Preventing Stress-Related Mental Decline in Soldiers

Making mindfulness training accessible to active-duty soldiers can reduce the harmful impacts of stress on their brains, according to a new study.

Active-duty soldiers experience highly stressful mental and emotional demands that can take a toll on their brains over time. New research finds that mindfulness instruction delivered by professional military trainers may help to lessen these effects.
Rogers, founder and director of the Institute for Mindfulness Studies and the University of Miami School of Law’s Mindfulness in Law Program, were curious to see whether professional trainers who work with military personnel but have no background in mindfulness, could successfully teach MBAT to soldiers. MBAT combines fundamental mindfulness principles and practices with skills relevant to military service members with the goal of reducing stress and building mental resilience.

Prior research with active duty service members has shown that periods of stress, pressure, and uncertainty can take a toll on soldiers’ mental health. Although mindfulness interventions that emphasize focused attention and open monitoring have been found to bolster resilience and protect against declines in attention and memory, none have been delivered by professional military trainers with no prior background in mindfulness.

Before beginning the study, professional military trainers with no history of mindfulness practice completed a formal, 12-week MBAT training practicum. This included first-hand experience practicing mindfulness exercises, and eight weeks of instructor training that prepared them to teach these skills to soldiers. At the same time, several trainers with prior mindfulness experience but no history of working with soldiers also completed the MBAT practicum.

**Delivering Mindfulness-Based Attention Training to Soldiers**

Next, 180 healthy, active-duty, male, US Army volunteers from three different companies were randomly assigned to receive MBAT instruction from either one of the professional military trainers (military trainer group), or an experienced mindfulness trainer (mindfulness educator group). Soldiers from a fourth company, who did not receive any mindfulness training, were included as a control group.

Both mindfulness training groups received the MBAT program, but with different trainers. Instruction was delivered in weekly, two-hour sessions over four weeks. Training involved mindfulness instruction and practice using weekly themes: concentration, body awareness, open monitoring, and connection. All participants were asked to complete daily exercises at least four days per week that corresponded to the weekly theme, and were given an MP3 player with 15-minute guided practices.
recognition task where participants had to recall pictures of faces or shoes, while being distracted by combat-related or non-military-related images.

**Slowing Cognitive Decline**

At the end of the study, performance on the attention and working memory tasks declined for all three groups. However, the military trainer group showed the smallest amount of change immediately after training and four weeks later. They also had less of a drop in working memory than those in the mindfulness educator and control groups. For all groups, accuracy on the tests was lowest when respondents were distracted by emotionally-charged images.

There were also differences in how much time each group spent practicing mindfulness on their own. During training, members of the military trainer group formally practiced mindfulness nearly one day more per week on average than those in the mindfulness educator group. This trend persisted during the four weeks of follow-up. Dr. Jha, one of the study’s authors, believes that this occurred because “context-familiar trainers were better positioned to motivate soldier engagement in and out of class. Perhaps soldiers felt that these trainers were more attuned to their goals, demands, and challenges, compared to the context-unfamiliar trainer,” she concluded.

Jha also feels that the results of this study are hopeful: “The findings suggest that it is possible to improve accessibility of effective mindfulness training programs for groups like soldiers, firefighters, police officers, surgeons, and teachers”—in other words, groups that regularly experience high on-the-job pressures, demands, and challenges.

“What we learned,” says Jha, “is that the key to successful scalability [of mindfulness programs] involves having members of these groups learn how to deliver training to their peers. And our results suggest that trainer ‘train up’ time need not take years. It can be achieved in as little as 12 weeks,” she says.

All told, results of the study suggest that soldiers who received instruction from a professional trainer who understood the military context were more inclined to practice mindfulness on their own, and more likely to be protected against stress-related cognitive decline.
Neuroscientist Amishi Jha

Why The Army is Training in Mindfulness

NEW ONLINE COURSE

HOW TO MEDITATE
Find focus, feel peace, and uncover your inner power

with Elisha Goldstein

READ MORE

How the Body Scan Meditation Practice Reduces Biological Stress

B Grace Bullock PhD

Mindfulness at School Improves Critical Learning Skills

B Grace Bullock PhD

SIGN UP FOR OUR NEWSLETTER

Get mindfulness meditation practices, research, and special offers from our Mindful community delivered to you.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

B Grace Bullock PhD

Dr. B Grace Bullock is a psychologist, organizational consultant, research scientist, educator, author and motivational speaker. She has spent the past two decades teaching and studying physiological and psychological interventions that foster resilience and support healthy relationships and systems, and is the author of the acclaimed book, Mindful Relationships: 7 Skills for Success - Integrating the science of mind, body & brain. Grace is Founder and Principal Consultant of the International Science & Education Alliance, a consulting firm devoted to the strategic planning, design, development, training and evaluation of mindfulness-informed offerings that promote personal, interpersonal and systemic wellbeing, effective leadership, decision-making and social change. An educator at heart, she teaches courses and workshops on mindfulness, interpersonal relationships, stress resilience, and clinical psychology and practice at colleges, universities, professional schools, school districts and organizations across the USA and internationally. For more information see www.bgracebullock.com.
February 2020
Issue № 42

Do You Need a Mindfulness Teacher?

Five Mindful Books to Refresh and Renew

Welcoming the New Year with Mindfulness

Three Meditations for Beginners

Practice the RAIN Meditation with Tara Brach

How I Discovered That I Wasn’t the Centre of the Universe (and Neither Are You)

What Happens When Meditation Replaces Detention
NEWSLETTER

WEEKLY WAKEUP & TOP STORIES
Weekly newsletters delivering practices, research and special offers from our Mindful community straight to your inbox.

TRENDING

Sparking Joy: A Mindfulness Practice for Everyday
WILLEM KUYKEN

Five Common Work Challenges Mindfulness Can Improve
JEREMY HUNTER
How to Navigate Difficult Conversations

OREN JAY SOFER

Top Mindfulness Research Fall 2019

B GRACE BULLOCK PHD

How a Lack of Gratitude Kills Relationships

KIRA M. NEWMAN