Mindfulness has become recognized as a promising mental health intervention for soldiers returning home from war. But it may also be a vital tool for soldiers before they are deployed to conflict zones.

During the critical pre-deployment period — the training period before a soldier goes to combat — soldier face high levels of stress and high demands. While training intensively for the upcoming mission, they are also mentally preparing themselves to leave their loved ones and head into a dangerous conflict zone.

Research has shown that the demands of this critical period can take a psychological toll on soldiers, leading to impairments in mental health and cognitive functioning — meaning that soldiers may be going into combat already dealing with mental health challenges.

And according to a new University of Miami study, a brief mindfulness meditation exercise aimed at staying focused on the present moment can help
active-duty soldiers prepare for combat, improving performance and cognitive resilience.

"Soldiers are experts at standing at attention," Miami neuroscientist Amishi Jha, the study's lead author, said in a statement. "However, maintaining a mind at attention under the intense physical, emotional and cognitive demands they face, is a more difficult task."

In the study, 75 soldiers stationed in Hawaii, who were all eight to 10 months away from being deployed to Afghanistan, underwent the MT program. Then, their attention and cognitive performance was tested using the Sustained Attention to Response Task (SART), a test that measures attentional lapses and mind wandering. The data showed mindfulness training (MT) during pre-deployment, completed in just eight hours over the course of eight weeks, to be effective in preventing mind-wandering and attentional lapses.

While previous studies by the same researchers showed 24 hours of mindfulness training to lead to improvements in mood and cognitive function, the new study is the first to suggest that a much shorter training period could

Mindfulness Training Improves Resilience Of Active-Duty Soldiers

ine trainings are important, because soldiers in the pre-deployment period generally don't have nearly as much time to complete a full mindfulness training program. However, as the researchers note, this is the time when they need it most.

"With the continued deployment of our soldiers to face complex threats around the world, these results are a critical addition to our ever-evolving readiness and resiliency toolkit," Deputy Commanding General of the U.S. Army in Europe MG Walter Piatt said in a statement. "Ensuring our men and women are both mentally and physically prepared is essential to mission success," he said. "This study provides important information to help us do that."

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