

Operator Syndrome

Frueh BC, Madan A, Fowler JC, Stomberg S, Bradshaw M, Kelly K, Weinstein B, Luttrell M, Danner SG, Beidel DC. "Operator syndrome": A unique constellation of medical and behavioral health-care needs of military special operation forces. *Int J Psychiatry Med*. 2020 Jul;55(4):281-295. doi: 10.1177/0091217420906659. Epub 2020 Feb 13. PMID: 32052666.

Read the article: <https://sealff.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Operator-Syndrome-International-Journal-of-Psychiatry-in-Medicine.pdf>

Read a summary: <https://www.military.com/military-fitness/operator-syndrome-managing-high-allostatic-load>

Listen to a podcast: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/tfr-200-operator-syndrome-discussion-with-dr/id1215928033?i=1000514259750>

Listen to another podcast: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LdJjM3Trg0&skip_registered_account_check=true

Main Points:

- Operator Syndrome is a “framework” not a diagnosis
- “Blast Injuries” occur when: you pull a trigger, during training ie. breaching exercises, landing from a parachute jump, being near a blast/explosive
- Repeated small blast injuries cause very minor brain injuries, deep within your brain
- This pattern of brain injury is called “[astroglial interface scarring](#)” and is not detectable on an MRI
- How many times have you been exposed to a “blast injury” in your career compared to your civilian buddy?
- These deep areas of your brain control things like: testosterone production, ability to process and store memories, ability to process information/concentrate/focus/multi-task, emotional responses
- In addition, there’s something called “[High Allostatic Load](#)”- essentially referring to the collective effects of high ops tempos- frequent training, frequent deployments, stress on the family, losing teammates/friends, physical injuries from training/deployments, more.
- High Allostatic Load often contributes to mental health challenges including: anxiety, depression, [moral injury](#), and more, which can lead to substance abuse, domestic violence, high divorce rate etc.
- Common experiences in operator syndrome:

1. Not feeling like yourself	15. Feeling overwhelmed
2. Low motivation/drive	16. Short- and Long-Term Memory challenges
3. Problems with sleep	17. Concentration/focus/multi-tasking challenges
4. Changes in weight	18. Dizziness
5. Chronic joint & back pain	19. Visual Changes/challenges
6. Other pain from physical injuries	20. Headaches
7. Depression and sadness	21. Low Testosterone (causes: 1-4, 7, 8, 9)
8. Anger	...and more.
9. More frequent outbursts	
10. Worry and rumination	
11. Feelings of guilt	
12. High reactivity to stress	
13. Marital & family issues	
14. Feeling on guard / hypervigilant	

What do I do?

- **Do not assume your medical provider is going to understand your job, or your challenges.**
- **Take your healthcare into your OWN hands- be an advocate for YOURSELF (refer to next handout to take to your medical appointments).**
- **It will take time, work, and dedication to improve these symptoms- but it is possible.**

