

Research Paper

Mental Health and Life Satisfaction in Indian Army Personnel

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ABSTRACT

The psychological well-being of military personnel is a critical determinant of both individual functioning and operational readiness. This study explored the relationship between mental health and life satisfaction among Indian Army personnel, an area with limited systematic research despite the unique stressors inherent in military service. A total of 51 male serving soldiers aged 20–40 years were recruited using purposive sampling. Data were collected using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985) and a 15-item Mental Health Screening Questionnaire assessing psychological distress. Pearson's correlation analysis revealed a significant negative relationship between mental health distress and life satisfaction ($r = -0.54, p < .05$), indicating that higher levels of psychological symptoms were associated with reduced satisfaction with life. These findings align with international research highlighting the protective role of resilience, social support, and positive affect in sustaining psychological health within military contexts. The study underscores the need for routine psychological assessments beyond recruitment, stigma-free access to counseling, and resilience-building programs to strengthen soldiers' coping capacities. Limitations include the cross-sectional, correlational design, reliance on self-report measures, and restricted sample size, which limit causal inference and generalizability. Future research should employ longitudinal and intervention-based designs to examine psychological well-being across diverse ranks, genders, and service branches, and to evaluate the effectiveness of structured resilience and support programs. Overall, the results highlight the importance of integrating mental health promotion into the Indian Army's existing framework to enhance both life satisfaction and mission readiness.

Keywords: *Mental Health, Life Satisfaction, Indian Army, Resilience, Well-Being*

Mental health is broadly understood as a level of psychological well-being or the absence of mental illness—reflecting a state in which an individual functions at a satisfactory level of emotional and behavioural adjustment.¹ Contributing factors to favourable mental health include a general sense of well-being, self-confidence, personal competence, satisfaction with life or job, positive affect, strong social bonds, happiness, and ego strength.

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Received: January 02, 2026; Revision Received: March 27, 2026; Accepted: March 31, 2026

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Life satisfaction is recognized as a key cognitive component of subjective well-being (SWB), involving an individual's holistic, judgmental evaluation of the quality of their own life. It is often referred to as cognitive well-being, characterized by global appraisals rather than momentary mood.^{2,3} Contemporary research defines life satisfaction as not only a comparison between one's ideal and actual life circumstances, but also as an overall cognitive assessment—whereby individuals evaluate their life as a whole based on personal standards and meaning.^{2,4}

In the context of the Indian Army, the Defence Institute of Psychological Research (DIPR) serves as the key body conducting psychological research on soldier welfare. While the institute administers psychological tests during recruitment and task allocation—ensuring personnel are mentally fit and appropriately placed—continuous monitoring of soldiers' well-being post-recruitment is largely absent, except for cases referred for psychiatric treatment. Similarly, follow-up research on life satisfaction and well-being is minimal.⁵ Typically, Other Ranks (ORs) begin retiring after 15–17 years of service (around ages 35–37), while officers retire at 54 unless further promoted. Feelings of anxiety—such as concern about combat operations or personal matters—are normal and often adaptive. However, when anxiety becomes persistent and unmanageable, it can disrupt daily functioning and overall well-being. The psychological well-being of armed forces personnel has substantial implications for operational performance, both during peace and conflict. Nonetheless, there is a clear lack of research capturing the psychological state of soldiers who dedicate the prime years of their lives to national service.⁵

Military service presents unique stressors: high-stress environments, prolonged separation from families, exposure to trauma, and heavy responsibility—all impacting mental health and life satisfaction. Although recent initiatives—such as reducing stigma, increasing access to mental health professionals, and offering counselling, resilience training, and stress management programs—have emerged, further attention and investment are essential to sustain mental health within the force. Still, most studies focus on diagnosis during hospitalization or in-depth interviews with only severely affected individuals, rather than on soldiers' everyday psychological well-being across their careers.⁵ Stress is universal, but soldiers experience it in uniquely intense and changing contexts, distinct from civilians in similar roles.⁶ Compared to veterans and reserve personnel, active military members often report poorer physical and mental health, especially those deployed in uncontrollable or hazardous peacekeeping missions, who are at elevated risk for PTSD. Notably, organizational support and leader behaviour play a critical role in mitigating stress, lowering depression symptoms, and enhancing resilience.⁷

A compelling body of contemporary research further underscores the critical interplay of mental health and life satisfaction among military personnel. Liu et al.⁸ conducted a 12-week longitudinal study among 215 military personnel, measuring resilience, perceived social support, depression (via PHQ-9), and life satisfaction (via SWLS). They found resilience and perceived social support to be significant predictors of later life satisfaction, with resilience additionally predicting reduced depressive symptoms—and both positive and negative mental health dimensions influencing each other over time. Similarly, Urbón et al.⁹ examined Spanish military personnel, exploring satisfaction with life, subjective happiness, and affect, and confirmed that positive emotions such as pride and camaraderie boost life satisfaction and happiness, while stress and anxiety related to deployment decrease these well-being indicators. Importantly, adaptability and resilience were found to moderate these effects, highlighting the importance of emotional balance for soldiers. From broader

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research, unit-level and individual happiness and meaning in life were shown to buffer PTSD symptoms among National Guard personnel, with higher happiness at both levels reducing symptom severity following trauma exposure and suggesting protective, transferable intra-unit psychological resources. In New Zealand, during the COVID-19 pandemic, 86% of military personnel reported feeling “healthy, happy, and satisfied in life,” though 22% of those deployed in pandemic response operations experienced moderate psychological distress.¹⁰ A 2020 study of U.S. Army Reserve/National Guard soldiers also revealed that unit support, marital satisfaction, and psychological hardiness were strongly associated with less depression, anxiety, PTSD, and anger, highlighting key protective factors independent of deployment status.¹¹

In light of the evolving demands on Indian Army personnel—ranging from operational deployments in challenging environments to the pressures of prolonged separations from home—the lack of systematic, longitudinal assessments of their mental health and life satisfaction is stark. Existing studies point to a strong inverse relationship between occupational stress and both psychological well-being and quality of life, while revealing that soldiers in combat or high-stress roles often exhibit reduced life satisfaction.¹²

Contemporary research underscores the importance of protective factors during prolonged stress: for example, a 2023 study of Chinese military recruits during the COVID-19 pandemic found that resilience significantly reduced anxiety, and this effect was mediated by social support, emphasizing the salience of support networks in maintaining psychological health under duress.¹³ These insights underscore a pressing need for a structured, holistic approach to understanding and supporting the psychological resources of Indian Army personnel. Consequently, this study is designed to fill these gaps by exploring the interplay of resilience, institutional support, emotional regulation, and occupational stress in shaping life satisfaction and mental health outcomes among serving soldiers.

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

Research Question: What is the relationship between mental health and life satisfaction among Indian Army personnel?

Objective: To explore the mental health and life satisfaction of Indian Army personnel.

Hypothesis

There is a significant correlation between mental health and life satisfaction of Indian Army personnel.

Research Design: The researcher used a quantitative research method. Correlation design was used to study the relationship between two variables.

Variables

For correlational analysis-

- Predictor variable - Mental Health
- Criterion variable - Life satisfaction

Participants

The study involved a total of 51 participants who were Indian Army serving personnel. All the individuals belonged to an age range of 20-40 years. Purposive sampling technique was employed. All the participants were males.

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Inclusion criteria:

- Army Personnel between 20 to 40 years of age
- Currently who are serving in the Indian Army.
- Proficient in either Hindi or English language or both.
- Participants who voluntarily agree to take part in the study.

Exclusion criteria:

- Army Personnel below 20 or above 40 years of age.
- Not currently serving in the Indian Army.
- Individuals with insufficient language proficiency to understand either Hindi or English.
- Individuals who do not wish to participate in the study.

Tools

- **Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS):** The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) is a 5-item self-report instrument developed by Diener et al.¹⁴ to assess global cognitive judgments of life satisfaction, capturing long-term evaluations rather than momentary mood states. Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree), producing a total score ranging from 5 to 35, with higher scores indicating greater life satisfaction.¹⁵ The SWLS demonstrates strong internal consistency, typically with Cronbach's alpha around 0.87, and solid temporal reliability, with 2-month test-retest stability approximately 0.82.^{15,16} Several psychometric evaluations across diverse populations and languages have confirmed its unidimensional factor structure, convergent and discriminant validity, and sensitivity to life changes such as psychotherapy outcomes or major life events.¹⁷
- **Mental Health Screening Questionnaire Scale:** The designed scale is a 15-item instrument to assess psychological distress. The item pool was collected in line with the common psychiatric disorders prevalent in the community. The pool was then discussed among psychiatrists, psychologists, public health experts and community nurses. On the basis of the discussion 15 items were finalized. The difficulty levels were: not difficult at all, somewhat difficult, very difficult and extremely difficult. Participants responded using a one-point format for Q1-15: Yes = 1, No = 0. These items are designed to detect problems and risk factors, not to capture positive aspects of mental health (like resilience, coping skills, optimism, or life satisfaction). That makes them pathology-oriented or "deficit-based." So, the lesser the score of an individual, the better is their mental health.

RESULTS

Pearson's correlation was calculated from the data to study the relationship between mental health and life satisfaction of Indian Army personnel.

Table 1: Shows the correlation matrix between mental health and Life Satisfaction

Variables	Mental Health	Life satisfaction
Mental health	1	-0.54
Life satisfaction	-0.54	1

The results revealed a significant negative correlation between mental health scores and life satisfaction among Indian Army personnel, $r = -0.54$, $p < 0.05$. This finding indicates that higher levels of psychological distress were associated with lower levels of life satisfaction.

In other words, as symptoms of poor mental health increased, soldiers reported a decline in their overall satisfaction with life. The moderate strength of this negative relationship underscores the importance of maintaining positive mental health to enhance subjective well-being in military contexts.

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated the relationship between mental health and life satisfaction among Indian Army personnel, revealing a significant negative correlation ($r = -0.54$, $p < .05$). This finding indicates that higher levels of psychological distress are associated with lower levels of life satisfaction. Conversely, greater life satisfaction corresponds with fewer reported psychological symptoms, underscoring the interdependent nature of soldiers' mental health and well-being.

These results align with international findings. Cao et al.¹⁵ observed that resilience significantly reduced anxiety among Chinese military recruits, with social support serving as a critical mediator. Similarly, Urbón et al.⁹ emphasized that positive affect, camaraderie, and adaptability enhanced well-being among Spanish military personnel, while deployment stress weakened it. Within the Indian context, Sharma¹⁸ found that prolonged exposure to operational stress enhanced resilience, suggesting that structured resilience training may serve as a protective factor against psychological distress.

The study also highlights the pivotal role of institutional and social support. Prior research suggests that leader behaviour, peer support, and accessible mental health resources reduce depressive symptoms and improve overall psychological outcomes among armed forces.^{7,19} Given the high-stress environments and unique occupational demands of soldiers, interventions that strengthen both personal resilience and systemic support structures appear crucial in fostering both mental health and life satisfaction.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relied on correlational design, which prevents causal conclusions about the direction of influence between mental health and life satisfaction. Second, self-reported measures may have introduced social desirability bias, especially given the stigma associated with mental health concerns in military culture. Third, the study was conducted with a specific sample of Indian Army personnel, limiting generalizability to other branches of the armed forces or different cultural contexts. Finally, cross-sectional data restricts understanding of how these relationships evolve over time, particularly during deployment versus peacetime.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies should employ longitudinal designs to capture changes in psychological well-being and life satisfaction over soldiers' careers, particularly before, during, and after deployment. Incorporating qualitative interviews could enrich understanding by exploring soldiers' subjective perspectives on stress, resilience, and life satisfaction. Furthermore, intervention-based studies—such as resilience training, counselling, or peer-support programs—should be implemented and evaluated to assess their effectiveness in reducing distress and improving well-being in the Indian Army. Expanding research across different ranks, genders, and branches of service would also allow for a more comprehensive understanding.

Practical Implications

The findings carry important implications for policy and practice. The moderate negative correlation between mental health distress and life satisfaction suggests that interventions aimed at improving psychological health may simultaneously enhance life satisfaction. The Indian Army could implement routine psychological screenings beyond recruitment, coupled with confidential access to counselling and psychoeducational workshops. Leadership training to promote empathetic and supportive command behaviour may also buffer against stress and reduce stigma surrounding mental health help-seeking. Moreover, investment in resilience-building programs—such as mindfulness, stress inoculation training, and structured social support systems—could significantly contribute to both soldier well-being and operational readiness.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated a significant negative relationship between mental health distress and life satisfaction among Indian Army personnel, highlighting the urgent need to prioritize mental health within the armed forces. The findings underscore the value of resilience, social support, and proactive institutional measures in enhancing soldiers' overall well-being. While limitations constrain the scope of generalization, the implications are clear: fostering a culture of mental health awareness and support can simultaneously protect soldiers' psychological resilience and improve their quality of life.

The Indian Army invests heavily in the physical preparedness of its personnel; similar sustained investment in psychological health will not only benefit individual soldiers but also enhance collective morale and operational efficiency. Ultimately, recognizing and addressing the interplay between mental health and life satisfaction ensures that the armed forces remain both mentally resilient and mission-ready in the face of evolving challenges.

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Acknowledgment

The authors sincerely express their gratitude to all the Indian Army personnel who willingly participated in this study and shared their experiences. We are deeply thankful to the University of Lucknow for providing academic support and guidance throughout the research process. We also acknowledge the valuable insights of experts and mentors whose suggestions enriched this work. This study would not have been possible without their cooperation and encouragement.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

How to cite this article: Singh, P., Sinha, S. & Yadav, N.K. (2026). Mental Health and Life Satisfaction in Indian Army Personnel. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 14(1), 3291-3297. DIP:18.01.329.20261401, DOI:10.25215/1401.329