Dr. Amishi Jha, a neuroscientist and associate professor of psychology at the University of Miami, is the ultimate oxymoron — a rock star in the field of contemplative neuroscience. She studies how practices like mindfulness meditation change the structure and function of the brain, increasing attention and working memory while minimizing stress.

Although she is following in the footsteps of giants in the field, Jha seems to be blazing her own trail. Her work is influencing such disparate fields as the military, primary education and business.

Jha, 42, currently has five active research grants with the U.S. Army, which is trying to help soldiers protect their minds as well as their bodies amid multiple deployments and life-altering injuries.

U.S. Army Brig. Gen. Walter E. Piatt and his soldiers had just returned in 2009 from back-to-back deployments to Iraq when he expressed to an army doctor a desire to help prepare soldiers mentally and emotionally. The doctor connected him with Jha, who came to speak to military leaders about her research.

Now commander of the Seventh U.S. Army Joint Multinational Training Command, stationed in Germany, Piatt says within five minutes of listening to Jha’s presentation, she had described challenges soldiers were facing after multiple deployments. “She pretty much described me,” he told the Miami Herald in a telephone interview. “It was not the nicest thing to hear, but she was very accurate.”
To administer the training for her research, Jha enlisted Elizabeth Stanley, founder of the Mind Fitness Training Institute and associate professor of security studies at Georgetown University. Stanley, a former U.S. Army military intelligence officer, developed the mindfulness-based training.

“We fight now in a cognitive struggle with an enemy that can’t be defeated through technology. They’ve taken our strengths, big weapons and technology, and changed the game,” Piatt told the Miami Herald. “They attack on their terms. They don’t care about civilian casualties. Our best weapons in that fight is the soldiers’ minds.

“You’re not letting your mind wander, you’re focusing straight on. This is what her technique teaches you to do, focus on the task.”

Soldiers who are taught before deployment can regulate their stressful thoughts by increasing focus on the present moment, rather than continually reliving stressful events or worrying about the future.

Growing up in a Hindu family, Jha said, meditation “was part of the culture, but it wasn’t something I personally engaged in.” When she was a year old, her family moved to Wheaton, just outside Chicago, where she grew up.

After hearing a lecture by Richard J. Davidson, another pioneer in the field, she bought “Meditation for Beginners,” and began practicing ten-minute exercises.

“By the end of the summer I felt better,” Jha said.

“That was an ‘aha’ moment. I knew it was a topic that was so compelling that I had to study it,” Jha said.

The Indian American professor shifted her research from basic neuroscience to studying how the brain pays attention to contemplative neuroscience, focusing on “how to get the mind to pay better attention using mindfulness.”

WHAT IS YOUR REACTION?

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HAPPY 0%  UNMOVED 0%  AMUSED 0%  EXCITED 0%  ANGRY 0%  SAD 0%