

SALUTOGENETIC ORIENTED MILITARY PHYSICAL EDUCATION: AN EXEMPLARY IMPLEMENTATION IN THE TRAINING OF FUTURE MILITARY LEADERS

Dumitru Cătălin COHAL

“Nicolae Bălcescu” Land Forces Academy, Sibiu, Romania
cohalcatalin@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Military physical education represents a fundamental component of the training process for military leaders, contributing not only to the development and maintenance of the physical capabilities necessary for fulfilling specific missions but also to the strengthening of psychological resilience, leadership skills, and an active, healthy lifestyle. Within this complex instructional-educational framework, the military physical education specialist plays a decisive role, being responsible for designing, organizing, and implementing the psychodidactic process within military educational institutions. The salutogenic approach, centered on identifying and capitalizing on the factors that generate and support health, provides a relevant theoretical framework for optimizing military physical education in the current context, characterized by increased operational and psychosocial demands. This article aims to analyze the theoretical foundations of military physical education from a salutogenic perspective and to propose a model for integrating this approach into the training of future military leaders. At the same time, it highlights the need to move beyond a strictly performance-based vision, emphasizing the importance of developing a motivational profile that supports the constant practice of physical activities and the awareness of their role in maintaining individual and collective health. The salutogenic approach thus emerges as a bridge between tradition and modernity in military education.

KEYWORDS: military physical education, salutogenesis, military leadership, health promotion, resilience

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1. Introduction

In the current context of international security and the ever-increasing demands placed on military personnel, the training of military leaders calls for an integrative approach to physical, psychological, and social development. The place and role of a soldier's physical training, amidst the accelerated transformations of technology and tactics on the contemporary battlefield,

require a critical reconsideration and, where necessary, a conceptual and methodological optimization. The results of physical education should not be reported exclusively in relation to achieving immediate performance objectives but should be tracked from the perspective of sustainable effects with medium and long-term impact. This endeavor is made possible by raising awareness of the

benefits of regular physical training – motivated and adapted to individual particularities – within the salutogenic model of physical education.

Traditionally, military physical education is predominantly oriented toward performance and individual or group operational readiness. While this orientation remains necessary, new educational and health paradigms emphasize the importance of a broader vision centered on forming autonomous behavior for the constant practice of physical activities, without external pressure, for the purpose of maintaining health and preventing physical and psychological risks (Antonovsky, 1979). The concept of salutogenesis provides an appropriate theoretical framework for reconfiguring physical education toward the sustainable development of the individual. According to this model, health is not a static state but a dynamic continuum between health and disease, where an individual's position is determined by their capacity to cope with stress and life's challenges. A central role is played by the **Sense of Coherence (SOC)**, defined by comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness (Antonovsky, 1987, pp. 15-19).

Applied to the military environment, salutogenic theory acquires particular relevance given the specific physical and mental demands of this profession. This approach aims to achieve operational standards while simultaneously maintaining an optimal state of health at both individual and organizational levels. In this context, the role of the military physical education specialist becomes essential, contributing decisively to the formation of a motivational model and sustainable behavior for physical activity, with direct effects on the quality of life and well-being of military personnel.

Although physical activity represents a major factor in health, it does not act in isolation. The Lalonde Report (1974)

highlighted that health status is significantly influenced by human biology, environment, and lifestyle, alongside the healthcare system (Kickbusch, 2003). In this sense, the planning of military physical training programs must take into account the individual's internal and external resources, promoting regular physical activity as an essential resource for health, resilience, and long-term performance.

2. Theoretical Foundations of the Salutogenic Approach in the Military Environment

Military physical education offers distinct opportunities for health promotion and the development of associated competencies among Romanian soldiers. The reference regulatory framework in the field, Order M149 of 2012, stipulates in Article 1 that *“military physical education is a fundamental component of the instruction/education process, which systematically utilizes the ensemble of collective or individual forms of activity carried out to form, develop, and maintain motor capacity, contributing to the improvement of the physical and mental health of army personnel”*.

Therefore, the health promotion of military personnel is established at a regulatory level, and this effort must be constantly supported by updated scientific benchmarks capable of responding to new challenges and transformations generated by the dynamics of contemporary society. In this context, the salutogenic model provides, at a conceptual level, solid premises for designing physical education oriented toward capitalizing on individual and organizational resources, as well as promoting health, being relatively easy to adapt to the specific nature of the military environment.

In particular, the three components of the Sense of Coherence (SOC) – comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness – constitute relevant

theoretical benchmarks for substantiating and optimizing educational interventions in the field of military physical education, with a view toward the sustainable training of personnel and the maintenance of an optimal state of health.

The Three Components of SOC:

1. **Comprehensibility:** Understanding what is happening to us and the world we live in; perceiving the society we live in as orderly, predictable, and intelligible.
2. **Manageability:** Having the necessary physical, mental, and social resources, as well as the motivation and conviction that we can cope with life's demands and challenges.
3. **Meaningfulness:** Perceiving life's challenges as being worthy of our effort, involvement, and energy (Antonovsky, 1987, pp. 16-18).

These can be specifically used for planning and allocating physical education hours in military educational institutions where all trainees benefit from the same training conditions. The goal is to form, during the years of study, specific psycho-pedagogical and language habits regarding the military physical education process that future military leaders can, know how to, and wish to operate with. Corresponding motivational concepts, from both theoretical and practical perspectives, will thus lead to the formation of a benchmark organizational culture.

2.1. The Concept of Salutogenesis

Salutogenesis is a theoretical concept introduced by medical sociologist Aaron Antonovsky in 1987, designating an approach oriented toward factors that generate, maintain, and promote health, in opposition to the pathogenic perspective centered on the causes of disease. Salutogenesis seeks to explain how individuals and groups manage to maintain their state of health under conditions of constant stress and challenges, emphasizing

personal, social, and environmental resources that facilitate adaptation and optimal functioning. The central element of the salutogenic model is the Sense of Coherence (SOC), defined as a global orientation of the individual that expresses the extent to which they perceive life as comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful (Antonovsky, 1979). Viewed through the prism of the military organization, salutogenesis represents the process by which soldiers develop and maintain their physical, mental, and social health under conditions of stress, danger, or isolation by capitalizing on their own and group resources, with an emphasis on the capacity for adaptation, resilience, and functionality. The motivational factor plays an overwhelming role in this environment, and the salutogenic concept of military physical education offers the specialist the possibility to participate actively in forming a model and a healthy lifestyle that allows the soldier to become aware of their well-being.

2.2. Salutogenesis and Physical Activity

The Role of Physical Activity in Maintaining Health: Within the salutogenic model, physical activity asserts itself as an essential determinant of health, moving beyond a strictly biological function to become an educational and formative tool with a major impact on quality of life, autonomy, and the individual's capacity to adapt in demanding contexts. Health is maintained, when necessary, through medical science and practice, but it can also be improved through individual effort in becoming aware of and putting into practice the information held by each individual (McCuaig & Quennerstedt, 2016).

The Contribution of Physical Exercise to Psychological and Social Balance: In the salutogenic model, physical exercise represents a fundamental resource for maintaining and optimizing psychological and social balance, being valued not just for

its physiological effects but especially for its impact on the individual's mechanisms of adaptation and self-regulation. The salutogenic approach focuses on factors that support health and well-being, and physical exercise is integrated into this paradigm as a Generalized Resistance Resource (GRR), with multiple effects on psychosocial functioning.

At the psychological level, physical exercise contributes to the reduction of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, favoring emotional regulation and increased well-being. From a salutogenic perspective, these effects are closely linked to the consolidation of the Sense of Coherence. Regular practice of physical exercise provides structured and predictable experiences that support comprehensibility through understanding the relationship between effort, adaptation, and result. At the same time, by developing a sense of control and self-efficacy, physical exercise strengthens manageability, facilitating the perception of life's demands as approachable. The dimension of meaningfulness is stimulated by associating physical activity with personal goals, values, performance, or self-improvement, giving it an existential sense.

From a social point of view, physical exercise favors interaction, cooperation, and group cohesion, contributing to the development of interpersonal relationships and social support – essential elements in maintaining health according to the salutogenic model. Physical activities carried out in collective contexts create opportunities for communication, role assumption, rule-following, and the development of mutual responsibility, thereby strengthening social integration and the sense of belonging.

Overall, physical exercise supports psychological and social balance by activating and developing personal and social resources that allow the individual to cope with daily stress and challenges. From

this perspective, in the salutogenic model, physical exercise transcends its utilitarian or recreational function, becoming an essential tool for promoting health, strengthening resilience, and maintaining psychosocial balance in the long term.

3. Methodology

The present study is grounded in a qualitative theoretical-conceptual research design with exploratory-applicative valences. The methodological framework integrates systematic literature analysis, document analysis of military educational regulations, and structured conceptual modeling.

The research follows a descriptive-analytical paradigm, aiming to clarify the theoretical foundations of the salutogenic model, examine its compatibility with the military educational framework, and conceptualize an operational model of salutogenically oriented military physical education.

Sources were selected according to relevance, scientific credibility (peer-reviewed publications and official regulatory documents), conceptual contribution to salutogenesis and health promotion, and applicability to structured educational environments. Non-scientific materials and sources lacking methodological rigor were excluded.

3.1. Procedure of Conceptual Analysis

The conceptual analysis followed a structured multi-stage procedure, beginning with the identification of key theoretical constructs.

Stage 1: Concept identification

This included salutogenesis, the sense of coherence framework (encompassing comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness), Generalized Resistance Resources (GRRs), as well as related constructs in the fields of health promotion, military physical education, and leadership formation. These concepts were selected and defined based on primary theoretical

sources in order to ensure conceptual validity and analytical consistency.

Stage 2: Thematic categorization

Concepts were organized into thematic clusters, such as health and resilience mechanisms, educational processes in structured institutions, physical training as a formative tool, and organizational and leadership development.

This categorization facilitated analytical comparison between salutogenic theory and military physical education practices.

Stage 3: Analytical comparison

A comparative conceptual analysis was conducted to identify convergences between salutogenic principles and military educational objectives, structural compatibilities between SOC components and military training methodologies, and potential gaps or tensions between performance-centered approaches and health-oriented models.

Stage 4: Operational translation

Theoretical constructs were translated into applicable educational principles.

Each SOC component was operationalized within the military physical education framework:

- A. Comprehensibility → structured explanation of training rationale, predictable progression, clarity of objectives.
- B. Manageability → adaptive workload, recovery planning, development of self-regulation skills.
- C. Meaningfulness → integration of physical training with leadership identity and professional mission.

Military educational regulations were analyzed using structured content analysis, focusing on explicit references to health promotion, objectives of physical education, evaluation criteria and performance standards, and opportunities for integrating autonomy-supportive methodologies.

The analysis aimed to determine the degree of normative compatibility between the salutogenic model and existing regulatory frameworks. This stage represents the transition from theoretical abstraction to institutional applicability. A structured content analysis of military regulations was conducted to assess normative compatibility, focusing on health promotion objectives, training structure, and evaluation standards. The outcome of this analytical process consists of a conceptual implementation framework designed to complement existing performance-oriented training models by integrating health-sustaining principles. Given its exploratory and conceptual nature, the study does not include empirical validation. Further quantitative research is required to assess measurable effects.

4. Military Physical Education from a Salutogenic Perspective

The salutogenic model, centered on identifying and capitalizing on health-generating factors, provides a relevant theoretical framework for understanding the role of physical education in developing psychological resilience, the sense of coherence, and the psychosocial competencies essential to military leadership. Thus, military physical education becomes a complex educational tool that facilitates the training of leaders capable of effectively managing the demands of the operational environment and promoting an active and healthy lifestyle within military structures.

4.1. Particularities of Physical Education in the Military Environment

Military physical education presents a series of specific characteristics determined by the goals, values, and requirements of the military environment, which differentiate it from physical education in the civilian system. These particularities manifest at the level of objectives, content,

methods, organization, and evaluation of the instructional-educational process. Military physical education is mandatory, being included in the specific plans and programs existing at the level of each combat or educational unit. It is primarily oriented toward preparing the individual for the fulfillment of military missions, with the objective of developing the functional physical capacities necessary under conditions of intense effort, stress, and hostile environments. The training process takes place within a strictly organized framework, characterized by rigorous planning, progressivity, and adherence to military pedagogical principles. The intensity, volume, and complexity of effort are adapted to the stages of training and the preparation level of military personnel. Military physical education includes exercises and activities of a military-applied nature, such as cross-country running, applied obstacle courses, strength and functional endurance exercises, self-defense exercises, as well as activities that simulate real combat conditions. A recognized military applied discipline that subjects the soldier to the most rigorous physical tests is the *military pentathlon*. This event is part of the *CISM (International Military Sports Council)* and represents a pragmatic way of testing a soldier's skills on the battlefield. Within the Ministry of National Defense, such military applied competitions are held regularly. The results can provide an overview of the physical training level across the entire ministry (Cohal, 2025).

4.2. Salutogenically Oriented Military Physical Education

The salutogenic approach to military physical education does not necessarily imply a paradigm shift, but rather a completion of the role of military physical education, in which the focus shifts from a vision predominantly centered on performance and compliance with standards toward a perspective oriented toward the

global development of the individual. It capitalizes on resources that support health, adaptation, and optimal functioning in the military environment. Although the traditional dimension remains essential, the salutogenic perspective proposes supplementing it with a holistic approach that integrates the physical, psychological, and social dimensions of military training. Physical activity is no longer viewed exclusively as a tool for testing and selection, but as a complex educational means intended to develop body awareness, effort self-regulation, emotional balance, and interpersonal relationships (Mittelmark et al., 2017). In this sense, military physical education contributes to the formation of a leader capable of maintaining long-term health and effectively managing the multiple demands of the operational environment. By developing the capacity for self-assessment and understanding the relationship between physical exercise, health, and performance, future military leaders are encouraged to adopt active and responsible behavior, both at the individual and group levels. Thus, military physical education moves beyond its prescriptive nature and becomes a tool for forming an organizational culture oriented toward health and prevention.

5. Exemplary Implementation in the Training of Military Leaders

5.1. Implementation Objectives

Developing the Sense of Coherence: Implementing salutogenically oriented military physical education aims to achieve educational and formative goals that go beyond the sphere of physical development, targeting the optimization of health, functionality, and sustainable performance of future military leaders. In this sense, the main objectives of the endeavor aim at developing the sense of coherence, strengthening leadership capacity, and preventing burnout and injuries.

Strengthening Leadership Capacity: A central objective of implementing the salutogenic approach in military physical education is the development of the sense of coherence. Through structured, progressive physical activities adapted to the level of training, trainees come to perceive physical and mental demands as comprehensible, understanding the logic of the exercises and the relationship between effort, adaptation, and performance. The dimension of manageability is strengthened by providing experiences that allow for effort control and the efficient use of personal and collective resources, and meaningfulness is stimulated by correlating physical activities with professional objectives, military values, and the leadership role (Klein, 2019). Thus, military physical education contributes to forming a positive attitude toward challenges and increasing the capacity to adapt to stress.

Preventing Burnout and Injuries: Another major objective is the prevention of physical and mental exhaustion, as well as reducing the risk of injuries. Through individualizing effort, respecting the principles of progressivity and recovery, and promoting self-control, physical activities contribute to maintaining the balance between demand and the body's adaptive capacity. Furthermore, developing body awareness and self-regulation skills allows soldiers to recognize signals of overexertion and adopt preventive behaviors. Thus, military physical education not only optimizes performance but ensures its sustainability, protecting the health and operational capacity of military personnel in the long term.

5.2. Content and Methods

The implementation of salutogenically oriented military physical education requires the selection and organization of didactic content and methods that support the development of

trainees' physical, psychological, and social resources, in accordance with the requirements of the military environment and the principles of health promotion. In this context, adaptive functional training, outdoor and team-building activities, and the systematic reflection on motor experiences constitute essential methodological benchmarks.

Adaptive Functional Training: Functional training (Cohal, 2025) represents a central pillar of military physical education from a salutogenic perspective, being designed to meet individual needs and specific operational requirements. These aim to develop strength, endurance, mobility, and coordination through exercises that reproduce natural movements and real situations of exertion for the soldier in the tactical field. The adaptive nature of the training allows for the adjustment of intensity, volume, and complexity based on each participant's training level, health status, and effort capacity. This approach promotes safety, injury prevention, and increased autonomy, encouraging trainees to consciously manage their effort and develop confidence in their own physical resources.

Outdoor and Team-building Activities: Activities carried out outdoors and team-building exercises occupy an important place, offering authentic contexts for developing group cohesion, communication, and leadership. Marches, applied obstacle courses, orientation exercises, survival activities, or cooperative challenges demand both physical and psychosocial capacities, facilitating adaptation to varied and unpredictable environments. These activities contribute to strengthening the sense of belonging, consolidating social support, and developing the ability to work effectively in a team – essential elements for maintaining health and performance in the military environment.

Reflection on Motor Experiences (Feedback, Self-assessment): Systematic reflection is an indispensable didactic method, facilitating awareness of the learning process and individual progress. Through the use of constructive feedback, group discussions, and self-assessment tools, trainees are encouraged to analyze how they managed effort, emotions, and interpersonal relationships during physical activities. This process contributes to the development of self-regulation capacity, the consolidation of the sense of competence, and the strengthening of intrinsic motivation. Simultaneously, reflecting on motor experiences supports the formation of a responsible attitude toward health and performance, favoring the transfer of acquired skills to real professional and life situations (Álvarez et al., 2021).

5.3. The Role of the Military Physical Education Instructor

Within military physical education, the instructor occupies a key position, significantly influencing both the quality of the training process and the attitudes and behaviors of the trainees. From a salutogenic perspective, the instructor's role moves beyond the traditional function of transmitting knowledge, supervising exercise execution, and recording performance, becoming a facilitator of learning, a healthy behavior role model, and an educational leader. It is very unlikely that a sports instructor who, through their own physical and behavioral example, cannot induce a sense of confidence and skill in the trainees will be able to optimally carry out the education and training process. Thus, the instructor designated to lead the physical preparation must be:

1. **Facilitator of Learning:** The military physical education instructor creates a structured, safe, and stimulating educational environment that encourages active participation. They adapt content, methods, and intensity

based on individual particularities, supporting the development of autonomy and self-regulation.

2. **Healthy Behavior Role Model:** The instructor influences the adoption of an active and balanced lifestyle through personal example. By demonstrating professional behavior, a positive attitude toward effort, and respect for safety and recovery principles, they transmit values that support long-term health. This modeling dimension is vital in the military environment, where leadership conduct is frequently replicated by subordinates.
3. **Educational Leader:** As an educational leader, the instructor coordinates and influences the formative process beyond physical activities. They promote values such as discipline, respect, cooperation, and responsibility. From a salutogenic perspective, the educational leader supports the development of personal and collective resources, facilitating stress adaptation and the maintenance of efficiency.

6. Discussions

The analysis of military physical education from a salutogenic perspective highlights significant implications for the training of future military leaders, offering both opportunities for optimization and specific challenges for practical implementation. This model is highly relevant in military leadership development because it allows for the training of leaders capable of effectively managing stress, physical and mental demands, and complex interactions. By focusing on personal and collective resources – such as resilience, autonomy, responsibility, and the sense of coherence – salutogenically oriented physical education supports leaders' ability to make effective decisions under pressure, coordinate teams, and maintain the health

and performance of their subordinates. This perspective contributes to creating a holistic leadership model where operational performance is correlated with health and the sustainable development of human resources. The limits of this approach are related to the need for instructor training to integrate salutogenic principles into practical activities. Additional logistical and material resources for outdoor or adaptive functional exercises do not pose a major problem in the military system; rather, the time allocated must be correlated with other educational and learning activities. Resistance to change, especially in traditional military educational institutions

where the focus is often on standardizing physical performance rather than the holistic dimension of training, is still considered a barrier in military physical education.

7. Conclusions

Salutogenically oriented military physical education contributes to the training of competent, resilient, and responsible military leaders, capable of effectively managing stress and promoting health within military structures. The implementation of this approach represents a strategic direction for the modernization of military training.

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