Mindfulness: A Fundamental Skill for Performance Sustainment and Enhancement

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ABSTRACT

The term “mindfulness” has become very fashionable within the military and across multiple sectors of civilian and first responder populations. Overall, the key concept of mindfulness is intentionally being acutely aware of what is going on internally as well as externally, without reacting. Mindfulness and the awareness that underlies it are inherent capabilities that can be honed through training. As such, classes in mindfulness are being offered in many venues and medical clinics are using mindfulness-based interventions for patients for a wide range of medical issues. The evidence behind the benefits of mindfulness is extensive and instructive. Importantly, evidence suggests that mindfulness can be helpful for many operational, leadership, and personal activities and is likely beneficial for enhancing resilience and overall health. Many current military leaders are using mindfulness as a tool to better prepare for a dynamic and uncertain future.

Keywords: mindfulness, performance sustainment, performance enhancement

Introduction

“Mindfulness is the skill of being deliberately attentive to one’s experience as it unfolds—without the superimposition of our usual commentary and conceptualizing.”¹ In this quote, the “our” is us: we need to let go and view our experience as an outsider. The term “mindfulness” has become very fashionable within the military and across multiple sectors of civilian and first responder populations. Wherever you turn, groups are offering classes in mindfulness and medical clinics are using mindfulness-based interventions for patients for a wide range of medical issues. For example, mindfulness is used for pain management,¹² weight loss,³–⁵ stress reduction,⁶–¹⁴ and depression and anxiety,¹⁵,¹⁶ to name a few. Importantly, others promote mindfulness for performance enhancement,⁸,¹⁷–¹⁹ improvements in sleep,¹¹ and overall positive mental health,¹³,²⁰,²¹ What is mindfulness? What is the evidence behind it? How can mindfulness be applied to and used by Special Operations Forces (SOF)? This article discusses the history, definition, evidence base, and application of mindfulness for enhancing the performance of SOF personnel.

Historical Perspective and Definitions of Mindfulness

Historically, the concept of mindfulness appears to have emerged from a variety of ancient psychological and philosophical concepts, but it is most associated with Buddhist psychology. In Western culture, its origins include “existentialism and naturalism in Western Europe” and “intellectualism and humanism in America.”²⁰ The appearance of the concept of mindfulness in many cultures speaks to its importance in human psychology, philosophy, and physiology. Despite its quasi-religious or philosophical roots, newer neuroimaging methods have demonstrated that mindfulness is clearly related to activities of the brain and nervous system, not to an ethereal process or belief system.²²–²⁶ The most relevant features of mindfulness are awareness and attention—two essential activities of our conscious selves. Many leaders of philosophical and spiritual schools, past and present, believe that what separates humans from animals is our consciousness,²⁰,²¹,²⁵ particularly the awareness of self. Thus, the activity of awareness is an aspect of consciousness: we are self-aware through our physical and mental experiences. Every human being has his or her own distinct awareness and the capacity to be both self-directed and responsible to the sensations and incoming stimuli of the physical body and the mind. Being wholly aware of our internal and external environments, feelings, sensations, actions, and thoughts is our
most direct contact with reality. Being aware of what is going on around SOF personnel is what can keep them and their team members safe.

The term “mindfulness” has been used in many contexts: mindfulness meditation, basic meditation, mindfulness-based stress reduction, mindfulness training, and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, to name a few. Likewise, it has been defined or characterized differently by different people. Overall, the key concept of mindfulness is intentionally being acutely aware of what is going on internally as well as externally “including thoughts, emotions, sensations, actions, or surroundings as they exist at any given moment,” without being outwardly reactive. Intention, the aforementioned awareness, and attention are essential. Table 1 presents a variety of published definitions of mindfulness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bishop et al.</td>
<td>A process of regulating attention to bring a quality of nonelaborative awareness (often termed “nonjudgmental”) to current experience and a quality of relating to one’s experience within an orientation of curiosity, experiential openness, and acceptance.</td>
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<td>Shapiro et al.</td>
<td>The three axioms of mindfulness—intention, attention, and attitude—are not separate stages. They are interwoven aspects of a single cyclic process and occur simultaneously. Mindfulness is this moment-to-moment process.</td>
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<td>Szalavitz</td>
<td>The awareness that arises through paying attention on purpose in the present moment, nonjudgmentally.</td>
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<td>Brown and Ryan</td>
<td>A receptive attention to and awareness of present events and experiences.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jha et al.</td>
<td>Mental mode characterized by full attention to present-moment experience without judgment, elaboration, or emotional reactivity.</td>
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Mindfulness has been characterized as the antithesis of mind wandering. William James, a famous American philosopher and psychologist, stated in 1890, “The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will . . . An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence.” In other words, any educational or training approach that is able to bring one back to the intended focus at will is the best of its kind. James went on to say, “The immediate effects of attention are to make us: perceive, conceive, distinguish and remember.” These are all conscious actions that SOF personnel want to master, as the words epitomize Special Operators during missions.

In contrast to unintended thought drifting or haphazard mind wandering, intentional and purposeful daydreaming or deliberative imagination may be important to creativity and productivity. Singer et al. noted in 1966 that “daydreaming, imagination, and fantasy are essential elements of a healthy, satisfying mental life.” Thus, a clear distinction must be made: mind wandering during purposeful tasks is viewed as a performance degrader, whereas intentional or deliberate daydreaming is viewed as important for creativity.

The Science of Mindfulness

The evidence behind the benefits of mindfulness is quite extensive and instructive. First and foremost, with regard to personal health, mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) training has been shown to improve sleep and sleep is directly related to performance. Similarly, mindfulness training (MT) has been and is being used as a treatment for pain, with some excellent results. In addition, MBSR training and MT have been shown to be effective in reducing symptoms of depression and stress in a variety of populations, including veterans. Overall, mindfulness practices are likely to benefit health and performance.

However, strategies to optimize performance are more important to SOF personnel than improving health. Studies have shown that MT is effective for maximizing capacity to control focus and attention. Attentional control, or the ability to concentrate at will, is critical for managing continuous and exhaustive intellectual, physical, and perceptual demands such as those experienced during high-stress missions. MT also appears to help mitigate depletion of attentional control capacities, which otherwise could contribute to performance failure. Morrison et al. showed that only a total of 7 hours of MT over a period of 7 weeks decreased mind wandering, which interferes with attentional control. Importantly, mind wandering per se can degrade performance. Thomson et al. demonstrated that individuals who increase the amount of mind wandering over time, when they are supposed to be focused, had decreased accuracy in performing various tasks over time. Furthermore, MT has been shown to improve working memory capacity. In particular, MT appears to counter decrements in working memory that typically are noted during highly stressful situations. To date, the amount of time spent in training and the frequency of MT needed for a positive benefit are open to debate. Research to identify this minimum training required is ongoing. Figure 1 presents the possible effects of being mindful: if one starts at a baseline of X performance units, then, over time, with significant stressors, performance could degrade to Y performance units.
decrements such that performance units would be sustained at X units rather than falling to Y, despite significant distracting stressors. Overall, MT seems to mitigate performance decrements due to decreases in attentional focus or “negative” mind wandering during intensely stressful situations. It is possible that MT could also result in improved performance when learning new skills and/or over the course of training. However, whether it improves performance during nonstressful situations is less clear. These questions remain to be answered.

In addition, MT appears to improve emotional self-regulation. Several studies have indicated the benefits of MT and MBSR on emotional state, in particular with regard to lessening symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress. Omidi et al.6 found that when veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder underwent MT, they were more effective in regulating their mood state. The direct effects of MT on emotional reactions to various events are less clear and may depend on both inherent mindfulness as well as how long a person has been engaging in mindfulness practices. Table 2 presents a list of mindfulness practices. When it comes to emotional regulation, two general strategies are usually considered: reappraising or reconsidering the threat by modifying the emotional response to sensory input or intentionally suppressing the emotional response through altering the behavioral output.28 Both of these strategies can be improved through intentional mindfulness or being in charge of what you are thinking about.

In summary, increased mind wandering, decreased working memory, and degradation of performance may all be linked together through the inner workings of the brain and may be improved through MT. Stress and chronic states of stress may lead to anxiety, depression, sleep disturbance, and the like. Clinical researchers, such as Amishi Jha45,46 and Jon Kabat-Zinn47,48 and colleagues, suggest that one can overcome the effects of stress, depression, and related issues through mindfulness that improves present awareness and attention as well as working memory. All three allow one to harness a greater capacity to manage details and be more attentive to important elements of decision-making, even in states of profound and sustained stress. Figure 2 presents a simple cartoon of the benefits of mindfulness. More
Applications of Mindfulness

So how can you use mindfulness (situational awareness) to improve performance and other various aspects of your life? How can this tool be useful to an SOF medic restocking his medic bag, reviewing treatment protocols, engaging in combat, or returning from deployment? First, it may be useful to differentiate mindfulness into two realms: a practice or tool, and a way of living in the world. For SOF, indeed, for all of us, both applications may be critical. Mindfulness can be a tool to enhance various aspects of performance, but it also needs to part of daily living, so everything going on in your surrounding environment is taken in, at least when on missions. Importantly, it may be that SOF come into this world more mindful than others: mindfulness appears to be an inherent attribute or characteristic in some, and this may reflect self-selection or the SOF selection process. Living mindfully means trying to consider every decision and action fully and carefully, rather than allowing fear, pride, ego, and negative emotions to dictate how we respond and react. Thus, mindfulness can be applied to virtually every aspect of daily life: training, missions, lifestyle behaviors, relationships, and recreation. Most people are not able to be mindful all of the time (this evokes images of contemplating one’s navel), and mindfulness skills may need to be learned and then practiced.

Mindfulness skills can be used for a multitude of mission-related activities. Agile and adaptive reasoning, which is required for mission planning and execution, surely can benefit from improvements in attentiveness and the working memory of factors influencing selection of the best course of action among a multitude of choices. Mindfulness has applications to specific tasks; for example, saving a combatant under fire using Tactical Combat Casualty Care. SOF medics likely practice mindfulness throughout their training without having attached a name to it; they filter out all distracting information and concentrate on the casualty; they are aware and attending to the task. Mindfulness can be used to control breathing, to release tension in body parts, and to focus attention on the surroundings. Certain exercises and skills could be learned to augment attention for many mission-specific tasks. Interestingly, Academi LLC (www.academi.com) introduced a mindfulness course into its training and has been reporting excellent results. MT is also being used for building resiliency in police officers. The police force in Hillsboro, Oregon, is offering one of the “nation’s first on-the-job mindfulness training program specifically tailored to law enforcement and based on a widely recognized curriculum.” A graduate of the class noted that he learned to “take a few moments to breathe, pause and scan his feelings” and “notice what’s important now,” in terms of “on the job” actions. It is like Michael Jordan, the great basketball star, who saw in his mind the arc of the ball going into the basket before each free throw.

Another area where mindfulness skills can be used is with eating and drinking. How many times each week do you sit down and just gobble up your food without even thinking about how it tastes? How often do you grab a bag of chips or a tub of ice cream and manage to consume far more than intended—mindlessly? How often do you grab a beer and then drink several, without really considering if it tastes good or not? Have you tried to savor one sip of beer or truly taste a small sample of chocolate? Try it; you might be surprised! A number of mindfulness skills can be taught for “mindful” eating.
24,55 have shown that mindless play (e.g., videos or television) is not. This contrasts with mindful activities, like creative imaginative play (e.g., building forts, making bread, planting seeds, discovering nature, being outdoors, painting, participating in other arts and crafts, playing an instrument, playing sports). These are the substrates for deliberate daydreaming, a creative endeavor, whereas mindless or passive play (e.g., watching videos or television) is not.

Mindfulness or mindfulness training (MT) involves being intentionally aware, moment-to-moment, and “paying attention” with a specific and positive attitude (e.g., calmness or gratitude). For example, when a child acts inappropriately, such as throwing toys around, learning to take a deep breath, and calmly, gracefully, and respectfully, in a mindful way, leading them to put the toys away where they belong, should improve outcomes for parent and child alike. In parenting or dealing with children, it is also important that we encourage children to engage in mindful activities, like creative imaginative play (e.g., building forts, making bread, planting seeds, discovering nature, being outdoors, painting, participating in other arts and crafts, playing an instrument, playing sports). These are the substrates for deliberate daydreaming, a part of the creative endeavor, whereas mindless or passive play (e.g., videos or television) is not.

Important, mindfulness may help with relationships, parenting, and child rearing. With regard to all three, it is easy to focus on the reactions or responses we want or expect from our significant other, peer, or child in various situations in which we react customarily, or through habit, without thinking. Mindfulness approaches encourage switching the focus to our own self-control by being intentionally aware, moment-to-moment, and “paying attention” with a specific and positive attitude (e.g., calmness or gratitude). For example, when a child acts inappropriately, such as throwing toys around, learning to take a deep breath, and calmly, gracefully, and respectfully, in a mindful way, leading them to put the toys away where they belong, should improve outcomes for parent and child alike. In parenting or dealing with children, it is also important that we encourage children to engage in mindful activities, like creative imaginative play (e.g., building forts, making bread, planting seeds, discovering nature, being outdoors, painting, participating in other arts and crafts, playing an instrument, playing sports). These are the substrates for deliberate daydreaming, a part of the creative endeavor, whereas mindless or passive play (e.g., videos or television) is not.

Finally, mindfulness can be very effective for emotional self-regulation. Teper et al.24,55 have shown that mindfulness can help people learn to “observe their emotional experiences without trying to change them.” For example, in a fit of unanticipated anger or emotional upheaval, being mindful can help one pay attention to how the body is responding and observe the emerging emotions without judgment, and then, moment by moment, dampen the unfolding (over)reaction. Paying attention with intention allows for greater control and insight into oneself. Mindfulness removes the need to label a response as good or bad, and allows one to observe and intentionally self-regulate. Again, for audio (mindful eating and drinking) and video activities relating to mindfulness, visit hprc-online.org.

Other applications of mindfulness include its use as an intervention for pain, decision-making, and reducing stress, for example; however, this article is intended to give an overview, and to be broad, rather than deep. Importantly, it must also be recognized that mindfulness will not work for everything, and it may not suit everyone. However, it can be both a tool or skill and a way of living. Natural mindfulness, as noted, is a way of being, whereas MT is an intervention to teach someone how to become more mindful to improve a variety of life experiences and activities.

How do you find an MT course or training in mindfulness? Currently, a number of MT programs are available. As mentioned, MBSR, which is sometimes considered meditation training, was originally developed by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts for pain management and anxiety disorders in the 1980s and is available at many clinical sites and has been used in the military setting. Another MT program used in the military is Mindfulness-Based Mind Fitness Training, a 24-hour course offered by Dr. Elizabeth Stanley’s Mind Fitness Training Institute, in Alexandria, Virginia. These courses typically involve in-person instruction from trained experts for extended periods of time (24 hours or more plus daily practice) and are usually offered at only a few medical and training centers. The investment of time limits its applicability in providing such a promising resource to SOF operators and families.

Dr Amishi Jah, a well-known mindfulness researcher at the University of Miami, is investigating questions regarding other models for delivering her Mindfulness-Based Attention and Training, including the following: (1) Is an 8-hour experiential training period as effective as a didactic and experiential 24-hour program? (2) Will an Internet-facilitated, expert-delivered MT course be as effective as an in-person course? (3) Are similar benefits attained when nonexpert trainers (i.e., military members or spouses) deliver MT? (4) Do benefits differ when peers conduct MT, rather than experts? These are all very important questions to address. Interestingly, her most recent work suggests that an 8-hour, 8-week practice/experience-focused MT program bolstered attentional performance more than a didactic-focused program. For more information regarding these research initiatives, please visit Dr Jha’s website at http://www.amishi.com/lab/mbat_project/.

Table 3 Quotation by a Senior Operational Leader

| “Mindfulness training not only countered the detrimental effects caused by stress and fatigue, but also reinforced strategic leadership competencies, including identity, mental agility, and cross-cultural savvy.” | COL David Hodne, Commander, 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team* |

Note: *COL Hodne served in special operations and conventional units deploying in support of both OEF and OIF from 2002 through 2012. While assigned to the 2nd Ranger Battalion and the 75th Ranger Regiment (2002–2007), he deployed as a Ranger Battalion Liaison Officer, Joint Special Operations Planner, Battalion Operations Officer, and Battalion Executive Officer. COL Hodne also commanded twice at the battalion level in combat. He first commanded the 3rd Squadron, 4th US Cavalry in Iraq (2008–2009), and subsequently returned to Afghanistan while commanding the 2nd Ranger Battalion (2010–2012).
Summary

Mindfulness and the awareness that underlies it are inherent brain capabilities that can be honed through training. It can be helpful for many professional and personal activities, and appears to be beneficial for enhancing resilience and overall health. Its use as a tool to better prepare current and future leaders for a dynamic and uncertain future should be seriously considered. To gain a better appreciation of this critical human capacity, CHAMP’s HPRC has a certified mind-body specialist on staff, and many mindfulness research and practice resources are available. Virtual classes on various aspects of mindfulness and how to integrate mindfulness into everyday life will be offered through the HPRC.

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Disclosures

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