A Simple Practice Can Transform The Lives Of First Responders

Yet another reason to love mindfulness.

08/18/2015 07:21 am ET | Updated Aug 21, 2015

Lindsay Holmes
Deputy Healthy Living Editor, The Huffington Post

Firefighters are known for their physical strength and bravery, but they also face an immense amount of emotional stress and pressure. And just as first responders train for fitness, so too should they work on sharpening and preparing their minds, according to neuroscientist Amishi Jha.

Jha, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Miami, just launched a collaborative study with the local Miami-Dade Fire Rescue department. The project will investigate how a mindfulness practice can help fire rescue workers cope with the stressful nature of their jobs. Recent research conducted by Jha and several of her colleagues found that mindfulness training successfully helped pre-deployment members of the military boost cognitive performance, and she’s hoping to see similar results in this experiment.
“This project really came out of our military study and other high stress groups that we were looking at,” she told The Huffington Post. “When we look at the rates of firefighter suicide, depression and PTSD, they’re actually not too different from retired military members.”

The four-week training, which is underway now, includes a series of mindfulness sessions — or a period of “nonjudgmental awareness of experiences in the present moment” — for approximately two hours a week. The training will also include relaxation and visualization exercises to help aid in falling asleep, which can be a challenge for many firefighters “since they are shift workers with unusual sleep schedules,” Jha explained. Participants will also do “homework” in the form of 10-15 minutes of self-guided meditation.

The small time commitment was designed to be low maintenance with the hope that the first responders will continue to employ the techniques after the study is complete.

Aside from improving stress and sleep, Jha also is looking for evidence that the practice will help improve the firefighter’s concentration levels.

“Attention gets fatigued under high stress, so we’re trying to find ways to keep it available and strong even though the very job that they’re doing is depleting it,” she said. “Mindfulness and attention are highly interrelated. It’s a portable,
low-cost, low-tech way to actually strengthen attention, which is crucial when they’re on the job.”

Sharon Israel, an industrial psychologist with the organization, says the experiment will not only be beneficial to the firefighters while they’re on duty, but outside of work as well.

“When they’re able to deal with their own stress better, it helps them as individuals in their own personal lives,” Israel told HuffPost. “As much as we like to keep personal and professional lives separate, we know we’re not a chest of drawers. We can’t compartmentalize that sometimes. So this practice can help [firefighters] at home, then of course they’re better able to do their jobs and handle stress better at work.”

**Meditation in action**

The concept of mindfulness is no longer some new-age fad. The practice has hit the mainstream as more CEOs introduce it to their offices as a way to battle burnout in their boardrooms. Mindfulness in the workplace can help a company’s bottom line through increased employee productivity. Studies also show that just a few minutes of practice each day can reap a host of mental and physical health benefits.

Mindfulness, however, isn’t a cure-all. It takes time and patience to cultivate a regular practice that lasts beyond just a few weeks of training; some researchers even suggest that it takes approximately 66 days. Many of people give up on something if they don’t feel that it’s working — a risk that comes with any sort of habit-forming research project beyond the last day of trials. But the rewards are worth it, Jha says, especially for those emergency responders who carry the stress of their jobs outside of their final shift.

Gary Gonzalez has been one of those responders. As a retired MDFR battalion fire chief, he spent many days where he was quite literally running into places everyone else is running away from. He was also responsible for the safety of a large team of men and women — the kind of pressure that easily brings a lot of anxiety.

After discovering mindfulness on his own, Gonzalez realized how it could potentially help his fellow first responders. That’s why, he told HuffPost, he’s thrilled about Jha’s research.

"When we look at the rates of firefighter suicide, depression and PTSD, they’re..."
"I'm convinced it could be a powerful antidote to what I see happening to my peers, both as retirees and active personnel," he said. "We have high rates of suicide and PTSD. It can lead you to some pretty dark places."

Gonzalez saw the impact of mindfulness in his own life. The more he consistently practiced, the more he realized there was an "air of calmness" about him and he self-reports positive changes in his mood.

"It's worth giving an honest try because it can have a profound impact on your life," he stressed. "Here we have this technique that help prevent the habitual thinking patterns that can lead to [mental health issues]. It's beyond powerful from my perspective that there's something like this that people can do. Is it the solution to everything? No. But the results are worth giving it a try."

Ultimately, Jha wants her research to inform others in similar occupations if the study is successful. She's confident the practice can make a difference in the lives of these workers.

"First responders put a lot of effort into making sure they're physically fit, but enough emphasis in any of these high-stress professions hasn't always been on keeping their mind just as healthy and fit," she said. "Hopefully that's what this project will do."

_Also on HuffPost:_

100 Ways To De-Stress

More: Third Metric Well-being Amishi Jha Amishi Jha Mindfulness Research Mindfulness Training

_A Simple Practice Can Transform The Lives Of First Responders_