



The Sydney Morning Herald

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Heroes are born, not made

Published: February 18, 2009 - 12:00AM

CHICAGO: People who stay cool in a crisis may be natural-born heroes, psychiatrists investigating how soldiers behave in stressful situations say.

Blood tests on war veterans showed that a minority were almost oblivious to stress and could think clearly despite the dangers of situations in which they found themselves.

The research has led to a test that can predict which people will respond well in a stressful situation - such as the Victorian bushfires - and those who are more likely to panic.

Many heroic stories from the bushfires involved ordinary people - not just those trained to deal with disasters - keeping a cool head and chaperoning others to safety, or finding a secure place to bunker down in the face of the firestorm.

Deane Aikins, a psychiatrist at Yale University, said some people seemed to be born with an ability to cope in extremely stressful situations. "We'd all be ready to scream in our chairs, but there are certain individuals who just don't get as stressed," she said.

In a study, Mr Aikins took blood samples from soldiers before and after exercises designed to test their skills at evading capture and enduring interrogation.

In the majority of men, levels of the stress hormone cortisol increased sharply during the exercise. But Mr Aikins found a few whose stress levels hardly changed. They performed best because they stayed calm, he told the American Association for the Advancement of Science meeting in Chicago on Monday.

Interviews with the men after the exercise showed that while all of them found the experience unpleasant, only those with low cortisol levels said they did not find it particularly distressing.

"Certain people are cooler under pressure, and they perform very, very well during these periods of time," Mr Aikins said.

Further tests revealed the men who coped best with stress had higher levels of a substance called neuropeptide Y, which reduces levels of cortisol in the body and blocks feelings of stress.

The ability to cope with stress is linked strongly to the risk of soldiers developing post-traumatic stress disorder, which can cause them to experience anxiety attacks and flashbacks for years after the event.

Mr Aikins said his next goal was to identify mental exercises or drugs that could protect people from high levels of stress. Guardian News & Media

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/world/heroes-are-born-not-made-20090217-8a9h.html>