

Protecting the well-being of NATO's most powerful force: Its people

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About the author

Ingrid is a Chartered Psychologist (Health and Care Professions Council registered), public speaker, researcher, Qualified Executive Coach, a member of the European Association for Aviation Psychology, the Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP), EAWOP and Project Security Assessment for Everyone (S.A.F.E.) She has over two decades of experience in industries and sectors from finance to international organizations (e.g., the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO). She received the Practitioner of the Year Award (2010) from the British Psychological Society's (BPS) Division of Occupational Psychology (DOP). She served as the DOP Strategy Convenor and Conference Chair for a decade and was a Research Fellow at Birkbeck for two years. Ingrid is a reviewer for the BPS Professional Development Centre and is pursuing a PhD at KU Leuven University.

Ingrid is a member of the EAWOP Congress Katowice 2023 Organising Committee and is responsible for the invited speaker programme. She will be involved in a symposium chaired by keynote Professor Martin Euwema on what Work and Organizational Psychology can learn from military psychology research and practice, and is involved in the networking, relationship building and practitioner aspects of the congress.

Reflecting the context of this paper Ingrid has a chapter in a forthcoming international book to be published by Routledge – Taylor & Francis, on the topic of *Elite High Performing Military Leaders & Resilience*, edited by Professor Fotinatos–Ventouratos, Professor Sir. Cary L. Cooper and Professor Alexander, S. Antoniou.

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Introduction

Covid-19 was life altering, indiscriminate and unprecedented. We were paralysed by fear and the unknown, and the world ground to a halt. Acts such as handshakes, hugging and kissing became unwanted demonstrations of affection. The fear of infection overrode our need for affection and acceptance. Those living far away from

home experienced homesickness as though for the first time. Yearning for days gone by when they were surrounded by tradition, family gatherings, national celebrations and the simple hospitality people would offer one another. Our innate need to connect with others was hampered by the pandemic, leaving many of us to experience periods of prolonged isolation and loneliness. Facing the unknown led to heightened fears, leaving many of us to feel increasingly anxious and hopeless about the future.

This paper tells the story of the creation of the *Staying Well Together Programme* an informal, volunteer, grass root, networked effort to strengthen individual and collective resilience in the multi-national community of NATO's Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers, Europe (SHAPE) in Mons, Belgium.

Locked down, knocked down, but not out!

I will forever remember Friday 13 March 2020. It was the first day of lockdown in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. I was at home with my two teenage daughters and husband at SHAPE. This is the military headquarters of NATO's Allied Command Operations (ACO) that commands all NATO operations worldwide. Located in French speaking Mons, Belgium, it is home to 16,000 people from 30 member nations and two dozen partner nations. It is a culturally rich and dynamic community, with military personnel and their families passing through every two to three years. Fostering a sense of community and connection at SHAPE is part of supporting the mission for the Alliance.

Historically, SHAPE ran a varied and active social programme to celebrate the many traditions and cultures of its member nations. It offered a Language Centre to equip members with the language skills necessary to navigate an international community. There were a variety of clubs and activities in and around the base, in addition to sports facilities (e.g., tennis courts, running track, swimming pool, fitness centre and basketball courts). But all this came to a grinding halt on that fateful day!

Finding connections in a disconnected pandemic world

As a chartered psychologist I was acutely aware of the need to cultivate meaningful connections and a sense of community in the face of this pandemic to insulate the mental and physical health of individuals from factors such as loneliness. Loneliness and isolation can be experienced acutely by members of the military. According to Diener and Seligman (2004) the well-being of a population or workforce impacts on

health and social care expenditure as well as overall economic productivity of a nation or organization. This was especially salient given that individuals were away from home and far away from their trusted and familiar social support networks. Members of a military community have unique risk factors, especially for depression and anxiety, alcohol problems and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Inoue et al. 2022, for more information see [mentalhealth.org.uk](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk)). This is further compounded by lower-than-average support seeking behaviours. Indeed, Sharp et al., (2015), suggest that up to 60% of military personnel don't seek help, mainly explained by the high levels of stigma that exist around accessing mental health support. The importance of having human contact and meaningful activities as well as access to appropriate services and support was never more evident.

The Covid-19 lockdown was a period of deep uncertainty, causing doubts and worries that were deeply distressing for many. Under these circumstances, time was of the essence, and we immediately got to work and launched the *Staying Well Together at SHAPE* programme. The mission of the programme was to build social capital throughout the community by building awareness of, and opportunities for, how to remain and sustain an individual and collective sense of well-being. Social capital is a concept in social science that looks at the phenomenon of social networks and how individuals can benefit from membership in them. Social capital revolves around three dimensions: a) interconnected networks of relationships between individuals and groups (social ties or social participation); b) levels of trust that characterises these ties; and c) resources or benefits that are both gained and transferred by virtue of social ties and social participation ([Britannica.com](https://www.britannica.com)). An underpinning belief is that measurable and tangible psychological and protective benefits to individuals exist from being connected through strong and supportive social ties, which formed the foundation of the programme.

Well-being at the center of all we do

The literature on well-being has been rapidly growing for the last two decades and has accelerated even further in response to the pandemic. It is important to note that there are many different types of well-being to include physical, mental and social aspects. Interest from psychologists, sociologists, economists, business and policy makers in this area are becoming increasingly focused on the role and impact of well-being on overall life satisfaction and its relationship with key outcome measures. Indeed, several studies have associated higher well-being with better health and longevity (Boehm & Kubzansky, 2012; Huppert, 2009; Park et al. ,2016; Shrestha et al., 2019; Seligman, 2008), better

ability to cope with adversity, greater productivity and stronger social relationships (Diener, 2000; Graham, 2009). Protecting the well-being of military personnel and their families is especially important in the context of higher-than-average risk of PTSD, depression and anxiety, sleep disruptions and suicidal ideation. In response to this, a variety of programmes have been developed focused on counteracting stigma by building strong peer support relationships designed to increase social support to encourage help seeking behaviours (Greden et al., 2010).

The primary focus of our culturally sensitive programme (*Staying Well Together*) was on helping people to build and strengthen their psychological well-being by developing prompts and activities that encouraged an abundance of positive feelings and a reduction of negative feelings. We used the well-researched Diener (2009) definition of Subjective Well-Being (SWB), as it allows the individual to determine their own sense of well-being in terms of happiness, life satisfaction, and positive affect, and is influenced by health, social contact, activity and personality. It was built as a system with distinct elements that were inter-connected, self-reinforcing and adaptable to individual and group preferences and circumstances. It was evidence-based programme underpinned by the holistic *Five Ways to Well-being* (Connect, Give, Take Notice, Keep Learning and Be Active, Centre for Wellbeing at the New Economics Foundation, 2008) as a set of simple daily practices for individuals to improve their well-being. The idea that individuals can achieve a sense of well-being by developing specific building blocks is well documented and supported by Seligman (2018) who hypothesised that PERMA (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment) are the essential elements of well-being. Evidence exists to support the association between individual practices and well-being (Aked et al., 2008). Engaging in multiple practices is associated with higher levels of well-being, with well-being increasing with each additional practice regardless of the combination. The most important predictors of well-being are *Keep Learning and Take Notice*, according to an extensive study undertaken with 10,012 adults throughout Aotearoa, New Zealand (Mackay, 2019).

Importantly, the *Five Ways to Well-being* approach is outcome focused based on the five key actions of social relationships, physical activity, awareness, learning, and giving, that research indicates are important influencers of well-being. Evidence exists to show that both well-being and ill-being are influenced by having secure social relationships, being involved in learning and being physically active (Aked et al., 2008). Specifically, well-being is shown to be influenced in a positive way through the processes of giving and becoming more aware. The universality and simplicity of this approach was appealing

given the complex and diverse needs of the international military context. The positive and empowering focus on encouraging a healthy combination of these behaviours to enhance individual well-being with the goal of reducing the number of people in the community who develop mental health disorders in the longer term, was relevant and appropriate given the context of stigma around seeking mental health support that existed and the scarcity of resources available to deal with behavioural health challenges.

Thus, equipping individuals with the knowledge, skills and resources to achieve a sense of well-being by offering concrete activity-based ideas on how to improve personal well-being was highly desirable. By communicating these five simple ways to well-being, individuals were being prompted into thinking about what is important to their well-being and encouraging them to prioritise these simple activities into their everyday routines. Individuals would likely already be involved in many of these activities, and it was our goal to increase the time spent on the specific activities that were known to enhance well-being. As many of the ways for people to enjoy these activities were shut down due to the restrictions, the programme focused on redesigning these activities in Covid-19 friendly and accessible ways.

Staying Well Together

The programme had a clear mission and was volunteer-led, so it was able to be responsive, agile and adaptable to the ever-changing conditions and environment. It grew and evolved in response to demands and feedback from the wider community. Vulnerable groups were identified and prioritised. Those in danger of falling through the cracks were offered a sense of belonging. The systemic nature of the programme helped to simplify an over complex organization by making explicit the inter-connections and relationships that needed to exist throughout the community to achieve the mission.

Due to the increased risks of isolation during the winter months and lockdown during Christmas, we developed a targeted campaign, informing every member of SHAPE of the *Five Ways to Well-being*, employing leaflets, a huge banner and content displayed on large LED screens all around the compound (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Banner display of Staying Well Together



We needed to identify the resources available in the community that could be mobilised to help meet the needs of the community. To do this we developed a team made up of international psychologists and psychiatrists. This was accomplished rapidly through word of mouth and social media announcements. Team members were keen to have an opportunity to use their skills in a timely and impactful way. Collectively we developed a series of principles and activities that engaged all nations throughout the community, and which responded sensitively to the unique circumstances that each nation faced.

Activities mapped onto the *Five Ways to Well-being* such as language buddies, photo competitions, book clubs, cooking clubs, golf, Cross Fit, virtual Zumba and yoga and hiking clubs were launched to create opportunities for Covid-19 safe shared interests to be discovered and nurtured. They were designed to lessen isolation and increase motivation and a sense of hope. By joining special interest activity groups individuals were encouraged to develop social relationships and stay connected (*Connect*); as 'Doing good does you good' (McCulloch, 2012). We organised community activities such as healthcare appreciation lunches, that required volunteering and giving to others (*Give*); yoga and meditation classes encouraged individuals to become aware of what is happening in the moment by being more reflective and photo competitions helped individuals to notice and appreciate the beauty that surrounded them (*Take Notice*).

The Language Buddy Programme helped to increase skills and improve self-esteem by offering peer language support (*Keep Learning*); and the Walk and Talk programmes (designed for specific communities) encouraged people to keep active throughout the year, especially during winter, through a social walking programme designed to strengthen the link between exercise and reduced depression and anxiety (*Be Active*).

Figure 2
Walk and Talk programme



Evaluation and outcomes of *Staying Well Together*

We conducted formative and summative evaluation through monitoring uptake numbers (motivation), seeking feedback and reviewing the effectiveness of the activity. We also used Facebook polling to monitor and track the mood (affect) of individuals by using the mood questionnaire each week. For example “*How have you felt in the past week?*” *Please rate your mood by ticking the appropriate box*” Rating: 1 = never, 6 = all the time in the categories of Happy, At ease, Annoyed, Anxious, Calm, Motivated, Bored, Tired, Active, Gloomy. We observed that moods were adversely impacted by poor weather and quarantine (we introduced care packs and zoom counselling to counteract this)

and positively impacted by factors such as fair weather and community campaigns, for example, the photo competitions inviting people to take pictures of their favourite quarantine activities.

Based on feedback and uptake numbers, the two most impactful activities were Walk and Talk and Language Buddies. They each offered an opportunity for meaningful and mutually trusting connections to be built around a common interest, activity or goal. Friendships were made and confidence to connect amidst uncertainty offered a much-needed cocoon of safety and comfort. We successfully encouraged social connections throughout the pandemic by replacing the commonly used and severely limiting term 'social distancing' with 'keep socially connected and physically distanced'. We worked closely with the SHAPE Base Support Commander to ensure that we were operating safely within the Belgium Covid regulations and sought formal approval for each activity.

Visibility of our activities impacted the community positively and spurred many additional activities, including a Walk and Talk for the Italian spousal community, a book club for the Polish community and a Virtual London Marathon hosted by the British Military Community. Our programme principles inspired existing groups to understand their purpose more holistically, positively impacting the community. For example, the former president of the SHAPE International Toastmasters Club, thanked our programme for motivating her to take her club on-line and to use the platform to connect former members around the world with existing members, creating meaningful connections throughout the community and a renewed sense of purpose.

We created an education and awareness campaign through a Facebook group (currently with 874 members) and a monthly column in the SHAPE Community Life Magazine (for an example see Figure 3), featuring mental health-focused articles and studies, events and activities engaging all international members of the community. The many featured topics are selected in response to feedback from the community, and have included how to reduce and manage stress, how to build and sustain lasting friendships, how to build a balanced and happy life and understanding the benefits of health psychology for well-being. An article on 'Sustaining a Happy Work: Life Balance' resulted in our programme being asked to deliver staff training to the American Armed Services personnel based in Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg and 'Finding Your Sense of Belonging When Away from Home' was turned into a workshop and delivered at an Americans Working Across the Globe (AWAG) conference in Germany.

Over time, connections across the community were made and members of the community grew in strength and developed confidence in sharing articles and stories about resilience and mental health, demonstrating a level of trust and compassion that continues to grow. The primary goal of the campaign was to facilitate and create opportunities for individuals to make meaningful connections with other members of SHAPE. By strengthening the psychological safety and security of the community, we believed that the resilience of the SHAPE community was being strengthened.

Figure 3
Example of a monthly column in the SHAPE Community Life Magazine

Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Friends help you live a long and happy life!

StayingWellTogetherAtSHAPE

By Ingrid Covington

Investing in Friendships

With the uncertainty that we are experiencing at present, it is reassuring to know that there are some things that we can be certain about! One of those things is the power of friendships!

7 HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PEOPLE

EMOTIONAL BANK ACCOUNT

DEPOSIT	WITHDRAWAL
• Keeping promises	• Breaking promises
• Using kind words	• Saying unkind words
• Giving compliments	• Excluding and ignoring the person
• Remembering things about them like their interests	• Refusing to say sorry
• Sending an article that made you think of them	• Apologizing, including the person in your activity and helping a person out

When was the last time that you made a new friend or connected with an old one? Think of friendships as relationships that need to be nurtured and invested in – think of them like a bank account. We will all make withdrawals at some point, but the effects are limited by the credits that we have built up. You can make deposits by keeping promises, using kind words and giving compliments, by remembering things about them like their interests, sending an article that made you think of them, by apologizing, including the person in your activity and helping a person out. Withdrawals include breaking promises, saying unkind words, refusing to say sorry, by excluding and ignoring the person.

Did you know - People with strong social ties are 50% less likely to die early.

Did you know - A British study found that regular contact with 10 or more friends significantly increases happiness and lengthens life. The same study found that people with fewer friends reported lower levels of happiness all around.

Did you know - A Harvard Business School study showed that an everyday occurrence like a conversation can often hold more meaning for us later than a momentous event.

When you are feeling down – call a friend

Call your positive friend for a quick chat and we guarantee you'll feel better. It is a good idea to get into a healthy habit of calling friends regularly – perhaps choose a day of the week for 'friends'! To foster a friendship, skip the small talk and get to important topics. Research shows we feel closer to friends when we have meaningful conversations.

The *Staying Well Together* programme acted as a bridge between the community, the SHAPE Healthcare Centre and SHAPE. By way of example, the 'Walk and Talk for Parents with Newborns' programme, identified vulnerable parents of newborns across all nations, connected them with the various community healthcare services and designed an activity to bring together these otherwise dispersed and isolated individuals into a purposeful and active group. The Walk and Talk for Parents group met weekly come rain or shine and friendships were formed and continued throughout and beyond the pandemic. It offered a lifeline for many new mothers who found themselves struggling alone with a newborn and away from their family and friends. Focus groups and interviews of participants and professionals involved in the programme highlighted many powerful personal and community benefits, some of which were anticipated and others that were not:

“As a midwife, the programme reminded me of the importance of social connections and support for new mothers and taught me how to foster a sense of community and unity amongst service users.” UK Midwife, SHAPE Healthcare Facility.

“As a new mom and someone new to the military, I was overwhelmed by having a newborn in a foreign country during the pandemic. I have a history of mental ill health and was fearful that I would slip into a deep depression. The Staying Well Together programme gave me a reason to get dressed and out of the house. It helped me to make friends and to keep active and most importantly offered me a sense of security that someone would notice if I didn't turn up and reach out to check in on me.” US spouse of US Armed Services Officer.

Themes from our evaluation were shared with the healthcare professionals at SHAPE to further their understanding of the unique and universal needs of the community and the evidenced based ways of meeting them.

Reflections on what it means to help another's well-being

As I reflect on the past two and a half years of *Staying Well Together at SHAPE*, I am convinced that well-being of the individual or individual nations is at the heart of NATO. The Covid-19 experience made more explicit our understanding that well-being is underpinned by security in its many facets (health, economic, physical, psychological, national, regional and global).

The Washington Treaty was signed by 12 founding nations of NATO in Washington DC on 4 April 1949. While NATO's common defense purpose and its famous Article 5 is generally understood, the authors of the Washington Treaty also foresaw a critical mission for the Alliance in the post-World War 2 period of reconstruction and challenge:

"The Parties to this Treaty reaffirm their faith in the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and their desire to live in peace with all peoples and all governments. They are determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law."

Notably, the Treaty (p1.) reads: "They seek to promote stability and well-being in the North Atlantic area." Yes, well-being is a mission for the Alliance, and one of its original missions. It was this historical Treaty that sparked the start of a journey that would result in the formation of the world's longest and most successful alliance. For over seven decades, NATO has largely silently and subtly protected the well-being and security of over one billion citizens.

Over the decades of travel by the Alliance, well-being has been and continues to be challenged in numerous ways, to include communism, military invasion, Cold War, fall of the Berlin Wall, 9/11, Afghanistan and most recently the Ukraine crisis. These incidents bring into sharp focus our understanding of common defense and freedom, and the preservation of our well-being.

As a psychologist, and not a specialist on international relations or treaties, it is the authors of this Treaty over 70 years ago who used these words and highlighted them. These are words of the profession of psychology. These are the words we as psychologists use in consultation. We have seldom heard these words before concerning NATO; that is until the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, the Covid-19 has changed how we see security, how we see interactions and how we see well-being. Note the phrase 'You Are Not Alone'!

We built a programme at SHAPE that would support individuals to feel physically safe and socially connected. Yes - *socially* connected rather than socially distanced. The one thing connecting us on this planet is the one thing that protects us - our humanity. As humans we are instinctively connected and thrive through our being connected. I understood that we needed to nurture and foster these connections as a community at SHAPE and this is where the idea of the Staying Well Together programme was born. Social Capital is best understood as an organizational asset that benefits all its members.

Covid-19 has highlighted the value in moving beyond an individual model of well-being towards a collective one. Individuals thrive in environments where psychological safety and collective trust exist. A strong community in which individuals are able to leverage collective knowledge and resources, strengthens the entire membership. This is where the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

Our motto '*You Are Not Alone*' could not have been simpler. We will always be stronger together. Essentially, the principles of being an Ally that bound together the alliance back in 1949, were the same ones that bind together the community at SHAPE. Stay connected - take notice - keep learning - keep active - give to others. These were the pathways guiding us back to our roots; back to a more fundamental understanding of security, away from the complexity of policies or strategies or weapon capabilities - back to well-being, our well-being, our collective well-being as a prerequisite for any other form of security. And the well-being journey at SHAPE was designed to rebuild well-being and to respond to these crises with new pathways, as we simultaneously redrew the emotional maps of our lives to help us cope with the fear, unknown and isolation. We all redefined what well-being is and what it means to each and every one of us, individually and together.

The well-being journey at SHAPE led us to a place where we were reminded of the power of the human touch - the power of being touched and the power of touching others. Together we protect the well-being of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. This is a mission the Treaty authors envisioned over seven decades ago and it is a mission that remains central to each of us as individuals, as a community and as a community of nations. This priority will never go away. It is here to stay, with or without a pandemic. It is driven by need. And it is in the recognition of this universal need that we will all find our path to security, our path to success and our path to making others feel secure and safe.

As Work and Organization Psychologists, we can protect these cherished institutions. We can impart our extensive knowledge and understanding to ensure that humanitarian missions remain sustainable and achievable, through resilient and adaptable policies and practices, through education and awareness and through guiding principles that inspire future leaders to lead passionate and engaged followers in search of a safe, fair and humane existence. The pandemic created a moment in history for billions of people around the planet to contemplate the kind of world that they want. Thus, a global 'unfreezing' (Kurt Lewin, 1951) has occurred. So now, let us come together as

a profession and collectively create a future that is defined by a sense of psychological security, agency and a commitment to a higher purpose. American Anthropologist Margaret Mead summed this up well by stating:

“Never underestimate the power of a small group of committed people to change the world. In fact, it is the only thing that ever has.” (Stover, 2005).

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