Beyond Selection: Tools to Promote Long-Term Submariner Psychological Readiness and Retention

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Presenters

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Dominica Hernandez, Ph.D.



Dr. Dominica Blanca Hernandez, Ph.D., is a civilian research psychologist at the Naval Submarine Medical Research Laboratory (NSMRL). At the NSMRL she leads efforts to modernize the submarine psychological screening and assessment program and submarine leadership development programs. Her research focuses on assessing physical, psychological, and personality correlates that may impact submarine warfighter performance and readiness. In addition to her research background, Dr. Hernandez is a licensed psychologist and practices in the civilian sector as a behavioral health practitioner. She has held training placements at Columbia University, UConn Health Center, and the VA medical facilities. Dr. Hernandez also supports research focused on examining predictors of resilience, submariner success, contributors of obesity, and cardiometabolic comorbidities among Sailors in the submarine environment.

Justin Handy, Ph.D.



Dr. Justin Handy is a research psychologist at the Naval Submarine Medical Research Laboratory (NSMRL). He received his Ph.D. in Cognitive Psychology from Texas A&M University in 2015 and completed a post-doctoral training program with the Syracuse Veterans Affairs Medical Center before joining NSMRL in 2018. His research centers on understanding the impacts of stress and motivated behavior on mental health and well-being. Dr. Handy leverages his background in cognitive psychology and behavioral neuroscience to advance the Navy's mission to maintain cognitive and psychological readiness of undersea warfighters. To this end, he supports efforts to identify behavioral and non-behavioral indices of psychological distress and resilience, directly informing psychological screening programs for submarine duty and the development of preventive, resilience-based training initiatives. In addition, he leads projects examining the effects of environmental and physiological stress on neurocognitive function in Navy divers and other specialized operational communities.

Disclosures

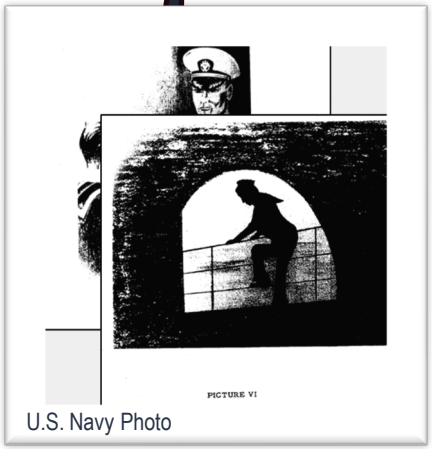
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Learning Objectives

At the conclusion of this activity, participants will be able to:

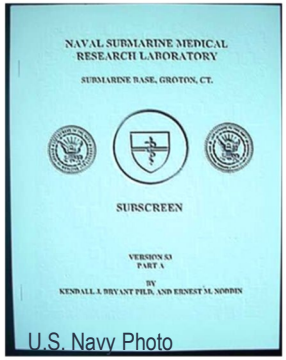
1. Differentiate the clinical screening and developmental assessment components of Submarine Environment Fit (SUBFIT) and their roles in supporting Submarine Force psychological readiness.
2. Interpret SUBFIT predictive risk estimates and model performance metrics (i.e., Area Under the Receiver Operating Curve (ROC-AUC)), including their implications and limitations for guiding early support.
3. Explain how individualized developmental goals support coping, adaptation, and teamwork in the extreme operational environment of the submarine.

History



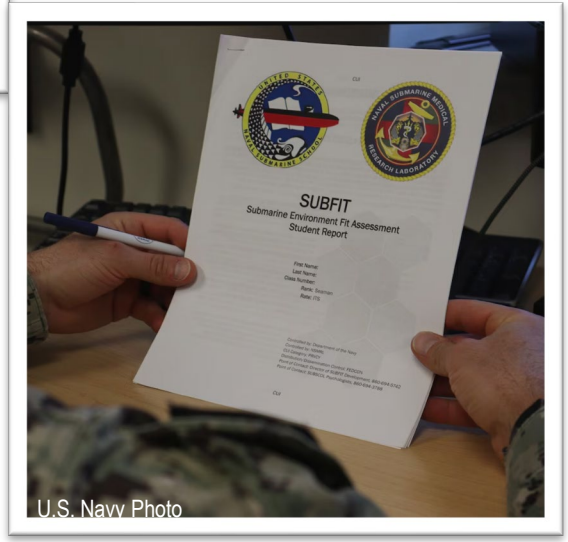
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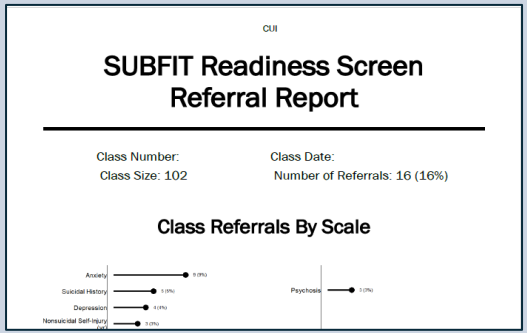
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SUBFIT

Two Components

Mental Health Screening

Brief, clinically-validated tools to triage for screening point-of-entry mental health concerns.


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SUBFIT Readiness Screen
Referral Report

Class Number:
Class Size: 102

Class Date:
Number of Referrals: 16 (16%)

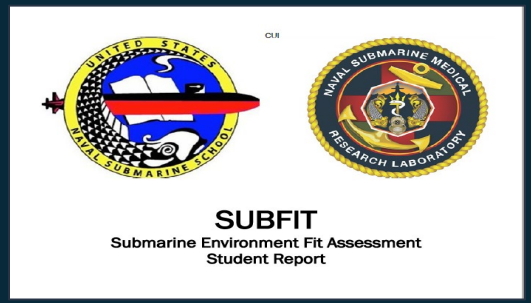
Class Referrals By Scale

Anxiety
Suicidal History
Depression
Nonsuicidal Self-Injury
Psychosis

(Hernandez et al., 2022)

Sailor Development

Non-clinical, personality-based assessment to foster development of enlisted and officer submarine



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SUBFIT: Mental Health Screening (Clinical Component/Readiness)

DSM-5 Cross-Cutting Symptoms Measure

Depression	Mania
Repetitive Thoughts & Behaviors	Anger
Suicidal Ideation	Psychosis
Anxiety	Somatic Symptoms
Dissociation	Personality Functioning
Substance Use	

Non-Suicidal Self-Injury, Homicidal Ideation Items, Columbia Suicide Behavior Question, and History of Antisocial Behavior

Violence to others	Homicidal Ideation
Self-Injury/Harm	Hx of Antisocial Behavior

Personality Inventory for DSM-5 Brief Form

Psychoticism	Detachment
Negative Affect	Antagonism
Disinhibition	

Bizarro et al., 2022
Krueger et al., 2013
American Psychiatric Association, 2013

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SUBFIT: Development

Personality Inventory

Achievement	Adjustment
Even Tempered	Intellectual Efficiency
Order	Physical Conditioning
Attention Seeking	Leadership Motivation
Non-Delinquency	Optimism
Selflessness	Sociability

Submarine Specific Inventory

Initiative	Adaptability
Resilience	Responsibility
Virtue	Humility
Self-Efficacy	Team Orientation
Affective Commitment	Continuous Commitment

Stress & Coping

Sense of Coherence	Mindfulness
Avoidant Coping	Problem Focused Coping
Emotion Focused Coping	

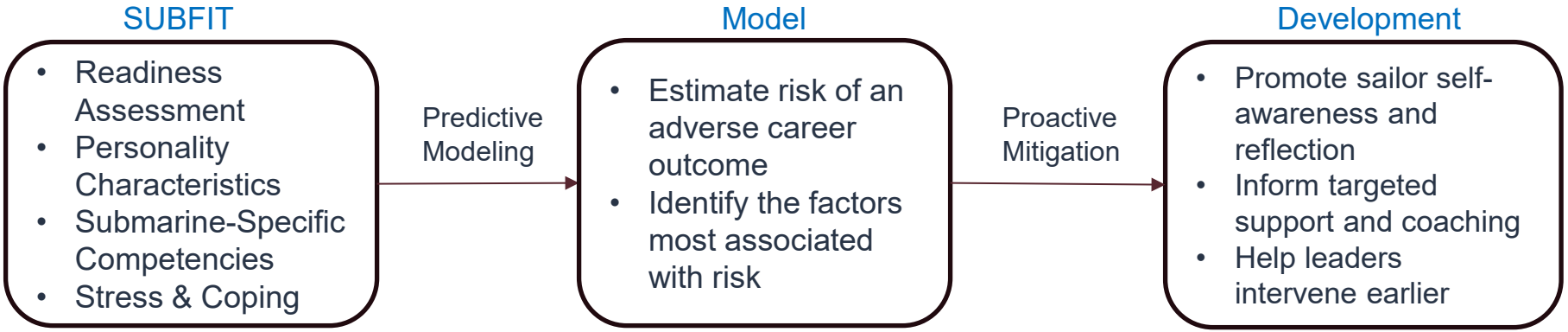
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(Bizarro et al., 2022)

From Assessment to Action

- Predicting Risk of an Adverse Career Outcome

Adverse Career Outcome (ACO): Graduate Rollback from Basic Enlisted Submarine School (BESS), Reclass, Separation, or Unplanned Loss.



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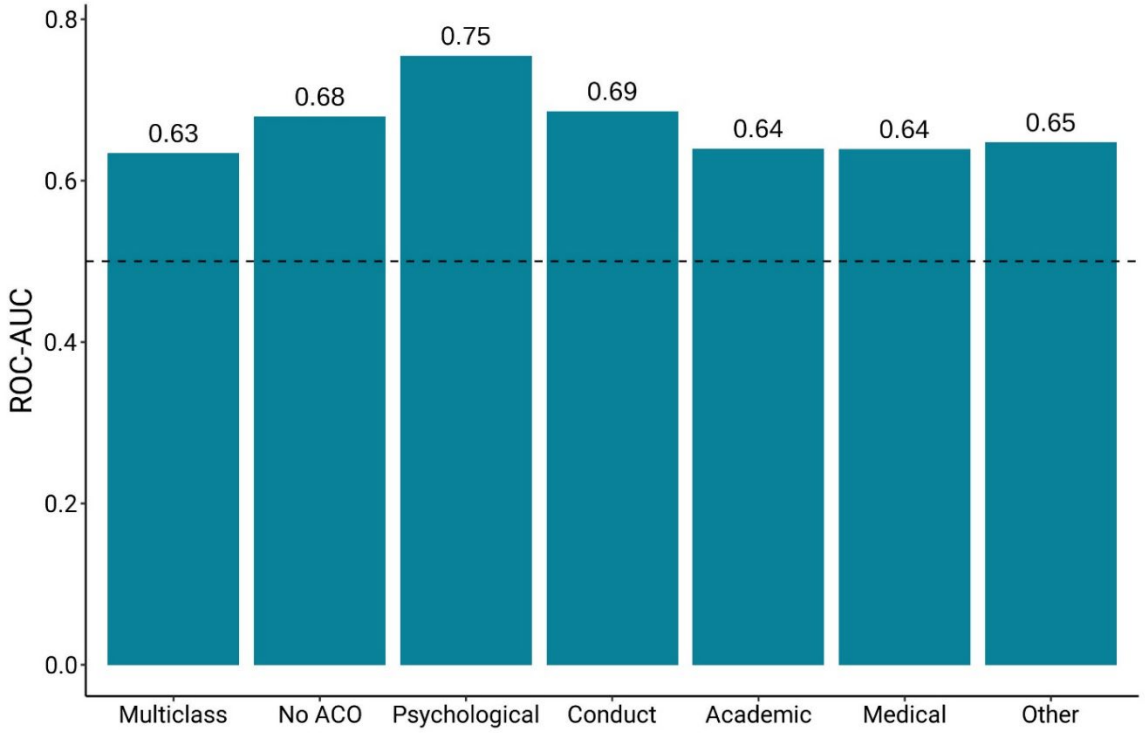
(Drasgow, 2020)

Predictive Modeling

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Model Performance at the Accession Level

- Multiclass ensemble machine learning framework
- Combination of Elastic Net, Random Forest, and XGBoost multiclass models
- Compared to previous iterations, this model is more computationally demanding, but better at prediction
- Area Under the Receiver Operating Curve (ROC-AUC) values for performance at the accession level presented in figure



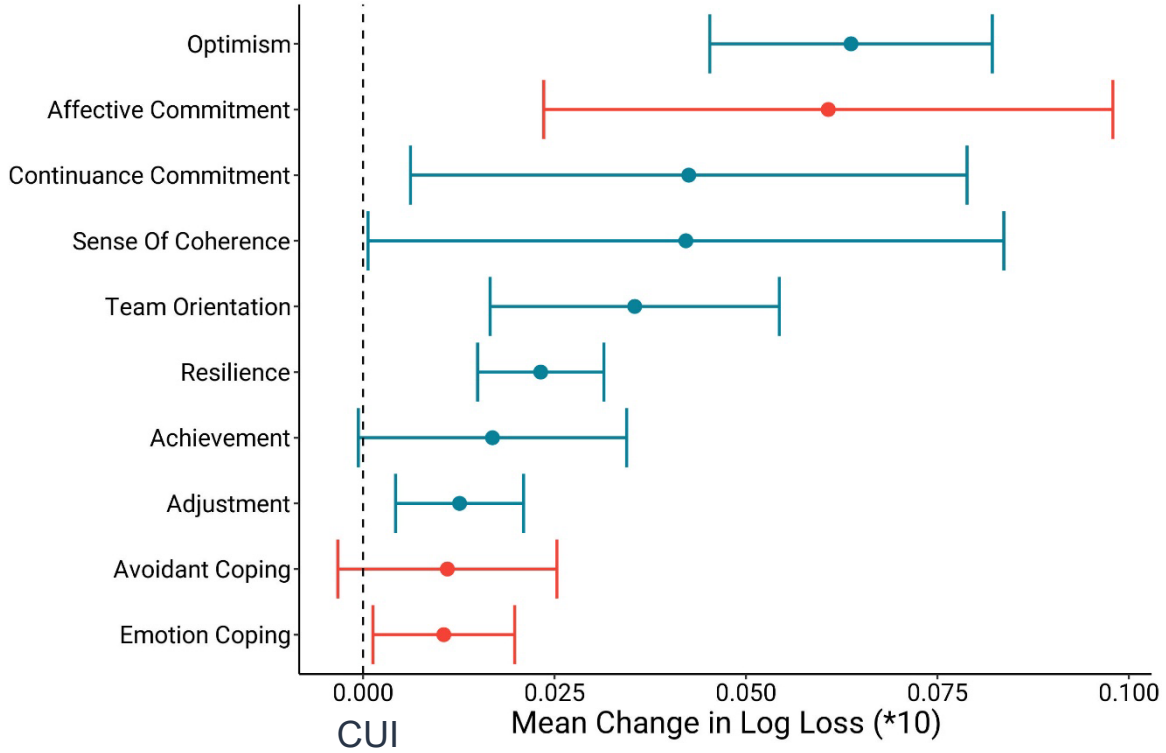
Note: "Conduct" is used in figures in place of "Counterproductive Workplace Behaviors" to conserve space.

(Hanley & McNeil, 1982)

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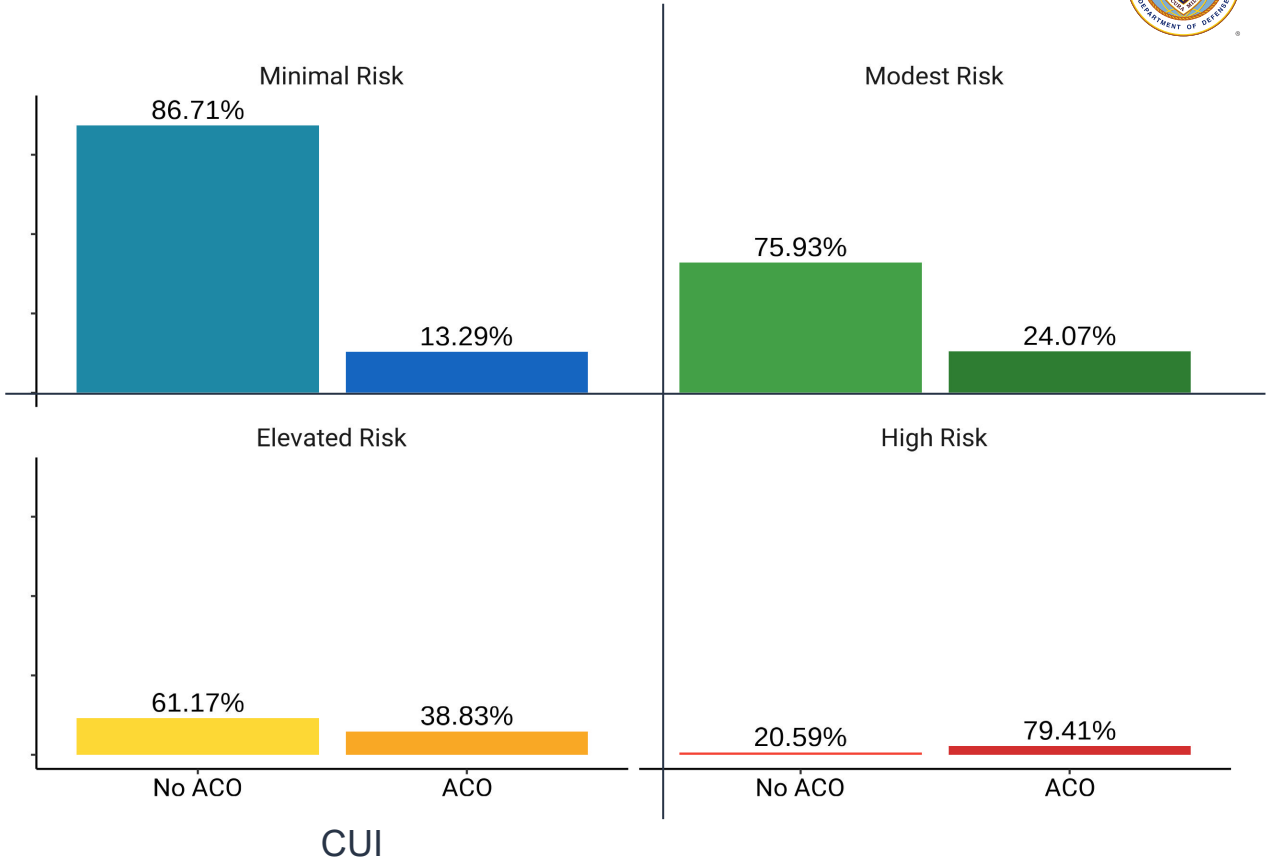
SUBFIT Scales Driving Prediction of All-Cause ACO

- Top 10 most “important” scales
  - **Blue** = Lower Risk
  - **Red** = Higher Risk
- Different SUBFIT scales are relevant to different ACO categories
- Allows for more targeted and specific developmental feedback



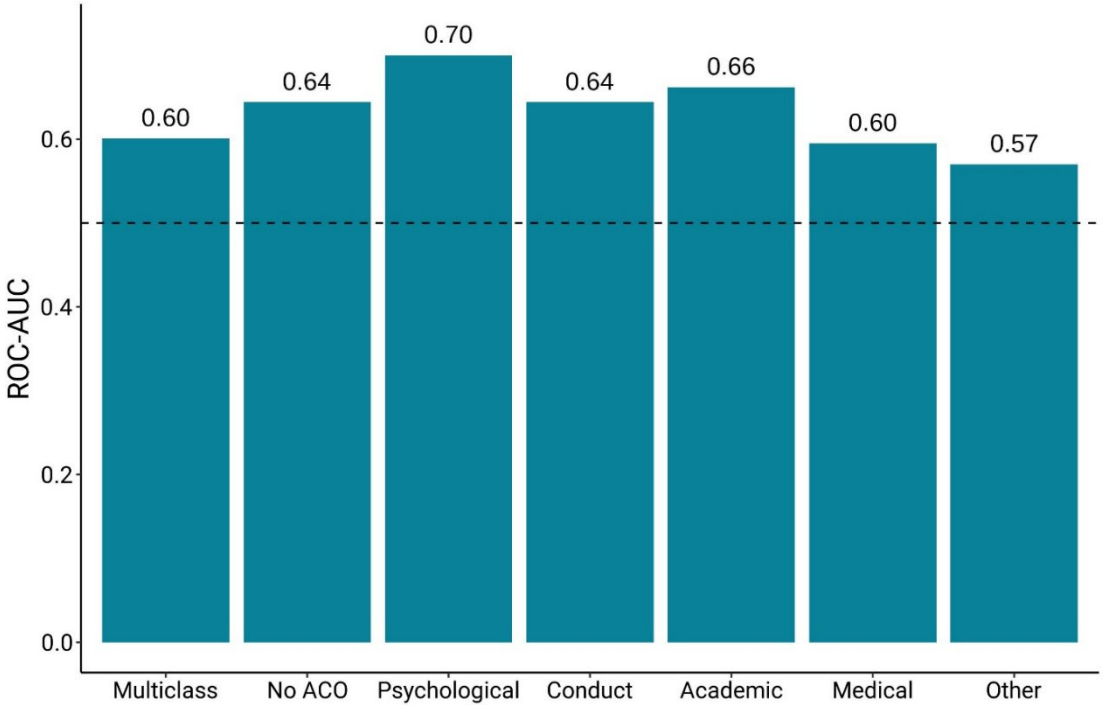
ACO Risk Classifications in Submarine School (SUBSCOL)

- Currently a four-tier classification system
- Meant to help distinguish between relative versus absolute ACO risk
- Thresholds informed by ACO base rates, performance metrics at different thresholds, and clinical judgment
- Thresholds can be shifted as necessary



Model Performance in the Fleet

- Multiclass predictive ensemble
- Combination of Elastic Net, Random Forest, and XGBoost multiclass models
- Model trained with data from BESS
- Based on reduced SUBFIT assessment, consistent with how SUBFIT is administered in the Fleet
- Future iterations will be based exclusively on data from the Fleet

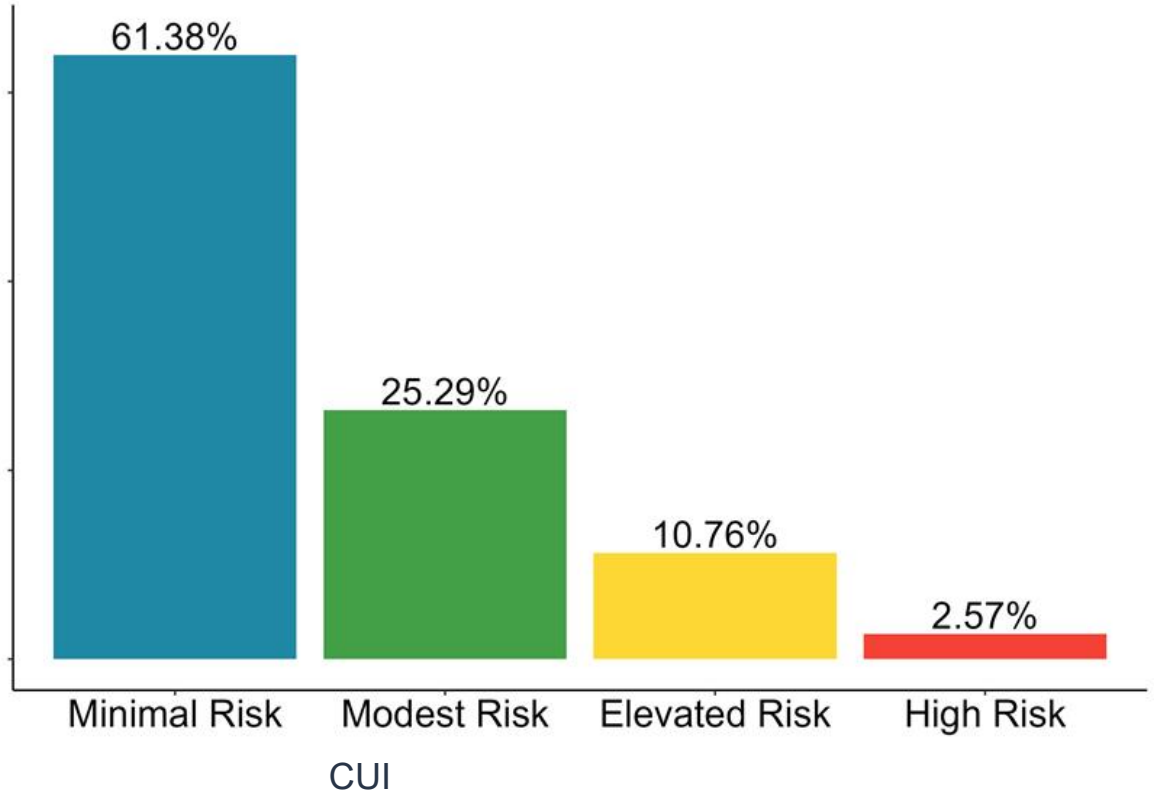


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ACO Risk Classification in the Fleet

- Performance of risk classifications can be evaluated after assessment data for ACOs accumulates
- Risk thresholds for the Fleet are slightly higher than risk thresholds for SUBSCOL
- Also possible to change thresholds based on Fleet requirements

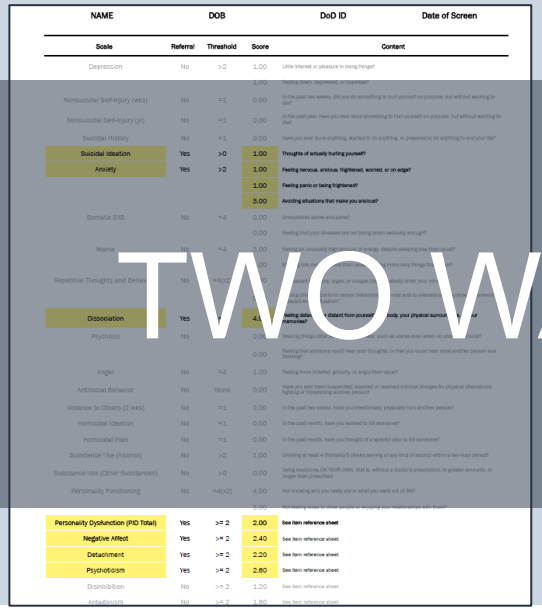


Screening Process

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Identifying Risk at the Accession Level

SUBFIT: Readiness



NAME		DOB		DoD ID	Date of Screen
Scale	Referral	Threshold	Score	Content	
Depression	No	>2	1.00	Little interest or pleasure in doing things?	
			1.00	Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless?	
Nonsuicidal Self-Injury (wks)	No	=1	0.00	In the past two weeks, did you do something to hurt yourself on purpose, but without wanting to die?	
Nonsuicidal Self-Injury (yr)	No	=1	0.00	In the past year, have you ever done something to hurt yourself on purpose, but without wanting to die?	
Suicidal History	No	=1	0.00	Have you ever done anything, started to do anything, or prepared to do anything to end your life?	
Suicidal Ideation	Yes	>0	1.00	Thoughts of actually hurting yourself?	
Anxiety	Yes	>2	1.00	Feeling nervous, anxious, frightened, worried, or on edge?	
			1.00	Feeling panic or being frightened?	
			3.00	Avoiding situations that make you anxious?	
Somatic SXS	No	=4	0.00	Unexplained aches and pains?	
			0.00	Feeling that your illnesses are not being taken seriously enough?	
Mania	No	=4	0.00	Hearing unusual sounds when others hear nothing, like ringing in the ears?	
			0.00	Feeling that someone could hear your thoughts, or that you could hear what another person was thinking?	
Repetitive Thoughts and Behav	No	=4	0.00	Unpleasant thoughts, urges, or images that repeatedly enter your mind?	
			0.00	Feeling driven to perform certain behaviors or mental acts over and over again?	
Dissociation	Yes		4.00	Feeling detached or distant from yourself, your body, your physical surroundings, or your memories?	
Psychosis	No		0.00	Hearing things other people couldn't hear, such as voices even when no one was around?	
			0.00	Feeling that someone could hear your thoughts, or that you could hear what another person was thinking?	
Anger	No	=4	1.00	Feeling more irritated, grouchy, or angry than usual?	
Antisocial Behavior	No	None	0.00	Have you ever been suspected, expelled or received criminal charges for physical altercations, fighting or threatening another person?	
Violence to Others (2 wks)	No	=1	0.00	In the past two weeks, have you intentionally, physically hurt another person?	
Homicidal Ideation	No	=1	0.00	In the past month, have you wanted to kill someone?	
Homicidal Plan	No	=1	0.00	In the past month, have you thought of a specific plan to kill someone?	
Substance Use (Alcohol)	No	>2	1.00	Drinking at least 4 (Female)/5 (Male) serving of any kind of alcohol within a two-hour period?	
Substance Use (Other Substances)	No	>0	0.00	Using medicines ON YOUR OWN, that is, without a doctor's prescription, in greater amounts, or longer than prescribed	
Personality Functioning	No	=4(+2)	4.00	Not knowing who you really are or what you want out of life?	
			0.00	Not feeling close to other people or enjoying your relationships with them?	
Personality Dysfunction (PID Total)	Yes	>= 2	2.00	See item reference sheet	
Negative Affect	Yes	>= 2	2.40	See item reference sheet	
Detachment	Yes	>= 2	2.20	See item reference sheet	
Psychoticism	Yes	>= 2	2.60	See item reference sheet	
Disinhibition	No	>= 2	1.20	See item reference sheet	
Antagonism	No	>= 2	1.40	See item reference sheet	

SUBFIT: Development



Submarine Developmental Plan

Overview

While your Submarine Developmental Plan represents only one aspect of your overall growth, it provides a personalized plan, tailored to you with actionable strategies to strengthen skills crucial for success in the SUBFOR. Achieving the goals outlined in your profile will not only mitigate risks like reclassification but also enhance your overall performance and contribute to your long-term career success.

Key Findings and Recommendations

We recommend using the SMART goals worksheet to set Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound (SMART) goals. Given the demanding submarine environment, be realistic and adaptable. Focus on incremental objectives achievable even during deployments. Leverage online training, mentorship, and communicate your goals to your chain of command for support. Consistent small steps and demonstrated initiative are key to progress.

Goals and Objectives

1 Decrease Attention-Seeking

Craving recognition is normal, but on a submarine, the mission always comes first. Constantly seeking praise or validation can distract from the task at hand and undermine team cohesion. While some [illegible] be positive, [illegible] the mission is [illegible] for success in the operator environment.

Strategies

Decrease Attention-Seeking by:

- **Think Before You Speak:** Pause before chiming in. Ask yourself: "Does this contribute to the mission, or am I just trying to impress?"
- **Own Your Wins:** Take pride in a job well done, regardless of [illegible]cognition.
- **Tea[illegible]er Self:** Sh[illegible] your focu[illegible]rom personal accolades to [illegible] success. [illegible]ublicly acknow[illegible]ledge others' [illegible]ns and [illegible]t your work speak for itself.
- **[illegible]a Sa[illegible]nd Op[illegible]on:** As[illegible]d shipmate or mentor [illegible]edb[illegible] on how you [illegible]coming across.

2 Increase Adaptability

In the Submarine Force, where the unexpected is practically routine, being able to adjust to changing situations is mission-critical. Adaptable Sailors are the ones who roll with these punches, viewing challenges as opportunities for growth. They're the ones who can quickly adjust their plans, strategies, and even their mindset when conditions demand it. This flexibility keeps us ready for anything, resourceful, and able to thrive even when things are uncertain.

Increase Adaptability by:

- **Think Outside the Box:** When facing a problem, consider multiple solutions instead of sticking to the usual.
- **See Change as a Good Thing:** Train yourself to view unexpected twists as opportunities to learn, innovate, and improve.
- **Have Backup Plans:** Always have a Plan B (and maybe C) for critical tasks or missions.
- **Reflect on Lesson Learned:** Think back to times you adapted well and figure out what helped you stay flexible and effective.

3 Decrease Avoidance Coping

Avoidance Coping is a strategy to avoid your problems (like with alcohol, excessive TV/gaming, or tuning out), which might relieve stress for a bit, but it won't cut it on a boat. Ignoring problems just makes it worse, hurts the crew, the mission, and even safety. On a boat, where tight quarters, high-stakes missions, and prolonged isolation are the norm, facing challenges head-on is key to a good patrol. We're all in this together, so let's tackle problems, not bury them.

Decrease Avoidance Coping by:

- **Own Your Avoidance:** Recognize your go-to moves for dodging tough tasks, conversations, or emotions on the boat.
- **Face the Pressure:** Step up to challenges and lean into the discomfort. Embrace difficult tasks or conversations.
- **Manage the Stress:** Use mindfulness apps (e.g., warrior toughness app), breathing exercises, or talk to the chaplain or a trusted crewmate.
- **Tackle the Problem:** Own the problem. Take charge, find the root cause and implement a lasting solution.

TWO WAYS TO FLAG

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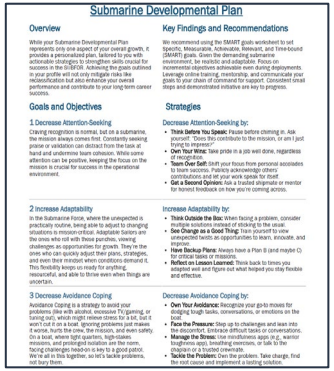
Screening Administration at the Accession Level

Day 1 Administration	Day 1 Scoring and Reporting	Day 2 Deliver Referral Reports	Day 8 Deliver Student Reports

Assessments Day 1 of SUBSCOL INDOC

Assessments scored and reports generated on same day of screening

Reports sent to embedded psychologist



Submarine Developmental Plan

Overview

Key Findings and Recommendations

Goals and Objectives

Strategies

Referral reports sent within 24 hours of screening

Tailored personality reports delivered to <u>all students</u> by end of Indoctrination week

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SUBFIT Developmental Program

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SUBFIT Developmental Initiatives

ASSESSMENT ADMINISTRATION → **INDIVIDUAL FEEDBACK REPORT** → **STUDENT ADVISOR ENGAGEMENT** → **SECOND TOUCHPOINT** → **WARM HAND-OFFS**



WEEK 1

SUBFIT administered to incoming BESS students



WEEK 2

Students receive tailored feedback reports and introduced to SMART goals



WEEKS 2-16

1st Warm Hand-off provided to NMTIs

Navy Military Training Instructors (NMTIs) serve as student advisors throughout training



WEEKS 6-9

Second Touchpoint with NSMRL staff and SMART goals revisited

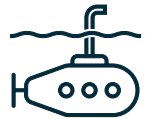
WARM HAND-OFFS

FOLLOW-ON SCHOOLS



Advanced training commands

TO THE FLEET



Operational commands

Receiving commands receive:

- Identified at-risk Sailors
- Leadership Support Strategies

*Reassessment occurs between 36 to 48 months during Sailor's first tour and then again after returning from each shore duty.

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- **Think Before You Speak:** Pause before chiming in. Ask yourself: "Does this contribute to the mission, or am I just trying to impress?"
- **Own Your Wins:** Take pride in a job well done, regardless of recognition.
- **Team Over Self:** Shift your focus from personal accolades to team success. Publicly acknowledge others' contributions and let your work speak for itself.
- **Get a Second Opinion:** Ask a trusted shipmate or mentor for honest feedback on how you're coming across.

2 Increase Responsibility

Owning your actions and commitments is crucial on a boat. Being the shipmate others can depend on, especially when things get tough, is what gets the mission done right and keeps everyone safe. No one can afford to slack or pass the buck – that erodes trust and puts the entire mission at risk. Taking responsibility not only makes you a better shipmate but also builds the kind of strong, reliable team we need to succeed in this demanding environment.

Increase Responsibility by:

- **Realistic Commitments:** Only say yes to what you can do. Break big tasks into smaller chunks with deadlines.
- **Reflect on your Performance:** After each task, think about what went well and what could be better. What would you do differently next time?
- **Own your Mistakes:** Admit when you mess up. Focus on fixing the problem, not placing blame.
- **Be Disciplined:** Use tools like checklists, buddy systems, or reminders to stay on track. Tackle the tough stuff first – "eat the frog."

3 Increase Resilience

Resilience is your ability to bounce back and thrive despite the stress and challenges of submarine life – long deployments, tight quarters, high-stakes situations. It's a skill you can build. Remember, tough times make you stronger and prepare you for future missions. Even when exhausted, stressed, or facing danger, resilient submariners find a way to recover and keep going.

Increase Resilience by:

- **Flip the Script:** See setbacks as temporary roadblocks, not dead ends. Every challenge is a chance to learn and grow.
- **Build Your Crew:** Surround yourself with supportive shipmates who encourage and challenge you. Lean on your team and seek mentorship.
- **Break It Down:** Tackle big problems one step at a time. Develop backup plans and focus on what you can control.
- **Push Your Limits:** Embrace challenges that stretch your comfort zone to build mental toughness.

SETTING SMART GOALS

Goal Example: Become a Better Listener (Decrease Attention-Seeking)

Specific — What exactly do I want to accomplish? *In group setting, I will actively listen to each speaker without interrupting or thinking about my response until they have finished speaking.*

Measurable — How will I track progress? *I will track the number of times I interrupt a speaker and review my progress weekly.*

Achievable — Is this goal realistic for me? *Yes, I have all the resources needed to accomplish this goal.*

Relevant — Why is this important to me? *Improved listening will help be better understand others and better contribute to discussions.*

Time-bound — When will you achieve this by? *I will work to achieve this goal by the end of the month.*

Goal 1:

Specific

Measurable

Achievable

Relevant

Timebound

Goal 2:

Specific

Measurable

Achievable

Relevant

Timebound

Goal 3:

Specific

Measurable

Achievable

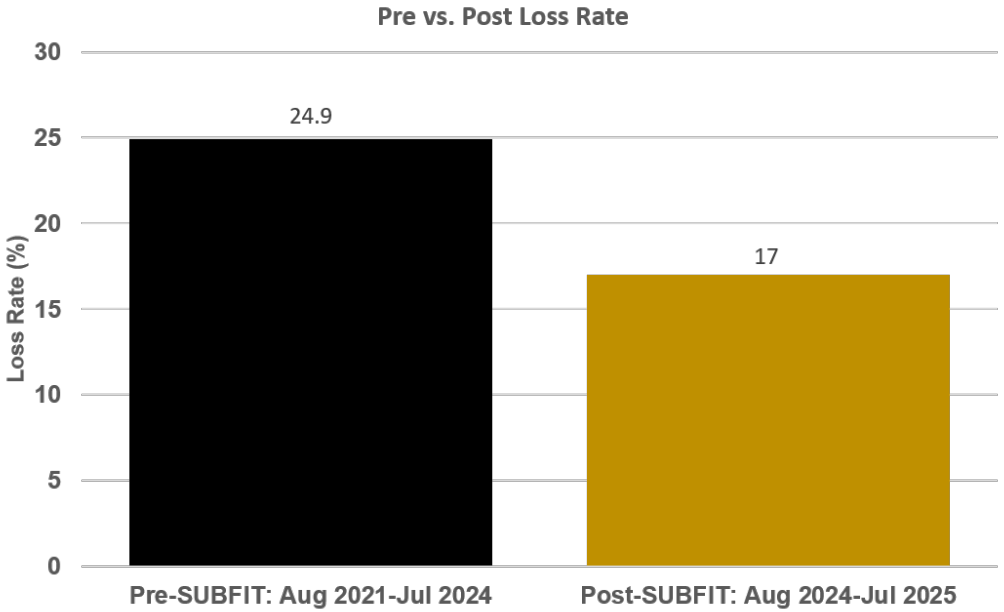
Relevant

Timebound

(Epton et al., 2017)

Preliminary Findings

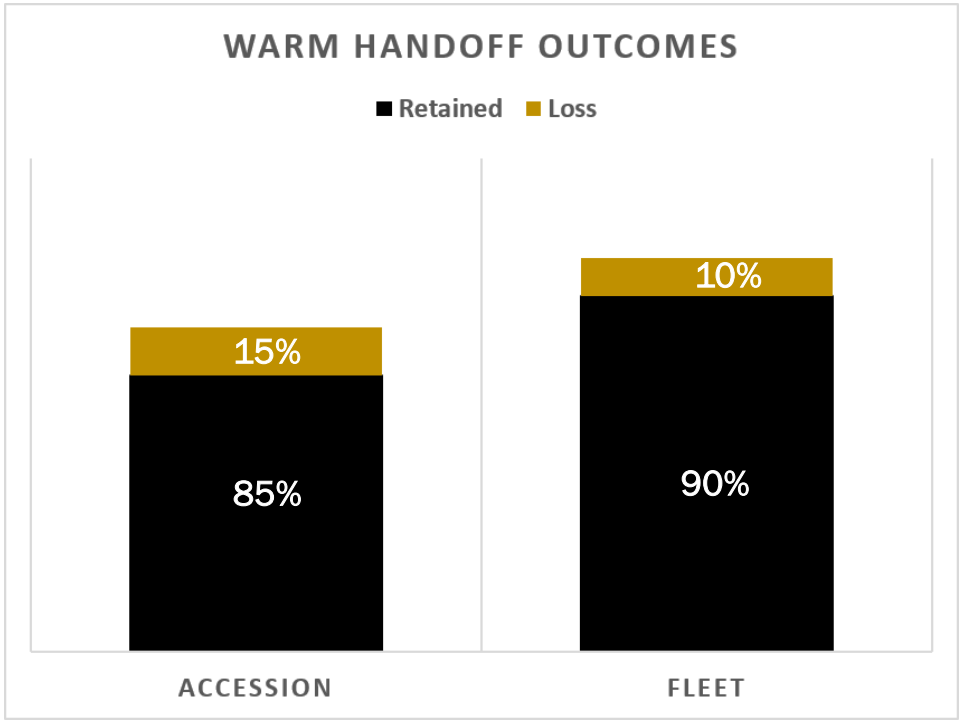
Preliminary Findings from Accession to the FLEET



- Attrition includes training pipeline and fleet losses
- **~32% lower observed attrition from Navy SUBSCOL to Fleet**
- **8 fewer losses per 100 Sailors assessed**
- These preliminary findings are consistent with improved readiness preservation

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Fleet Warm Handoffs



- Fleet-level warm handoffs include Sailors identified as at highest risk during accession screening and Sailors identified as at risk while screened onboard
- Most were retained during follow-up
- Findings support the value of early identification and targeted support

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Future Fleet Sailor Development Pilot Program

Study Objective

Evaluate whether implementing a leader-reinforced developmental support program (informed by Embedded Mental Health [EMH] providers) across an entire boat improves Sailor risk stabilization, reduces escalation of risk, and supports operational readiness compared with treatment as usual

Structured Leader Engagement
Leadership tools to support interpretation of SUBFIT indicators and guide consistent, development-focused interactions across the crew

Targeted Skill Development
Personalized Targeted Skills Plans supported by digital skill-building tools, such as Headspace

Embedded EMH Support
Two brief EMH check-ins during the first two weeks, with additional follow-up or escalation according to standard practice

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Key Takeaways

- **Screening and development serve complementary roles.** SUBFIT pairs identification of clinical concerns requiring follow-up with tailored recommendations for growth.
- **Predicted risk informs support rather than determining outcomes.** Model predicted risk estimates should not be viewed as deterministic; multiply determined, low-incidence outcomes require strategic, person-centered approaches for risk mitigation.
- **Development supports readiness under demanding conditions.** Actionable goals address coping and person-environment fit to help submariners navigate isolation, confinement, and operational demands.

Acknowledgments

Naval Submarine Medical Research Laboratory Team

David Clark, Ph.D.

Dana Dilweg, M.A.

References

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