Mindfulness training—the technique of bringing full attention to present experience
and holding it without judgment or emotional engagement, and returning to the present each time the mind wanders—could offer soldiers protection from post-traumatic stress and other anxiety disorders. It might provide clarity of thinking needed for soldiers fighting in challenging and ambiguous counterinsurgency zones. (Credit: iStockphoto)

U. PENN (US)—Just as physical conditioning, weapons training, and fighting skills prepare soldiers for the rigors of combat, meditation practice may give them the mental capacity to withstand the trauma of war.

Amishi Jha, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, is investigating how brain functions can be improved with exercises like stress reduction, mindfulness training, and long-term meditation practices.

Mindfulness training is the technique of deliberately bringing full attention to present experience and holding it there moment to moment, without judgment or emotional engagement, and returning to the present each time the mind wanders.

The clinical value of meditation practice for treating physical and psychological disorders is widely recognized, Jha says. There are more than 250 U.S. medical centers offering mindfulness-based stress-reduction programs.

To investigate the protective effects of mindfulness practices on soldiers, Jha and Elizabeth Stanley, assistant professor of security studies at Georgetown University, provided mindfulness training to Marines preparing for deployment in Iraq. Their findings were published in the journal Emotion and featured in Joint Force Quarterly, the advisory journal of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The training was given to one group of 31 soldiers but not to a control group of 17. In the months prior to deployment, soldiers undergo intense training for physical endurance and mission-critical operational skills, as well as “stress-inoculation” training, which helps habituate them to the extreme mental rigors of combat.

During this period, Jha and Stanley provided the Marines with mindfulness-based mind fitness training, which helped them cope with the pre-deployment training and the stresses of leaving family to face the uncertainties of war.

The eight-week program used mindfulness exercises like focused attention on the breath and mindful movement. Participants kept track of the time they practiced the formal meditation exercises outside the classroom.

Jha evaluated the protective influence of the mindfulness training on working memory and the ability of Marines to regulate emotion. “Our findings suggest that, just as daily physical exercise leads to physical fitness, engaging in mindfulness exercises on a regular basis may improve mind-fitness,” she says.
“Working memory is an important feature of mind-fitness. Not only does it safeguard against distraction and emotional reactivity, but it also provides a mental workspace to ensure quick and considered decisions and action plans.”

Mindfulness training, the researchers suggest, could offer some protection to combatants from post-traumatic stress and other anxiety disorders, and it might provide the clarity of thinking needed for soldiers fighting in challenging and ambiguous counterinsurgency zones.

“Building mind-fitness with mindfulness training may help anyone who must maintain peak performance in the face of extremely stressful circumstances,” Jha contends, “from first responders, relief workers and trauma surgeons, to professional and Olympic athletes.”

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