



By Chris Garlick

How many Soldiers do you know who always have an energy drink or coffee in their hand, despite the time of day? That question likely describes many of your co-workers and perhaps even yourself. The Army has started to combat this overreliance on caffeine and other stimulants through an information campaign highlighting these substances' [harmful effects](#). However, this mitigation focuses on a symptom rather than a root cause of the problem. In truth, Soldiers are not getting enough sleep, and the way we organize the standard duty day may be contributing to this issue. Leaders must be open to adjusting their unit's daily battle rhythm and when their unit conducts PT, adapting to their environment and the demands of our profession.

The recently published [FM 7-22 Holistic Health and Fitness](#) recognizes "sleep readiness" as a crucial factor, underpinning a Soldier's ability to accomplish any mission. This fact should come as no surprise to military leaders who are all too familiar with the problems resulting from a [lack of sleep](#). For instance, a [2015 RAND study](#) revealed that a lack of sleep leads to second-order effects like reduced cognitive ability, limited energy for exercise, and an over-reliance on stimulants like nicotine and caffeine.

Despite the Army's best efforts to educate the force on the importance of sleep, the vast majority of Soldiers get less than the CDC's recommended [seven hours per night](#), during the

work week. This lack of sleep stems from modern [technological developments](#) that have all Americans staying up later than previous generations. However, it is also due to a garrison battle rhythm that is yet to adapt to modern life.

The vast majority of US Army units begin physical training between 6:00 and 6:30 AM. Additionally, many units conduct pre-PT synchronization meetings, which means that many Soldiers and leaders regularly wake up at 5 AM or earlier. When paired with the [average American](#) bedtime of 11:39 PM, it's easy to see how early physical training leads to a lack of sleep and an overreliance on stimulants to make it through the duty day.

Lack of sleep has negative consequences for personal health, training quality, and daily output. Tired Soldiers make mistakes, which extends the time required to accomplish tasks to standard, so leaders extend the duty day, and the cycle repeats itself. Exhausted Soldiers bank sleep on the weekend, however, this disrupts their circadian rhythm, making it difficult to fall asleep in a timely manner on Sunday night, exacerbating the problem during the following week.

Admittedly, the justification for early morning PT is a persuasive one. Conducting PT early in the morning helps mitigate against hot mid-summer days. Scheduling PT as the first training event of the day increases the likelihood that we actually do it, by de-conflicting it with other events, and enables subordinate units to execute it simultaneously.

Consider the adage that "PT is not the most important thing that we do in a day, but it is the most important thing we do every day." The logic behind that statement is sound but it remains so whether we PT in the early morning, midmorning, afternoon, or evening. In fact, some units that tried afternoon PT report [additional benefits](#) beyond improved sleep readiness. Positive returns include increased quality of life, improved energy and focus, and dispersed demand for gym equipment in on-post fitness centers. Potential drawbacks include scheduling conflicts with training events that run longer than planned and adverse weather impacts during summer months.

Notably, there are alternatives to making PT the first or last thing we do. Perhaps units would benefit from conducting midmorning PT. Consider the following hypothetical battle rhythm:

0730: Leaders Huddle Window

0800-1000: Admin Tasks, Meetings, or Classes

1015-1300: Physical Training and Lunch

1300-1700: Training and Practical Exercises

This hybrid model retains many of the benefits of morning PT while still protecting a dedicated afternoon window for training. This model would not work for all units, but it is an example that leaders can use to discuss whether their current schedule is optimal.

We don't have to blindly stick with the status quo. Unit leaders must seek feedback and be willing to experiment in search of a battle rhythm that works best for their units and circumstances. Effective experimentation can be achieved by embracing the principles of mission command: clear commander's intent, mutual trust, disciplined initiative, and risk acceptance. Many units may be best served by early morning PT; however, others may find a better way of doing business.

Americans are going to bed and waking up later than ever. Accordingly, American Soldiers stay up late and use stimulants to offset an unyielding early wake-up time. The best way to promote holistic health and provide a ready force is to accept and adapt to this environment. Soldiers will not put down the energy drinks and coffee until we address the underlying cause of their lack of energy and delay the start of the duty day.

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