



The Forge: Lives in Leadership Podcast - Australian Defence College

SHOW NOTES

Episode Summary, Highlights and Full Transcript

SEASON 01: EPISODE 02

Guest: Dr Leigh-Ann Perry
Host: Dr Lucas Marie



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Lives in Leadership explores leadership in demanding environments, featuring insights from experienced practitioners drawn across Defence, government, industry, and academia. Through sharing compelling stories and perspectives, the podcast explores military leadership, ethics, culture, and service in the Profession of Arms. The podcast focuses on insights in joint and integrated appointments at the operational and strategic level. It complements existing single-service professional military development platforms.



S01E02 – Dr Leigh-Ann Perry – Episode Summary

Duration: 37 minutes

Key Themes: Mindfulness, Performance optimisation, Cultural adaptation, Holistic approaches, Normalisation of cognitive fitness.

Overview: In this episode, Dr Lucas Marie speaks with Dr Leigh-Ann Perry, associate professor of psychology and behavioural science at the US Naval War College, about her pioneering work applying positive psychology to military leadership development. Dr Perry shares her journey from forensic psychology—analysing violent criminals for NCIS and the FBI—to her current focus on building resilience and optimising performance in military leaders through mindfulness and cognitive fitness practices.

Key Discussion Points

Dr Perry's transition from clinical and forensic psychology (working with NCIS, FBI, and Facebook on violent crimes) to positive psychology and military leadership development.

Her pivot from analysing "the bad guys" to building up military leaders using proactive psychological approaches.

Core Focus Areas

- **Mindfulness & Performance Optimisation:** Using mindfulness as a cognitive fitness tool for military personnel at tactical, operational, and strategic levels
- **Resilience Building:** Developing protective factors before crises occur, rather than reactive clinical interventions
- **Holistic Wellness:** Extending support to military families, addressing sleep, stress management, and emotion regulation



Insights

- Mindfulness practices are tailored differently for various audiences (junior enlisted, mid-level officers, flag officers)
- The approach emphasises cognitive and emotional fitness alongside physical fitness
- Research is relatively new in Western military contexts, though mindfulness has deep cultural roots elsewhere
- Work is being done across US military services (Navy, Army, Air Force) with collaboration between institutions

Challenges & Future Direction

- Developing appropriate assessment tools for cognitive fitness (unlike easily measurable physical fitness)
- Balancing individual vs. organizational/team-level approaches to resilience
- Cultural adaptation across different military communities and international partners
- Growing acceptance among younger generations who are exposed to these concepts earlier

Vision

Dr. Perry hopes cognitive fitness practices will become as commonplace as physical exercise, embedded naturally into military culture as the science continues to develop and replicate findings.



Memorable Quotes

On her career pivot: *"I thought it could be a really interesting pivot in my career to take the clinical psychology background that I had and my experience in high stress occupations like law enforcement and global security, and bring that to the military and pivot away from looking at the psychology of the bad guys, if you will, to taking the positive psychology approach to bolstering the good guys and the good women."*

On cognitive fitness: *"We talk a lot about physical fitness in the military, and that's super important. And what I find is that we talk less about cognitive fitness and emotional fitness and how that also plays into performance because we cannot, none of us as human beings can operate at our peak level if we are not cognitively fit and emotionally fit on top of being physically fit."*

On the future of cognitive fitness: *"We didn't always know the value of jogging and running on cardiovascular health. We didn't know that until the science came out on it. And then when the science came out on it, people were like, well, of course, why would we not be jogging and running and building up our cardiovascular health? So, I wonder if maybe a decade or two from now, these different cognitive fitness principles and these different exercises, if you will, for the brain, aren't going to be just commonplace, like jogging is for physical exercise."*

About the Guest

Dr. Leigh-Ann Perry is an associate professor of psychology and behavioural science at the US Naval War College, where she specialises in applying positive psychology to military leadership development. With a background in clinical and forensic psychology, she previously conducted behavioural analysis research with the Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS) and the FBI's Behavioural Analysis Unit and led the intelligence team at Facebook's Global Security division. Drawing on her experience in high-stress occupations, Dr. Perry now focuses on mindfulness, resilience, and wellbeing as tools for performance optimisation across all levels of military leadership. Her work emphasizes "cognitive fitness" as essential to peak performance.



Resources & References

[US Naval War College - College of Leadership and Ethics](#)

[Dr. Amishi Jha \(University of Miami\) - Mindfulness research with US Army](#)

[US Army War College mindfulness programs](#)

[West Point mindfulness programs](#)

[US Naval Academy resilience initiatives](#)



S01E02 – Dr Leigh-Ann Perry – Time Stamped Highlights

1:11 - Dr. Perry's background: in forensic psychology with NCIS and FBI's Behavioural Analysis Unit. Working with violent crimes and observing colleague burnout. Career at Facebook's Global Security division.

3:02 - Career pivot: From analysing "the bad guys" to building up military leaders.

3:44 - Positive psychology: as the "opposite side of the coin" to clinical psychology. Proactive protective factors vs. reactive problem-focused approaches. Applying mindfulness across tactical, operational, and strategic leadership levels.

7:58 - Setting conditions: for senior leaders and their teams.

8:37 - Initial scepticism: "Side eye or eye roll" when introducing mindfulness.

10:00 - Cognitive fitness: "We talk less about cognitive fitness and emotional fitness".

11:08 – Challenges: Leader development vs. leadership as a process. Mindfulness is not new and clarifying the neuroscience research angle. Challenges in measuring cognitive fitness vs. physical fitness.

15:40 – Research: Gathering perspectives from fleet members for combat readiness research.

17:52 – Support: Tailoring approaches for different audiences and families. Supporting military families during deployments and transitions.

20:22 - Holistic wellness: Sleep, stress management, emotion regulation.

21:22 - Cross-service collaboration: Army, Air Force, Naval Academy.

23:10 - Criticism of resilience: Individual vs. environmental focus.



24:30 - Organisational culture: Setting conditions at the unit and team level. Incorporating practices into drills and unit-level PT.

27:50 - Cultural differences: within Navy communities (surface, aviation, etc.). International students are taking different things away from mindfulness training.

32:17 - Brother's experience: "We do yoga every morning" in Air Force basic training, and younger generations are normalising these practices early.

34:02 - The jogging analogy: "We didn't always know the value of jogging for cardiovascular health".

35:03 - Vision: Cognitive fitness becoming as commonplace as physical exercise.

36:18 - Validation: Cultural traditions in Japan and India vs. Western need for neuroscience validation.



S01E02 – Dr Leigh-Ann Perry – Full Transcript

[00:00:05] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Welcome to Lives in Leadership. This podcast is dedicated to promoting thoughtful and strategic conversations about military leadership, ethics, culture, and service in the profession of arms within the Australian Defence Force. My name is Dr Lucas Marie.

Dr Leigh Ann Perry is an associate professor of psychology and behavioural science at the US Naval War College. She's a leading expert in the application of positive psychology for military leadership development. Leigh Ann Perry's work focuses on the area of well-being, resilience, and mindfulness as they relate to leadership development.

Leigh-Ann, thank you so much for joining us today.

[00:00:46] **Dr Leigh-Ann Perry:** Well, thank you for having me.

[00:00:47] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Thanks. To start off, could you tell us a bit about your journey into leadership development and education within the military context? And I guess what drew you to the field of positive psychology more recently?

[00:00:56] **Dr Leigh-Ann Perry:** Sure. So my background, my educational background, is in clinical psychology and community psychology, and I started my career off in the world of criminal and forensic psychology.

So I did research and behavioural analysis in different law enforcement settings, including the Naval Criminal Investigative Service. So that was my first step into kind of that military world and my focus during that point in my career was looking at behavioural patterns and behavioural analysis of pretty violent criminals.



I did a lot of work with child victim cases when I was at NCIS. Um, and I also worked with the FBI's Behavioural Analysis Unit, doing research with violent crimes like serial murder and child abduction, homicide, things like that, and so doing work in those spaces I was watching some of my colleagues have some pretty negative effects from the types of material that we were looking at. So some different levels of burnout, really relationships, suffering, because of some of the, you know, that heavy material that they were kind of taking home with them, if you will, not actually taking the material home, but taking that emotional baggage home with them.

And then when I left NCIS, I worked for Facebook, actually, for a couple of years in their global security, Intel and Investigations division, and I was leading the Intel team there, looking at dangerous organisations that were, um, posing threats to the company. So jihadist groups, extremist groups, cartels, and that, as you can imagine, was very heavy material as well.

Um, and so trying to figure out in each of those different jobs how to best support colleagues and for myself, how do I support my own resilience and mental health while looking at these really heavy kinds of things and really disturbing things. And so I got the opportunity to apply at the Naval War College when there was an opening in their college of leadership and ethics for an associate professor.

And I thought it could be a really interesting pivot in my career to take the clinical psychology background that I had and my experience in high stress occupations like law enforcement and global security, and bring that to the military and pivot away from looking at the psychology of the bad guys, if you will, to taking the positive psychology approach to bolstering the good guys and the good women and working on leader development. How do you use psychology, um, and help build up leaders as opposed to how do you use psychology to analyse, you know, the criminals that we were working with? And so I thought it was kind of the opposite side of the coin of what I had been using my clinical psych degree for.

And so that's what brought me to the Naval War College and into leader development, um, because I joined their College of Leadership and Ethics, and so that's, that was my journey into that field and the positive psychology piece kind of flowed with that. It was, to me, positive psychology is like the opposite side of the coin to clinical psychology.



So what I was trained up in for clinical psychology. Was more of the kind of the problem focused side of things, which I think is really valuable. Obviously, I wouldn't have gone through that program if I didn't, find value in that. I think there is, but I also think there's then the other side of that coin, which is how can you be proactive, and work to build up those protective factors before you need to focus on the problem side of psychology.

And so I, I looked at it as a way to kind of approach from that positive psychology angle, slightly different than how I had approached from the clinical psychology side.

[00:04:48] **Dr Lucas Marie:** And, uh, interestingly, with clinical psych, is it, is it the same sort of methods and theories and approaches that they use for positive psychology?

Like, is it using, does it have like an a different set of tools like. Or is it the same that you learned when you were, um, you know, doing your PhD and, and so forth?

[00:04:54] **Dr Leigh-Ann Perry:** Yeah, that's a great question. So some of the tools are similar. So there were certain mindfulness strategies that we used, in the clinical setting when, um, I was working at, I worked at the University of Illinois as I was going for my PhD, and I did some clinical work there under the supervision of, our professors there.

And so we utilised some mindfulness tools within cognitive behavioural therapy was the type of therapy I was trained in. Um, but with cognitive behavioural therapy, we were normally coming in after someone had experienced, you know, different levels of either stress or crises. And I, I worked in our anxiety clinic, so, um, there were certain anxiety disorders that I, I was, um, involved in, in treating for our clients.

And so I think it's just a matter of. kind of where we enter for individuals. And so are we entering on that proactive side where we're helping them to have the tools on the front end? or are we providing the tools after they've experienced some type of life stressor, um, where they've come to us more on the clinical psychology side.



So I think, like I said, I think they go hand in hand, and I think they both have really important places in psychology. And so I, I consider myself very lucky to have gotten to kind of play in both of those worlds. I think they complement each other very, very well.

[00:06:18] **Dr Lucas Marie:** That's, yeah, that's really interesting. And I guess from your perspective, what's the relationship of your work recently in the positive psychology space, for the military across the, the tactical, the operational, and the strategic levels in which you're working?

[00:06:37] **Dr Leigh-Ann Perry:** Yeah, so the space that I have worked in within positive psychology is mainly in the area of mindfulness as a tool for building resilience and for optimising performance in the military. And so I approach it with my students and with sailors out in the fleet as a way of utilising these tools for maximising their performance, right? So whether it be cognitive performance or emotion regulation as a way of furthering their cognitive agility and their ability to make sound decisions when under stress. And so I approach it differently with different audiences. So at different levels of tactical, operational, strategic, they might be used for different purposes, right? Because. Um, a group who operates at a tactical level are doing different things than our strategic leaders.

Um, but that's okay. These principles can apply across the groups, and I find it's my responsibility as a facilitator of those conversations and as an educator. Um. In that space to figure out with each group, how can you use this? How can this be useful to you in your given context, in your given role?

And when we start talking with the senior level leaders in the Navy, that conversation then extends not only to how is this useful for you in that role, but also how is this useful for you to set the conditions for the rest of your teams, the teams that you lead, the other admirals that are to the sides of you and above you. Right? And how can you utilise this not only at the individual level, but at that group level? And so those conversations come more into play, I think the more senior, um, that we go up in the Navy and have those conversations with those, those leaders,



[00:08:17] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Right, and I guess, what's your approach to facilitating, facilitating those sort of conversations with those leaders? Like, or how have different groups of at different levels of students responded to that research would be really interesting to hear.

[00:08:21] **Dr Leigh-Ann Perry:** Yeah. So there's, there's always some that give me a little bit of a side eye or an eye roll when I first, introduce the topic, but. I like to frame everything around this as performance optimisation, right? In the end, that's what we're working toward. And so the way to get there, this is just one possible way, one tool that you can have in your toolkit for that performance optimisation. So, I'm careful to lay out, this is not for everyone, right? Mindfulness practices are not going to be for everyone, but it is something to consider based on what some of the research is showing us in this space.

And, while it's relatively new research in terms of the western approach to mindfulness and utilising these neuroscience tools that we now have that are fairly new, that research is relatively new. So we, we have to, you know, take it. For what it is and know that we still need to replicate a lot of this data. But the findings really are quite promising. There's a lot of work being done in the US with the Army. Um, Dr. Amish Jha out of the University of Miami, has done quite a bit of work on this in this space. And so I try to ground the work that I'm doing in research that others have done. Right. And so I present that research.

I don't claim that is the end all, be all right. I, I make a point to say there's still work that needs to be done with this. Um, and then I talk about what this might look like for each individual because I do realise that can be quite different. Even if I'm talking to all strategic-level leaders, that might look different for the person directly across from me, as to the person to the left of me and the right of me.

And so we have more personal kind of conversations around that. And I think what can go a long way is discussing this as a cognitive fitness tool, right? So we talk a lot about physical fitness in the military, and that's super important. Um, and what I find is that we talk less about cognitive fitness and emotional fitness and how that also plays into performance because we cannot, none of us as human beings can operate at our, at our peak level if we are not cognitively fit and emotionally fit.



On top of being physically fit, right? Those things come into play and they play themselves out differently depending what level of leadership you are you're in, or even if you're not in a leadership level, that it still is something that is important for you to be able to maximise your performance at whatever level you find yourself in any given moment.

Um, and it's also a tool for individual development, right? For bettering yourself as a person. Because, you know, we're all human beings. Every leader is a human being. Every person within the military is a human being, and we need to work to be able to better ourselves and our capacities, right? So I like to look at it as leader development as opposed to leadership, right?

Leadership being more of a process, um, leader development, being more of that focus inward. And how we each develop ourselves individually as leaders, and then the process piece comes, right? Then we can think about, okay, how do we utilise those capacities that we have for the way we want our leadership to play out in different contexts, in different spaces?

And so I see myself more in the role of facilitating conversations around leader development and how you develop yourself as a person, as a human being, um, because then that will inevitably play out in your leadership style.

[00:11:38] **Dr Lucas Marie:** What are some of the reactions to this work from the broader communities?

[00:11:41] **Dr Leigh-Ann Perry:** Yeah, so one of the things, that I have had to get better at articulating is that mindfulness in particular is not, it's not a new phenomenon, right? Mindfulness has been around in other cultures for a very, very long time and has been embedded in those cultures. Um, and so the way I talk about mindfulness when I speak with our Navy and our military groups is I talk about it as this newer concept and this newer research.

And what I mean by that is kind of this more secular type of mindfulness and the, in particular, the neuroscience research behind it. And the reason that neuroscience research is relatively new, is because the equipment is relatively new. Right. That's used for some of this neuroimaging to be able to do the studies of mindfulness in that way.



Right? And so. So that has been one of, one of the questions I've gotten, um, when I've spoken with different groups at different workshops is something to the effect of, well, well, why are you saying this is new research? This mindfulness has been around a long time. And so, um, I try to clarify what I mean by that.

And, I mean, talking about mindfulness in this performance optimisation way, um, and looking at it from that neuroscientific standpoint is relatively new, right? That's compared to how it's been utilised in other cultures, in other countries, and how it's been embedded in kind of the everyday way of life.

And so, um. Yes. And so that is one thing that I try to be extra cognisant of now, because I don't mean to say that this is something that's never been done before. It's just the way it's utilised now in the military is something, at least in the US, that is a newer approach to building resilience and to building up those protective factors.

[00:13:22] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Yeah, Nicely said. Um, so many great points there. You're so articulate. It's really lovely speaking with you. Um, I really like this idea you said about cognitive fitness. I think it's a strong one because I think the military and we all understand physical fitness, right?

But a question that comes to my mind is. It's quite easy, or there are certain aspects of a physical body that we want in the military that are easy to measure and test, right? And all that sort of stuff. And I guess what I'm sceptical of is the ways in which we're trying to test cognitive fitness, you know? Is it through some surveys and like what, what, how would you see the best sort of cognitive fitness assessment or testing and what should it look like and, and how do we do that? Well, that kind of embraces maybe the science of the emotionally intelligent, culturally intelligent leadership, intelligent like, sure. These are really big questions and I'm not sure what measurements or assessments are out there, and I'd love to hear your thoughts on the kind of testing and assessment piece here.



[00:14:17] **Dr Leigh-Ann Perry:** Sure. Well, that's a great question. And so, uh, I wish I had one of my colleagues here who is an expert in the assessment field because she'd be wonderful at this. Um, well, there are assessments out there for emotional intelligence, right? Yes. There's emotional intelligence assessments. Um, I think. It's part of our challenge, right in the military, is to devise some of those assessments and figure out what is it that we are wanting to measure, right?

That's the key, I think, is figuring out for ourselves what are those outcomes that we're looking for. And so that's something that at the US Naval War College that we are, we're working on, right? So I have some colleagues, who do work with me in this space to figure out, okay, what is it? That we are hoping that our Navy, out in the fleet and the families that we work with, what are we hoping they get from these sessions?

What are we hoping they walk away with? What capacities do we want them to be able to, um, to grow and develop? And so I know that's not a very, it's not always a satisfying answer to say we're still in the development stages with that. but I really think that's part of the key to what we are doing is figuring out, okay, what is it?

That we want to measure, and then how do we measure it, right? Figuring out what those outcomes are first, that we're hoping our participants take away. And we're doing some work now to gather information from, um, participants out in the fleet that we've worked with as well as students at the Naval War College to figure out what it is that they are hoping to take away from this.

What are their perspectives on how this can be useful at the different levels, um, of leadership. And we're actually in the process right now of writing up a, uh, a manuscript for an article that looks at how mindfulness can be utilised for combat readiness across tactical, operational, and strategic levels.

And what we did there was we, um, we gathered survey data from fleet members who had been participants in some of our courses and workshops, as well as some of our students who have gone through the war college and taken some of our courses on resilience and mindfulness, and to get their perspectives on this and what this looks like, particularly for a combat setting.



And so, um, so that's what we're hoping to get out of that, is figuring out what it is that they're seeing and then how we can utilise that when we are measuring these things? Because we can, we, being the professors, can come up with what we think this should look like, and what we think we should be measuring for the outcomes, but really the folks who are involved in these processes, the leaders, the naval leaders are the people we need to be taking that information from too. So we're trying to collaborate with them, um, at all different levels of leadership to figure out, what it is that we should be doing the assessments on.

[00:16:55] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Nicely said, and I, I agree. I think, um, working out ourselves or, or in collaboration with the services, working out what they think it should look like and, 'cause I think there are a lot of companies out there that you're right. Offer emotionally intelligent tests or culturally intelligent tests. But though they seem to me, from one perspective, really articulated for business and how to thrive in that business space, which is quite different for the military and perhaps even different for a very high pressure kind of environments where people under stress, time, poor, you know, all these sorts of things. Quite a different sort of set of skills in the space. So these are really interesting. With regards to positive psychology and protective factors that you spoke about earlier, how does it tie into the resilience and mindfulness work that you've done?

[00:17:36] **Dr Leigh-Ann Perry:** Sure. so my goal is to be able to, to tie mindfulness and resilience into performance optimisation, right? And to bring it back to those cognitive fitness pieces, and how do you optimise what your performance, whatever that looks like for you, in any given context. And so I try to make sure that each engagement is tailored to the audience itself, right? So if I'm out on a fleet engagement with some of our younger enlisted sailors, that's going to look slightly different right then my students at the Naval War College, who are maybe O5 and O6, and that will look different than our flag officer development courses, um, where it's one, two, and three-star admirals and generals that we're talking with. And so I really try to tailor it so that we can look at what that performance looks like for those participants at any given engagement.



The other thing that I try to do is to tie this into how it can be utilised for families as well. So we do fleet engagements with family members, so sometimes spouses and partners, other times with parents of sailors. Um, and I also work with those family members to give tools for children as well.

And so we talk about what mindfulness and resilience can look like for the family during times of transition, whether it's when their sailors are going out on deployment or coming back from deployment. What does this look like in those times of change? Um, and what are some common types of emotional responses that might come up?

How can the family as a unit work on emotion regulation? And we talk about that, um, for adults and for children. And so looking at that family piece, I think is really important because. That's a huge part, I think, of holistic health and wellness for the sailors, right? Knowing that your family is taken care of too, and that the family has the tools that they need to build up their own resilience.

So we do, we do work in that space too. Um, and I think that looking at that as a performance optimisation piece and as a holistic wellness approach can be really important. So while we talk about the performance piece, we also talk about how does positive psychology, in particular mindfulness and building resilience impact those other areas of your health, of your wellness?

Right? So I just spoke of the family piece, but there's also, how can this be useful with your sleep, right? How can this be useful for stress management? Because all of those things, again, will factor into your performance overall. Right. If you're able to sleep better, if you're able to manage your stress better, if you're able to regulate your emotions more effectively, that all plays into how you are going to perform at your peak levels.



And so it's all those pieces, I think looking at the human as a holistic being, right? We are not just one thing. We're not only work beings. We're not only home life beings, those as much as we like to think we can separate work and home, you know, there's still parts of each of those that bleed into each other, and so working to support the family and working to support the sailor, I think is how we try to bridge that gap and show there are ways that you can incorporate this, not only in your performance at work, but also in how you are as a human being, out in the world, out in your personal life, whether it's with your family, friends, you know, or the people that you engage with your community too.

[00:21:01] **Dr Lucas Marie:** It's great to hear how it contributes to the overall health and wellbeing and, wellness, I guess, of the sailors in which you're working. And I wonder just, do you know if this is happening in other services in the US or is it just a focus on Navy that you're aware of?

[00:21:22] **Dr Leigh-Ann Perry:** Well, my focus is on Navy, just because of where I'm situated. But I do know the Army does some work on this. Particularly in the mindfulness space and there's some individuals at, at West Point as well as at the Army War College who I'm touch with, to talk about the things that they're doing in that mindfulness space, so that we have some visibility and awareness of how the other professional military education institutions are looking at this, as well as the service academies. So our Naval Academy also does work in this space. Um, and I know the Air Force has done some things. I'm not as familiar though, with what the Air War College and Air Force Academies are doing.

But I do know the Army is doing quite a bit. So, um, it's, it, that part is always interesting to me. The communication across the services we try, I know that people are so busy, and we try to keep, um, each other abreast of what we're doing in the different outreach spaces, in the research, we try to collaborate on research. There are some members of Air Force institutions and the Army, as well as our National Defence University, and we go out and speak at conferences together on panels so that we can bring the different perspectives of the different services. So that I found really rewarding.

[00:22:31] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Oh, that's wonderful.



[00:22:32] **Dr Leigh-Ann Perry:** Yeah. And it's a great way for us to learn about what each other is doing, and still incorporate it into those busy schedules that do happen, right? Because we're able to embed it in conferences and symposia. Um, and it gives us a way to stay in touch with each other and learn from each other too, because sometimes what one of the professors is doing at the Army War College, for example, is something I hadn't thought about, like an approach I hadn't thought about and vice versa. So we're constantly learning too, especially because this is a relatively new space, right, in the military. So, um, I think learning from each other is really helpful and figuring out what the other services have done, maybe lessons learned, challenges, those kind of things are always helpful to share too.

[00:23:16] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Oh, that's wonderful. And it's, it's nice to see that there is a bit of collaboration.

[00:23:17] **Dr Leigh-Ann Perry:** Yeah. We do our best.

[00:23:19] **Dr Lucas Marie:** I'm really interested to understand if you see any limitations to this, you know, what are the boundaries of where positive psychology is perhaps most effective? Um, you know, thinking about the concept of resilience in which we've spoken about, you know? One of the criticisms that I've encountered when it comes to this term, and it may be different outside of positive psychology, is its emphasis on the individual rather than the environment in which one lives and works. And so how does your work within the US Navy address this issue? Or do you focus on resilience or something else? I know you've talked about performance optimisation.

[00:23:51] **Dr Leigh-Ann Perry:** Yes, so we talk about performance optimization. We talk about resilience. I think the two go hand in hand and we also make a point to talk about this. Yes, in individual terms, but also at the team, the unit level and the organisational level, and so depending on who our audience is, particularly with senior level leaders, we talk about this in terms of the organisation. So how do you set the conditions for this to be part of the culture of the organisation, how do you not only model it, but how do you create that space for the people on your teams to realise that this is a priority, that this is something that you value as a senior level leader for the, for the organisation as a whole and not just for the individuals.



And there's also, I mean, positive psychology does, you know, one of the, one of the key components of it has to do with relationships, right? And so talking about this in terms of how it can help team cohesion. Right, unit cohesion, whatever phrase the group wants to use. I think that can be a really important way of thinking about this too.

How can you do this at the unit and team level? Right? Are there ways that you can incorporate these practices into maybe drills that you're already doing or into unit level PT? And so these are some of the things we talk to the commanding officers about when we, sometimes we do full day sessions with executive officers, commanding officers, and command master chiefs, right? Our triads of our ships. And so we'll have those conversations. We'll say, what might this look like at a unit level, what might this look like at the ship level? Right? How can you engage the team as a whole in this? And so, yes, there are individual benefits, but there can also be these unit level benefits.

And some of the work that we're doing now, some of the research that we're conducting, is looking at the perspectives of sailors and how they see this as something that could be more of that collective unit level type of benefit. And so hopefully we'll have more data on that soon. But yes, I think there's individual level benefits, but depending on how the practices are done, there can be that level that kind of piece of social cohesion that can come along with it too.

And the other thing I would say is that some of the benefits that, that can come from being more focused, being more attentive, right? Those pieces that, having levels of selective and sustained attention can benefit your interactions socially too, right?

So if you're more able to stay focused and attentive on the people, you're having a conversation with, right? If you come home to your children after a very long, stressful day at work. And you're able to hone that focus on what they're telling you, that inevitably is going to help strengthen that relationship and that communication that you have. And so there are these other extensions, I think of the benefits that might seem individual at the time, but that extend out to social networks. So whether it be at work or the family unit, um, which again, as I said earlier, I think is a really key component to that overall health and wellness, um, of the sailors too.



So. Yes. I think there is a lot of individual focus, but there also can be, or I should say, and there also can be a focus at the organisational and team level. I think it's really all in how you present it and how, how the practices are laid out, right? How they're embedded into the culture. And that's something that I think just takes some work and some collaboration, um, with the players involved. Right? And that's why we. Instead of lecturing at our par at participants, at the workshops and, um, at our senior leaders, we don't, we don't lecture at, we have conversations with Right.

And so we try to engage all of our participants to find out what would work for them, what would work for their teams. Right. And then work with them to figure out how to maximise that. Right. It's going to look different for everybody.

[00:27:43] **Dr Lucas Marie:** That's interesting, especially when you're asking them to kind of come up with what works? Yes. Because, uh, I think what's interesting to me as an anthropologist is the different ways in which different people from different social and cultural backgrounds have quite differing notions of, of things like wellbeing or things like health. Of things like, you know, what is, um, a positive health, healthy working relationship, personal relationship.

I'm interested, like what concepts and ideas within positive psychology, uh, do you think work kind of well or best across these sorts of different cultures? I mean, even within Navy there's different units and groups. Probably are quite different. You know, not just because of rank, but because of context and environment. You know, are there, are there some concepts and ideas that have really resonated with some of the students across those different groups more than others?

[00:28:23] **Dr Leigh-Ann Perry:** Yeah, I'm, I know the audience can't see me smiling, but I'm smiling right now because, when I first got to the Naval War College, I was told like all of the communities, so we call the different groups communities, right? So there's a surface community, the aviators, et cetera. Um, and they're like, every community is very different. So I was like, okay, well let's see. Let's see what I can learn here.



So I'm still getting, getting acclimated to all of the different community's kind of quirks. Um, but I think that's part of the fun for me is when I do engage with these groups, learning about what it is that they find valuable, what it is that they think would be most useful to them and to maximising their performance is going to look different again for each of the groups. And I'm not an expert in any of those groups, right? I have, I have not been a Navy member. I am, I am not a retired military member.

So I, I consider it my responsibility to learn from each of those groups that are sitting in front of me, whether it's from the different communities or even different levels of leadership within those communities about what would be most helpful to them? And so I think some parts of, um, positive psychology and of mindfulness practices might resonate better with one group vice the other, I'm not sure I necessarily know that until I get in front of the group.

Right. And because I also don't want to go in with preconceived notions, right? I could go and walk around to the Navy War College and ask, you know, the retired surface warfare officers and the retired aviators, what to expect from their communities. I can do that. Um, but then I'm going to walk into those groups and have you know, my preconceived notions of what they're going to need, and I'm, I'm pretty sure that'll, that would do a disservice to the group. So I try to go in with an open mind and see what it is that, that they think would be useful. And so, and some of the communities might be more resistant and that's okay, because then that just means we start the conversation at a different place.

Right. Um, and, and I think that's fine. Um, and I think it would probably be very similar across, um, if we were looking across different cultures. So at the Navy War College, we have a whole host of international students, right? And they're embedded in our classes. They come to my mindfulness sessions that I do two times a week and so I'm, I'm pretty sure they take different things away from this than some of the American students do, but I think that's okay. Um, and I try to make a point, in both in the way I deliver things, but also in how I explain mindfulness as a practice, as well as the potential benefits from it of explaining that this looks different for everyone. It's not a one size fits all. It's not cookie cutter. So if you walk away with something completely different than the person next to you, that's quite all right. Right? And so by not placing everything in a box, I think it gives that flexibility that different cultures can take from it what they find useful.



And so there may be some cultures that this just doesn't resonate at all, and that's, that's completely okay. Right? This is just one tool. If it doesn't work for you, then it doesn't work for you. Right? And so that's the way I, I attempt to approach it. I'm, I'm not an expert in all cultures, and I would never claim to be, all I can do is present some of the educational tools behind it, some of the science behind it, some of the practices. And then I trust that the folks sitting across from me will do with that what would be best for them, and that's kind of how I approach it.

[00:31:43] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Yeah. That's wonderful. I guess my last and final question, and we can see where this goes. Sure. But, um, where do you think this field is heading? And in positive psychology, you know, particularly in the military, do you think it could be, you know, the future that militaries, um, embrace more principles within positive psychology and not just US Navy, but you know, militaries broadly.

[00:31:59] **Dr Leigh-Ann Perry:** Sure. Well, I think they are starting to embrace it more. And so it's interesting, I have a, a much younger brother who's in the US Air Force and when he was going through basic training, I remember him calling me one day and saying, "Leigh, we do yoga, we do yoga every morning and we do meditation". And I just had a huge smile on my face because I thought, okay, so that's embedded in them early, right? And, and his age group, he's in his mid-twenties and younger, some of them, you know, go through high school and middle school with some of these principals already being talked about and normalised at really young ages.

That wasn't the case for me. I'm not going to say how old I am, but I am significantly older than him and we didn't have that in school. Right. So I think that as those new, those younger generations come up, I think they are learning about this younger and so I think it's going to be a more normalised piece for them, right? That resilience piece, even the, the concept of mindfulness, right? As a tool for that. Um, the different psych, the positive psychology principles, right? They may not use the phrase positive psychology, but that's okay, right? That's just a label. But if they're talking about finding meaning in their work and the importance of relationships and the benefit of positive emotions for buffering stress, all of those things are principles and concepts within positive psychology.



And those are things that some of the younger generations, I think, um, have been brought up with. And so I'm hopeful that as we move forward and as more research is done right, as more science comes out on this and the science gets replicated, right, the results get replicated, I think that this is something that will become kind of more commonplace, right?

It wasn't. So if we think about physical fitness, right? We didn't know, always know the value of jogging and running on cardiovascular health, right? We didn't know that until the science came out on it. And then when the science came out on it, people were like, well, of course, why would we not be jogging and running and building up our cardiovascular health? Right? So that now is normal. We don't even think twice about that, why someone would be jogging outside the campus. Right? And I talk with my students about this. How that wasn't always commonplace.

So I wonder if maybe a, a decade or two from now, these different cognitive fitness principles, right? And these different exercises, if you will, for the brain aren't going to be just commonplace, like jogging is for physical exercise. My hope is that it will be, that that will just be something that's embedded into our everyday practices. Because why would we not be working out our mind as much as we're working out our bodies? And I think we're moving in that, that direction.

And when I say we, I don't just mean the US Navy, I think that different branches of the US military, but also some of the international, um, students that I've spoken with. This is, it's something that they've been thinking more about too. And so while it may not be in place as a commonplace practice right now, I think we're moving in the right direction, and I think science will be really helpful in kind of pushing that along.

And especially like I'm having conversation with you right now, right? Our international partners and friends, the more these kind of conversations happen. And the more we engage with our international partners and share some of the findings and the science, um, and quite honestly some of just the anecdotal information that we're getting from our students, I think that will go a long way too to show that yes, it might look slightly different in different countries and across different cultures. but there may be a place for it. Even if it looks slightly different.



[00:35:24] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Yeah. I, I love that. And I, I imagine just from my own, some of research I've done in Japan or in parts of India. In which some mindfulness practices have been a part of those sorts of cultures for a long time and they're not, you know, it wasn't because they had the hard science of neuroscience to convince them, it was part of a sort of a cultural tradition in which, you know, a lot of businesses in Japan, you know, you see people doing certain sort of, um, breath work or, or other kinds of, um, you know, relaxing, like physical stress relieving kind of work.

And I wonder, if the neuroscience or other positive psychological science is what it takes for the, for places like Australia and the US and New Zealand to have a narrative that's grounded in some sort of, you know, objective science place for them to take it seriously. Leigh-Ann, thank you so much for chatting with me today. It was so lovely chatting with you. Thank you. And thanks for joining us at the college.

[00:36:17] **Dr Leigh-Ann Perry:** Oh, I appreciate you having me. Thank you for taking the time.

[00:36:28] **Mr Mike Richards:** This episode of Lives in Leadership is copyright Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Defence 2025. It is licensed under a Creative Commons by attribution, non-commercial no derivatives, 4.0 international license. Additional rights beyond this license can be arranged by contacting the.forge@defence.gov.au.

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