

An Interview with Jemma King: Special Forces Human Behaviourist

Samuel Cox (SC): How can your work make better leaders in the Australian Army?

Jemma King (JK): It's increasingly understood that in order to be an effective leader, it is critical to develop 'soft skills'. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, as the nature of warfare shifts and becomes crowded with asymmetrical threats and non-state actors, soldiers require a greater degree of diplomatic sensitivity and intuition. They must foster relationships and build trust in teams very quickly, especially with partner forces on Train, Advise, Assist missions.

Secondly, today's leaders in Army are commanding very different subordinates than they've traditionally been used to. This generation is accustomed to having instantaneous access to information and are not going to be satisfied with just being given direction. They want to know 'why?' they've been asked to do something and know 'why should I?' do something. In order for leaders to retain smart and loyal subordinates, they need to be adept at ascertaining what are the intrinsic motivations of each individual, and adept at explaining the goals of the Army in a way that resonates. That requires pretty sophisticated interpersonal and soft skills.

SC: You are a consultant with Special Operation Training and Education Centre (SOTEC) and 2nd Commando Regiment. How do you get the high performing individuals in these communities to care about emotional intelligence?

JK: Special Forces operators have an extreme bent for excellence. They are determined to improve self-mastery and to get better in any way they can, so they are an easy audience. They sit up the front, turn up on time, take heaps of notes, and ask really good questions. They also tend to already be very well informed and have a deep and sophisticated understanding of the human dimension of warfare.

SC: What can you tell readers about your work with these organisations? What is it you teach to give them an edge?

JK: I began my work in 2015 and it was developed with, and in response to the needs of, operators. I use a multi-dimensional biopsychosocial approach to being 'better'. My premise is that in order to be an effective leader, or an operator, you need to first be able to manage yourself. If you can't manage self, you can't manage others; and if you can't manage others, you can't manage a team through conflict. If you can't do that, then you certainly can't manage an organisation.

I'm interested in developing pre-emptive strategies *before* someone is placed under immense stress, rather than going back after operators have been under prolonged duress and already had a mental health disruption.

SC: So, this is about more than just heightening their performance in the battlespace? It's about preventive medicine to ensure there's fewer operators with post-traumatic stress disorder or a moral injury at their end of their career.

JK: Absolutely. The Human Performance Wing at the 2nd Commando Regiment believes in a 'from cradle to grave' approach. They are focused on operators being effective at their job at the moment and at their job longitudinally, but also on operators being better partners and parents. This ensures that when they leave the unit, they can be effective human beings who go out into the community and make the unit proud. It's much more than being able to kick doors.

When I talk about emotional intelligence or emotional regulation, I'm not advocating a 'soft and fluffy' approach where we all do meditation and learn to be nicer to one another. Quite simply, there are already not enough people who can get through Selection so we need to maintain those who can. They are a high-performance machine asked to do high-performance activities.

We know people don't tell the truth about stress, particularly in male dominated environments, because they are concerned saying so will have negative repercussions on their job. Cortisol is a good way to get around such impression management because it is a biological, objective measure of stress. I was awarded the [Army Research Scheme](#) in 2015 and was invited to continue research I'd started at the University of Queensland with the 2nd Commando Regiment because they've seen a lot of kinetic operations over the last decade and so are a good population for researching stress.

I spent a lot of time interviewing the senior, experienced operators and identifying what they think made them effective in their job and where they think they failed. I have a decade of human performance research behind me, but I wanted to use the wisdom of the men who'd been there. I asked, 'when you're in combat, what do you do? What does it feel like? How do you calm yourself down? What are you thinking? How do you train for it? What did you wish you knew back then?' I wanted to know what made these guys good. I could see themes emerging and put the science behind ideas that these operators had just worked out intuitively over years of experience. At this point, no one had deeply researched the minds of operators.

I spent two years doing research with SOTEC and then created a training package called the Pre-emptive Training and Education Continuum (PRETEC) which combined the stories of experienced operators with scientific theory and empirical, validated research. Training starts with the micro; the actual biology of what happens in your body when you get stressed. Then we escalate to the macro; we talk about the physiological consequences of that stress hormone; the behavioural and psychological impacts of that stress; and then what that means for your situational awareness, your ability to process complex information, your decision-making, leadership and interpersonal skills, and the group's behaviour.

The intention was to try and shorten the learning loop for the young guys coming in and give them this information quicker than if they'd had to work it out themselves. We got so much buy-in when presenting this PRETEC training to members of the Reinforcement Cycle because experienced operators stood alongside me and told 'warries' [war stories] that made it real for them. I was socially endorsed.

The course also seeks to answer, 'what are the factors that make it hard for you to remain emotionally stable and to perform under pressure?' PRETEC covers 'eating for emotional stability' and examines what foods you might be putting into your body that cause inflammation and therefore make it harder for you to stay calm. We talk about sleep and provide tips on how to perform while sleep deprived or how to optimise your sleep (especially when you can't get enough). We also go into the four factors of emotional intelligence and use practical examples from operators that demonstrate why emotional intelligence is important for them individually and as leaders.

The four factors of emotional intelligence are:

1. Emotional perception (in self and others);

2. Emotional understanding (why they arise and morph);
3. Using emotional data for effective decision-making; and
4. Using emotional management (for self and others).

Let me give you a generic, Army-wide example of this at work. Imagine you're in a meeting with your two-up Boss. You say your piece about a subject, but your two-up just dismisses it. You can feel anger well-up inside you. First, emotional perception. You need to identify what your 'first instance' emotional or stress response is: clenching your jaw, a tightening in your chest, your breath shortening, or maybe your face becoming hot. That's emotional perception in self; you also need to check if anyone else is noticing that you are getting angry. That's emotional perception in others.

Second, identify why is this making you angry? Does it remind you of a previous time where you felt ignored? Does it remind you of a partner who is dismissive of you?

Thirdly, acknowledge that you're feeling angry and identify that mid-meeting is not the time to bring it up. Take some notes and revisit the issue later; perhaps speak to the superior outside the context of the meeting.

Fourthly, utilise emotional regulation tactics you've identified and practiced before, like note taking, breathing, counting to ten, or resetting your vagus nerve. It's not a linear a process, but these four components can help you calm down and regulate emotion in a stressful environment.

SC: Can you talk to those emotional regulation techniques in more detail?

JK: First, when you're in the moment, under extreme pressure, and having difficulty down-regulating, we use the 'vagus nerve reset'. There are neuroscience and evolutionary biology reasons behind that. When you get angry or stressed, you get into a frenetic fight or flight state and your brain goes offline and you cannot concentrate. You whack that big vagus nerve in your chest three times and that gives your brain enough time to get back online and start thinking rationally.

Next, we employ resonant breathing. Every human has a specific breathing rate which is optimal for their physiology. This is slow, rhythmic breathing that uses the least amount of resources. It has been tried and tested with operators on various stress serials and before parachuting. It's a way to hack our stress response system and tell our brain to calm down.

Third, perspective take. You need go outside yourself and move beyond 'why is this happening to me?' Instead ask, 'what is the greater purpose here?'

Fourth, counting to 10 is a really effective way to calm your mind down because fear, panic and stress lie in the amygdala; a primitive part of the brain. Counting to 10 draws your brain into the higher order, more reasoned and complex parts of the brain. Writing down notes achieves the same result.

SC: You mentioned previously that the PRETEC training includes tips for how to perform under sleep deprivation. Can you speak to that? It'd be useful advice for those who are preparing to undertake Selection.

JK: Selection is a contest of minds. It's not the fittest person who passes Selection, but those who are mentally tough. I recommend high-performance athletes, and anyone planning to

undertake Selection, practice cognitive activities under sleep deprivation in order to test themselves. Knowledge dispels fear.

After 36 hours without sleep, there is degradation in cognitive and physical performance. Be confident that you can still perform within that time period. However, if you are *stressed* about being sleep deprived then you are making it *far* worse for yourself. You will make yourself more exhausted. Negative rumination grinds you down and draws on many cognitive and physical resources. On Selection, there's nothing you can do about being sleep deprived, but if you've practiced cognitive activities under sleep deprivation then you understand that you've done this before and can manage it.

I also suggest that you use resonant breathing as much as possible when you are sleep deprived. It is the most energy efficient way to breathe and will save you burning and grinding calories that you don't have when you don't have to.

SC: How do you know what your resonant breath is?

JK: We have a specific device for that test. However, there are many apps you can use to identify it. The breath should make you feel relaxed, but ready for action. You should be calm, but not sleepy.

That makes it perfect for periods when you are waiting to perform on Selection (for example, before the 3.2KM time trial or the pack march). If you just breathe, you will decrease how much energy you burn away, and you will perform much better.

If you understand what is going on within you physiologically, then you know that you must get control of your stress reaction system. Activate when you need to but stay calm in the moments beforehand.

SC: You also mentioned previously that the PRETEC training includes tips for avoiding food that increases inflammation and decreases performance. Can you speak more to that?

JK: There is a really strong correlation between 'the gut-brain axis'. What you eat has significant consequences for your emotional state. There are many things in our modern diet that will cause inflammation and that will change the gut microbiome in your stomach and therefore change your serotonin production.

For example, MSG makes your food taste awesome, but it is an excitotoxin which makes your brain fire. If you consume MSG before sleep, it will make it more difficult for you to get into slow wave sleep. That in turn makes it harder for you to produce growth hormones, testosterone, and produce your blood sugar regulation hormones. Avoiding MSG will enable you to have better, longer quality sleep.

More than ever our wheat crops have glyphosate, or Roundup, dumped on them which creates inflammation in your stomach and brain membranes. A lot of people are becoming gluten intolerant, but, in reality, they're probably intolerant to the amount of pesticides that are being dumped onto our food sources. This inflammation may be OK for someone who works a desk job which isn't physically demanding, but if your body is regularly under strain and you're eating lots of white bread, for example, it can create inflammation which can inhibit your performance. We know that brain inflammation does mimic the effects of anxiety and depression. You will post-rationalise the fact that you don't feel very good as a

result of your job, or your boss, or your partner, or your kids, but what's more likely is that your body is suffering inflammation. There's a lot of research demonstrating this.

There are also neuro-cognitive deficits as a result of high levels of sugar intake. There's a condition called hyperosmolarity which occurs if you have high levels of sugar passing the blood-brain barrier; this can shrink the cells and capillaries inside your brain. Sugar can have a really poor impact on cognitive performance.

SC: You also said previously that it isn't the fittest person who passes Selection, but those who are mentally tough. Is mental toughness something we are born with? Or can we train ourselves to be mentally tough? That sounds different to 'being in control of your emotions'.

JK: Yes, being in control of your emotions is only one aspect of it. Those who succeed during Selection are those who can emotionally regulate themselves for the longest amount of time. You are pushed and stripped back until only the 'raw' version of you remains and those that can keep emotionally regulated under those conditions get through.

Some people are naturally born tougher or more resilient, but absolutely there's a lot of environmental factors that you can use to train and foster mental toughness.

The first step is to know and identify those factors in your life which make it difficult to have emotional equilibrium. When you know the things that trigger you, and you take them away, then you can focus on improving yourself. Knowing what *not* to do is a huge part of it.

The Human Performance Team at the 2nd Commando Regiment conducted a meta-analysis on all the resilience building research that's ever been done, and they identified three pillars that make people resilient and mentally tough: you need to be 1) socially engaged, 2) intellectually stimulated and 3) physically active.

SC: What are the similarities between this and your work with the Australian Institute of Sport and Olympic swimming team?

JK: There are huge differences and there are some significant similarities. Commandos, like elite athletes and elite executives, all have a bent for excellence and self-mastery. They are single-minded about being better and they are incredibly disciplined. However, I think that what makes these people great can also make them unhappy or a little crazy. That single-minded focus, discipline and attention-to-detail can also make your world myopic and make you a little neurotic. I mean, you have to in order to become the best in the world. I spend a lot of my time with these high-performance individuals normalising that. They tend to think that everyone else must be doing so much better and suffer from 'imposter syndrome'. They always think that they aren't good enough and that they don't belong at that level. That pushes them to train so hard, but it can be difficult mentally to feel like you never reach the level where you've 'made it'.

On Selection, they don't provide feedback, so candidates tend to think things are going worse for them than they actually are, and so come unstuck due to this 'imposter syndrome'. We'd rather have negative input than no input, and it can be torturous for candidates to be denied that and so get wrapped up inside their own heads.

Jemma King is a specialist in the field of Human Behaviour and Psychoneuroimmunology. She has completed a doctoral thesis in stress and the interaction between endocrine profiles,

performance outcomes and the moderating effect of emotional intelligence. She is Specialist Consultant to Special Operations Command at the 2nd Commando Regiment and Australia's Special Operations Training and Education Centre Human Performance Optimisation Program. She is the Principal Advisor to the Australian Army Leadership Program. She is also a Specialist Consultant to McKinsey & Co on their Executive Leadership Programs, Senior Consultant to the AIS on the Gold Medal Ready Program (preparing Olympic Athletes for Tokyo 2020 and Paris 2024), Specialist Consultant to Swimming Australia's Dolphins Performance Optimisation Program for Tokyo 2020, and consults to many C-Suite executives and sporting organisations such as football teams, V8 Supercar and Australian Rally Championship drivers. You can connect with her on [LinkedIn](#) and via her website [BioPsychAnalytics](#).

When we speak, Jemma is in Tasmania, near Launceston, where the renovated church she owns is being donated as accommodation to [Cam's Cause](#), a charity raised after the death of Corporal Cameron Baird VC MG. The not-for-profit pays for activities to help operators de-stress (a rare opportunity), and Jemma's house in Tasmania provides a base for mountain biking and trout fishing.

#10in10 seeks to share the stories and projects of currently serving individuals of all ranks, trades and corps, defence civilians and academics from across One Army. One interview will be released every day for 10 days. You can find previous interviews [here](#).

About the Author: *Samuel J. Cox is the editor of Grounded Curiosity. You can follow him on Twitter via the handle [@samuel_j_cox](#)*