

INSIGHTS

10 Tips for Promoting Emotional Integration in the Military

Yasmine L. Konheim-Kalkstein¹, United States Military Academy

Ryan G. Erbe, United States Military Academy

Orin Strauchler, United States Military Academy

ABSTRACT

There is a recognized need for military service members to effectively regulate their emotions, especially when considering the extreme stressors of deployment and combat. Overreliance on suppression or other strategies that minimize the expression of emotions are associated with poor health outcomes. Research suggests that Emotional Integration training will help build self-awareness, regulatory skill, and an overall healthier relationship with emotions. Emotional Integration involves viewing emotions as information and subsequently being able to make an autonomous choice on how to respond to that information. We propose 10 tips to prepare our service members to better utilize their emotions and have healthier outcomes.

Keywords: emotional integration; emotional regulation; self-awareness; military; leader development

The Army highlights “emotional self-control” as being key to the leadership attribute of composure (ADP 6–22). Being successful in battle requires leaders to temporarily suppress fear, discomfort, and stress, while remaining calm in combat (Bryan et al., 2012); this approach is nested within a military culture that generally discourages open

¹ Author Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the United States Military Academy, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

CONTACT Yasmine L. Konheim-Kalkstein ✉ yasmine.kalkstein@westpoint.edu

© 2025 The author(s)

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Citation: Journal of Character & Leadership Development 2025, 12: 326 - <http://dx.doi.org/10.58315/jcld.v12.326>

expression of emotions (Bryan et al., 2012; Green et al., 2010). However, what is adaptive in combat and acute circumstances is not necessarily suitable as a long-term approach to emotional regulation. Research suggests that chronically ignoring or suppressing feelings can create long-lasting emotional difficulties (Davies et al., 2019; Gross, 2002; Gross & Levenson, 1997), which have been associated with alcohol and drug abuse, violence, and suicide (reviewed in Stanley & Larsen, 2021).

In contrast to suppression (pushing away or avoiding emotions) or reappraisal (changing one's thinking about a situation to alter emotional response), Emotional Integration (also known as Integrative Emotional Regulation) views emotions as data that can be explored to guide choices around suppression, reappraisal, or expression (Ryan et al., 2006). Thus, Emotional Integration requires first accepting emotions, taking an interested stance toward emotions (a key component) and using the information gathered to volitionally guide subsequent action (Benita, 2020; Roth & Benita, 2023; Ryan et al., 2006). Emotional Integration presupposes that emotions arise when a meaningful goal or value is engaged (threatened or advanced). Thus, rather than seeing emotions as “good” or “bad,” emotions are informational inputs that can inform us of our values and help guide or motivate actions to align with our values or goals (Roth et al., 2019).

Empirical research has found that Emotional Integration is associated with a reduction of fear and physiological arousal (Roth et al., 2014, 2018), while also associated with promotion of well-being outcomes, including purpose in life, personal growth, self-acceptance (Benita et al., 2020), learning from failure (Sharabi & Roth, 2024), and increases in self-esteem (Brenning et al., 2015). Emotional Integration may improve interpersonal relationships, possibly mediated through increased empathy (Benita et al., 2017; Kalman-Halevia et al., 2023), and even predict prosocial attitudes and behavior toward outgroups (Ditrich et al., 2024; Roth et al., 2017).

Given these benefits, we bring aspects of Emotional Integration together with the ability model of Emotional Intelligence (Caruso & Rees, 2019) to propose the following 10 tips to help trainees have a healthier approach to emotions:

Identify and Label Emotions

Precisely identifying emotions is associated with well-being and is frequently considered the first step to emotional regulation (Kalođerinos et al., 2019). In fact, one study found a connection between emotion differentiation (labeling an emotion) and effective emotion regulation (Barrett et al., 2001). The development of self-awareness in leadership training should provide trainees with opportunities to practice labeling their emotions. Simply asking, “How do I feel right now?” can make a difference in how we regulate our emotions (Caruso & Rees, 2019).

Accept Emotions

The discomfort caused by difficult and unpleasant emotions such as anger, fear, and sadness can lead us to associate them with maladjustment and poor performance (Roth & Benita, 2023). Although counterintuitive, accepting these difficult emotions can actually reduce their intensity (Guendelman et al., 2015). An Emotional Integration approach considers all emotions to provide important pieces of data (Caruso & Rees, 2019; Roth & Benita, 2023). Adapting practices such as mindfulness can help individuals to accept and thus address their emotions.

Identify the Source of the Emotion

When an emotion arises, which is labeled and accepted, ask “what is the cause of this emotion?” (Caruso & Rees, 2019). Knowledge about the source of emotion predicts emotion-regulation attempts and well-being (Millgram et al., 2023). Helping soldiers develop greater self-awareness will allow them to make the link faster between what they feel and why they feel it.

Consider What Meaningful Goal or Core Value Is Being Engaged

Emotions arise when something meaningful is at stake. They provide people with information about themselves, their values, or the situation (Roth & Benita, 2023). After understanding the source of an emotion, consider, “What information is this providing me? Specifically, what goal or value is being engaged here?”

Journal About One’s Emotions

Identifying, accepting, and exploring emotions requires intentional introspection and practice until it becomes automatic. Journaling about cognitive and emotional responses promotes self-awareness (Ullrich & Lutgendorf, 2002). Each of the aforementioned questions can be explored in a journal.

Meditate

Meditation, defined as a variety of complex emotional and attentional regulation strategies (Lutz et al., 2008), can be used as another introspective practice. Some forms of meditation, including mindfulness and insight meditation, can be used as exploratory strategies to examine emotional experiences (Singer & Engert, 2019).

Incorporate Emotions into After Action Reviews (AAR)

A team reflection after a training event (AAR) may also be an appropriate time to ask emotion-related questions pertaining to the event. The power of sharing emotions was highlighted by data from active combat soldiers from the Israeli Defense Force. In their recent study, Shorer et al. (2024) found that self-reported emotional expression (efforts to express or share emotions) was even more predictive than emotional processing (understanding emotions) in building resilience and reducing posttraumatic stress symptoms. The previously discussed questions and practices can be adapted to use for an AAR.

Prepare for Emotions in Training

Training with simulations of high emotion has been shown to build emotional resilience (White et al., 2020). Exposure to such scenarios may be useful in practicing the aforementioned strategies.

In educational settings, as scenarios are discussed to sharpen decision-making, we can add an auxiliary question about how students might feel during or after a hypothetical situation and encourage them to connect their emotions to their values.

Model the Skill for Trainees

Like many skills, one way people learn to emotionally regulate is through observation (Wright et al., 2025). Leaders can model Emotional Integration for trainees—especially how to identify an emotion and understand it. For example, a leader can share “I felt sad, because this mattered to me....” or “I’m so excited about this, because I value....”

Respond Appropriately to Someone Else’s Emotions

Adopting an Emotional Integration perspective that emotions are neither good nor bad, but simply information, allows us to respond accordingly to expressions of emotion from others. For example, a fitting response to a trainee statement of “I shouldn’t feel this way” might be, “Your emotion is an automatic response. But, *why* might you be reacting this way? What does this tell you about yourself? How do you want to respond to this emotion in a way that is consistent with your goals and values?”

Conclusion

Emotional Integration is not at odds with suppression. Rather, it inserts a deliberate step between emotional arousal and action, promoting deliberation of suitable approaches to emotions, of which suppression is one of many possible options. As we develop our current and

future leaders, it is vital for resilience that they have a healthy approach to emotions, and know both when and how to reappraise, to suppress, or to express their emotions. Many of these techniques lend themselves better to training and educational settings. Investing the time to developing the habit of Emotional Integration can result in more self-aware and resilient soldiers and leaders who will integrate emotion appropriately as they exercise judgment.

References

- Barrett, L. F., Gross, J., Christensen, T. C., & Benvenuto, M. (2001). Knowing what you're feeling and knowing what to do about it: Mapping the relation between emotion differentiation and emotion regulation. *Cognition & Emotion, 15*(6), 713–724. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02699930143000239>
- Benita, M. (2020). Freedom to feel: A self-determination theory account of emotion regulation. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 14*(11), e12563. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12563>
- Benita, M., Benish-Weisman, M., Matos, L., & Torres, C. (2020). Integrative and suppressive emotion regulation differentially predict well-being through basic need satisfaction and frustration: A test of three countries. *Motivation and Emotion, 44*(1), 67–81. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-019-09781-x>
- Benita, M., Levkovitz, T., & Roth, G. (2017). Integrative emotion regulation predicts adolescents' prosocial behavior through the mediation of empathy. *Learning and Instruction, 50*, 14–20. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2016.11.004>
- Brenning, K., Soenens, B., Van Petegem, S., & Vansteenkiste, M. (2015). Perceived maternal autonomy support and early adolescent emotion regulation: A longitudinal study. *Social Development, 24*(3), 561–578. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sode.12107>
- Bryan, C. J., Jennings, K. W., Jobes, D. A., & Bradley, J. C. (2012). Understanding and preventing military suicide. *Archives of Suicide Research, 16*, 95–110. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13811118.2012.667321>
- Caruso, D., & Rees, L. (2019). Developing leaders of character with emotional intelligence. *The Journal of Character and Leadership Development, 6*(1), 43–51. <https://jclausafa.org/index.php/jcld/article/view/140/135>
- Davies, R. L., Prince, M. A., Bravo, A. J., Kelley, M. L., & Crain, T. L. (2019). Moral injury, substance use, and posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms among military personnel: An examination of trait mindfulness as a moderator. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 32*(3), 414–423. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22403>
- Ditrich, L., Reinhardt, J., Roth, G., & Sassenberg, K. (2024). Integrative emotion regulation relates to sympathy and support for outgroups-Independent of situational outgroup behaviour. *PLoS One, 19*(1), e0296520. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0296520>
- Green, G., Emslie, C., O'Neill, D., Hunt, K., & Walker, S. (2010). Exploring the ambiguities of masculinity in accounts of emotional distress in the military among young ex-servicemen. *Social Science & Medicine, 71*, 1480–1488. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2010.07.015>
- Gross, J. J. (2002). Emotion regulation: Affective, cognitive, and social consequences. *Psychophysiology, 39*, 281–291. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0048577201393198>
- Gross, J. J., & Levenson, R. W. (1997). Hiding feelings: The acute effects of inhibiting negative and positive emotion. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 106*(1), 95–103. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-843X.106.1.95>
- Guendelman, S., Medeiros, S., & Rampes, H. (2017). Mindfulness and emotion regulation: Insights from neurobiological, psychological, and clinical

- studies. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 220. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00220>
- Kalman-Halevia, M., Kanat-Maymon, Y., & Roth, G. (2023). Antecedents of empathic capacity: Emotion regulation styles as mediators between controlling versus autonomy—Supportive maternal practices and empathy. *The International Journal of Emotional Education*, 15(1), 53–72. <https://doi.org/10.56300/YKOL5279>
- Kalokerinos, E. K., Erbas, Y., Ceulemans, E., & Kuppens, P. (2019). Differentiate to regulate: Low negative emotion differentiation is associated with ineffective use but not selection of emotion-regulation strategies. *Psychological Science*, 30(6), 863–879. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797619838763>
- Lutz, A., Slagter, H. A., Dunne, J. D., & Davidson, R. J. (2008). Attention regulation and monitoring in meditation. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 12(4), 163–169. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2008.01.005>
- Millgram, Y., Nock, M. K., Bailey, D. D., & Goldenberg, A. (2023). Knowledge about the source of emotion predicts emotion-regulation attempts, strategies, and perceived emotion-regulation success. *Psychological Science*, 34(11), 1244–1255. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09567976231199440>
- Roth, G., & Benita, M. (2023). Integration versus minimization of emotional experience: Addressing adaptive emotion regulation. In R. M. Ryan (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of self-determination theory* (pp. 200–214). Oxford University Press.
- Roth, G., Benita, M., Amrani, C., Shachar, B.-H., Asoulin, H., Moed, A., Bibi, U., & Kanat-Maymon, Y. (2014). Integration of negative emotional experience versus suppression: Addressing the question of adaptive functioning. *Emotion*, 14(5), 908–919. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037051>
- Roth, G., Shane, N., & Kanat-Maymon, Y. (2017). Empathising with the enemy: Emotion regulation and support for humanitarian aid in violent conflicts. *Cognition & Emotion*, 31(8), 1511–1524. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02699931.2016.1237348>
- Roth, G., Shahar, B.-H., Zohar-Shefer, Y., Benita, M., Moed, A., Bibi, U., Kanat-Maymon, Y., & Ryan, R. M. (2018). Benefits of emotional integration and costs of emotional distancing. *Journal of Personality*, 86(6), 919–934. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12366>
- Roth, G., Vansteenkiste, M., & Ryan, R. M. (2019). Integrative emotion regulation: Process and development from a self-determination theory perspective. *Development and Psychopathology*, 31(3), 945–956. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579419000403>
- Ryan, R. M., Deci, E. L., Grolnick, W. S., & La Guardia, J. G. (2006). The significance of autonomy and autonomy support in psychological development and psychopathology. In D. Cicchetti & D. J. Cohen (Eds.), *Developmental Psychopathology Volume One: Theory and Method* (pp. 795–849). Wiley.
- Sharabi, Y., & Roth, G. (2024). Emotion regulation styles and the tendency to learn from academic failures. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 95(1), 162–179. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12696>
- Shorer, S., Weinberg, M., Cohen, L., Marom, D., & Cohen, M. (2024). Emotional processing is not enough: Relations among resilience, emotional approach coping, and posttraumatic stress symptoms among combat veterans. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15, 1354669. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1354669>
- Singer, T., & Engert, V. (2019). It matters what you practice: Differential training effects on subjective experience, behavior, brain and body in the ReSource Project. *Current Opinion in Psy-*

- chology*, 28, 151–158. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2018.12.005>
- Stanley, E. A., & Larsen, K. L. (2021). Difficulties with emotion regulation in the contemporary U.S. armed forces: Structural contributors and potential solutions. *Armed Forces & Society*, 47(1), 77–105. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X19848018>
- Ullrich, P. M., & Lutgendorf, S. K. (2002). Journaling about stressful events: Effects of Cognitive processing and emotional expression. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, 24(3), 244–250. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15324796ABM2403_10
- White, A., Zapata, I., Lenz, A., Ryznar, R., Nevins, N., Hoang, T. N., Franciose, R., Safaoui, M., Clegg, D., & LaPorta, A. J. (2020). Medical students immersed in a hyper-realistic surgical training environment leads to improved measures of emotional resiliency by both hardiness and emotional intelligence evaluation. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 569035. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.569035>
- Wright, R. N., Adcock, R. A., & LaBar, K. S. (2025). Learning emotion regulation: An integrative framework. *Psychological Review*, 132(1), 173–203. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rev0000506>