Benefits of Mindfulness: Push-ups for the Brain

Throughout childhood, you likely were told to: “Mind your manners” or “Mind your own business.” In other words, for your own good, whether that’s avoiding a reprimand or a fist fight, pay attention to yourself or what you’re doing. Now, we’re starting to realize that having the mental discipline to pay attention to what we’re doing has benefits well beyond saving face.

In recent years, mental discipline has taken on new meaning in the context of “mindfulness,” a meditative practice gaining ground with mental health advocates. It’s described as exercises for the brain to encourage being in the present moment, focusing on the task, and not letting the mind wander. Service members practicing mindfulness may find it also helps reduce stress and anxiety and suppress distressing or distracting thoughts, which can translate to improved performance on and off the battlefield and overall mental health. Meditation alone is said to change the structure and function of the brain to encourage concentration and lower stress.

Practitioners of mindfulness use varying techniques to achieve those ends but seem to agree that breathing and concentration are keys. By being more attentive to your breathing and concentrating on the present, experts say you’re not allowing emotionally upsetting memories, such as unpleasant flashbacks of combat, to cause a reaction. In other words, the practice helps you gain control of your emotions.

According to the American Psychological Association, theorized benefits of mindfulness are:

- self-control
- objectivity
- enhanced flexibility
- mental composure
- improved concentration and mental clarity
- memory function
- emotional intelligence
- the ability to relate to yourself and others with kindness, acceptance and compassion

In the past decade, the practice has gained increased attention from within the military and a more formal place in rehabilitation centers.

Retired Marine Corps Maj. Gen. Melvin Spiese embraced the technique during his command as help for Marines wrestling with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He observed that it improved the Marines’ abilities to stay focused during mundane but potentially dangerous tasks such as walking patrol, or managing adrenaline spikes from sudden events like an ambush or explosion.

“Being able to remain focused helps with posttraumatic stress disorder because the disorder is characterized by anxiety and intrusive thoughts,” said Dr. James Bender, Deployment Health Clinical Center clinical psychologist. “Any technique that decreases these two symptoms will greatly aid in addressing an individual’s PTSD.”

Until recently mindfulness, meditation and yoga, which are related but different, were fringe practices in the mental health field according to Bender. Now, after more study, researchers understand that mindfulness can decrease anxiety often associated with PTSD.

“Mindfulness helps you process emotions, which is the first step towards changing or addressing them,” said Bender.

One influential researcher with five research grants with the U.S. Army, Dr. Amishi Jha, explains the slow start to accepting mindfulness techniques.

“We know that exercise keeps the body healthy … but we have not come to the cultural understanding that the mind, just like the body, needs regular exercise to be operating at its full healthfulness,” said Jha.

Find further information on complementary and alternative medicine therapies on the DCoE website, and check out these articles on mindfulness:

- The Role of Mindfulness, Meditation, and Prayer After Brain Injury
- Mindfulness Could Help Ease War-Related PTSD Symptoms, Study Finds
- Reduce Stress and Improve Your Health in 6 Easy Steps
- Mindfulness Therapy May Help Veterans With PTSD

Categories: Research, Stress, PTSD, DCoE, Treatment, Psychological Health

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