Like physical exercise, sustaining the benefits of mindfulness takes practice.

By Kelle Walsh | July 18, 2017

Plenty of research suggests mindfulness meditation may improve attention and emotional well-being. This is particularly useful during high-demand, high-stress periods, when both are vulnerable due to taxed cognitive function.

Now a new study out of the University of Miami finds that that meditation not only provides protection from a natural decline in attention during high-demand times, but that the more you practice, the greater that protection is.

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“That’s the biggest take-home for me: Practice is key,” says Amishi P. Jha, an associate professor of psychology and lead author of the study. “It’s not conceptual. It’s not like book-learning. [Mindfulness training] has to be embodied to get the most benefit.”

Researchers recruited 100 of the school's Division 1 football players during their intense pre-season training interval to compare the effects of mindfulness versus relaxation on attention and emotional well-being. “During high-demand intervals, the high frequency of external demands may require student athletes to expend resources of physical
strength as well as cognitive and affective control to maintain optimal functioning on the field and in the classroom,” the researchers explained.

Over four weeks, the students received weekly in-person instruction, recorded guided instruction with researchers present, and guided practices delivered via email to be used on their own in either mindfulness or relaxation techniques. The players were asked to record their engagement with the at-home material.

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The mindfulness training was based on shorter-format mindfulness-based stress reduction program, and “contextualized to fit the demands and culture of the university football program,” the researchers noted, such as distractions during performance and emotional over-reaction. Guided exercises included mindful breathing, a body scan, and a practice of choiceless awareness.

Participants were tested twice during the study, by completing the Sustained Attention to Response Task (SART) and questionnaires measuring emotional well-being.

Comparing mindfulness and relaxation techniques for improvements in mood and attention

As predicted, as the training wore on, the players reported feeling more anxious and depressed. And, also as predicted, both mindfulness and relaxation training helped buffer these increases, effectively providing some protection for the students' well-being.

But when it came to sustained attention, only mindfulness seemed to help.

And this effect was enhanced with greater engagement with the mindfulness practices.

“We had a strong hunch that practice matters, but this was the first time we saw that the type of training matters—by comparing mindfulness training to relaxation training, which also required practice,” Jha says. “Players who spent more time engaging in relaxation practices saw no impact on their attention. Yet, players who spent more time doing mindfulness exercises did have greater benefits for their attention.”

The takeaway? Used together, mindfulness and relaxation training form a protective shield against the emotional and cognitive impacts of high-demand, high-stress times—if you practice regularly.

“That was exciting for me, if they practiced [these interventions], their mood and their attention were protected over high-demand intervals,” Jha says.

But “if you only have a limited amount of time, and you want the maximum benefit, we’d recommend you do mindfulness training,” she adds. (You can find meditation practices and advice on where to begin in Mindful’s Getting Started guide.)

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