaptive coping mechanisms.

Skills Framework: Mission-Ready Training

"What we have learned and relearned in our Army is that unit cohesion and teamwork are what give individual soldiers the confidence to use initiative, to be resourceful, and to be all they can be." *— Sergeant Major Glen E. Morrell, US Army.*

In operational or conflict environments, military readiness demands skills embedded in group and**relational contexts.** Lecture-based learning–which members call death by PowerPoint–is insufficient for the challenges faced in real-world scenarios. Core Connections addresses these needs by equipping participants with practical skills critical for readiness, adaptability, and performance in any environment. To accomplish this, the program uses a social learning and network enhancement model, emphasizing skill acquisition through modeling, peer interaction, and group norm development.

This approach is based on research about how people naturally learn and apply skills:

1. **Social Learning and Network Health Research:** The program emphasizes **skill acquisition through interaction and observation**, creating **natural opportunities** for practice and reinforcement. This approach is grounded in social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and network health research (Wyman et al., 2019, 2020, 2022). Skills are not only learned but also become part of the person and unit, allowing for application in high-pressure military contexts.

2. **Individual and Group Integration:** Skills such as stress management and trust-building are **developed both individually and for the group**, fostering cohesive unit dynamics and enhancing interpersonal connections. This dual focus ensures readiness for deployment-ready units under evolving operational requirements.
3. **Actionable Application:** Activities are designed to **directly translate skills into real life**, ensuring participants can apply what they learn to real-world situations effectively, particularly in high-stakes operational environments.
4. **Resource-Efficient Implementation:** The program's group-based format allows units to build group strengths and mission-critical skills while minimizing training time and personnel requirements. This efficiency extends beyond initial delivery through natural reinforcement in daily unit activities

5. Addressing Hidden Risk Without Singling People Out

The Critical Gap in Military Suicide Prevention

Traditional military suicide prevention efforts focus on reactive measures—identifying and treating at-risk individuals after warning signs appear. However, the majority of service members who die by suicide are never formally identified as high-risk:

- 58% had no behavioral health diagnosis.
- Two-thirds received no mental health services in the 90 days before death.

This gap leaves a large population of hidden suicidal members—those who struggle silently, are reluctant to seek help, or exhibit risk factors that do not match screening criteria.

Approach: Strengthening Networks for Unseen Risk

Core Connections directly reduces isolation and strengthens unit cohesion, **providing built-in protective measures for those whom traditional detection methods might otherwise miss**. The program's network-based approach **provides multiple layers of passive and active protection for at-risk individuals without requiring them to self-identify** or their Units to detect and intervene.

- In untrained units, at-risk individuals tend to become more isolated over time.
- In Core Connections-trained units, at-risk individuals increase in peer connections and support, naturally integrating into the protective network.
- Thriving individuals lift up and strengthen the group, including more vulnerable members.

This network enhancement strategy **aligns with military values**—framing suicide prevention as **a mission-critical function rather than a mental health intervention**.

6. Research and Validation

The gold-standard randomized controlled trial (RCT) conducted with 1,500 Air Force personnel validated the program's effectiveness:

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The active mechanism for these outcomes was the formation of more cohesive groups unified around practices that support higher morale and mission readiness (Wyman et al., 2020).

7. Conclusion: Strengthening the Warfighter Through Connection

Core Connections represents a major advancement in military resilience and suicide prevention. By embedding protective relationships and skills within the unit structure, the program:

- Strengthens mission readiness by fostering unit-wide cohesion.
- Reduces suicide risk and enhances mental resilience without requiring at-risk identification.
- Reinforces military values by positioning prevention within operational effectiveness.

As the Department of Defense seeks **innovative and scalable solutions** to protect warfighter well-being, the Core Connections program provides a **battle-tested, research-backed**, and operationally efficient approach that meets the evolving demands of modern military service while **maximizing return on training investment**.