Mindfulness training significantly enhances the performance of elite US special forces, a new study has discovered. Even the simplest of mindfulness exercises were shown to enhance working memory, clarity of thought, and the ability to focus under extreme pressure.

‘Previous studies have found that mindfulness protects against the deterioration in cognitive performance during periods of high stress to help special forces sustain their performance and well-being over time,’ said Dr Amishi Jha, a Psychologist at the University of Miami and lead researcher on the study.‘Yet here, in a population already known for their peak cognitive ability, we found that mindfulness training may be able to enhance cognition, even under periods of high stress.’

Psychologists have known for many years that mindfulness meditation reduces anxiety, stress and depression. Scientific studies have shown that mindfulness not only prevents depression, but that it also positively affects the brain patterns underlying day-to-day anxiety, stress, depression and irritability so that when they arise, they dissolve away again more easily. Other studies have shown that regular meditators see their doctors less often and spend fewer days in hospital. Memory improves, creativity increases, and reaction times become faster (see http://franticworld.com/what-can-mindfulness-do-for-you/).

It is so effective that mindfulness meditation is now recommended for the treatment of anxiety, stress and depression by the UK’s National Health Service, many US Hospitals, and other healthcare systems around the world. Mindfulness seems to be particularly effective for relieving the worst forms of depression. Indeed, one programme – Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) - is recommended for the most severe forms of depression by the UK’s National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, which evaluates treatments for the NHS.

In recent years, researchers have begun investigating whether mindfulness can also enhance mental performance rather than merely relieving suffering. In this recent study, Dr Jha and her colleagues wanted to see whether mindfulness could enhance the already formidable mental performance and resilience of elite special forces. To this end, the study followed 120 of the US Special Operations Forces for two months to see whether mindfulness training could help improve their working memory and ability to focus under extreme pressure.

The warriors (special forces dislike being called ‘soldiers’) were taught four different mindfulness meditations over either two or four weeks and asked to practice them for 15 minutes a day for eight weeks. Classroom sessions were used to both teach the meditations and explain their underlying logic. The control group received no training. Each session in the course, known as Mindfulness-Based Attention Training (MBAT), introduced a corresponding mindfulness exercise. They were first taught a simple Breathing meditation. In this, participants were asked to focus on their breathing and to return their attention to the breath each time they realised that...
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also taught. The Open Monitoring meditation involved expanding the field of awareness beyond the breath and noticing the rising, changing, and passing away of sensory and mental phenomena (e.g. sounds, body sensations, or thoughts). The final meditation, known as the Connection exercise, asked the warriors to express kindness and feelings of ‘connectedness’ towards themselves and to others.

Before and after the training, the soldiers’ ability to pay attention under pressure was measured using a computer-based task that required them to respond to numbers on a screen. To test working memory, they were presented with complex visual information (e.g., faces) to remember for short intervals while being bombarded by distracting negative images. The researchers then tracked the changes as they progressed through the course.

Jha’s team also wanted to see whether the benefits of mindfulness followed a ‘dose-response’ relationship, that is, more practice conferred a greater benefit than did less. To test this, they delivered two and four week versions of the course.

‘The two-week training was the shortest we have ever offered,’ said Dr Jha. ‘And we found that two weeks is too short. The bigger benefits come with the four-week MBAT programme, which resulted in significant improvements to both attention and working memory task performance.

‘In addition, we found that just like physical activity, the more time that participants engaged in daily mindfulness exercises, the more their working memory benefitted.’

‘Because these soldiers are required to do the most difficult and cognitively demanding tasks under extreme conditions, we want them to have the maximum amount of attention and working memory to succeed at those tasks,’ said Jha. ‘We found that after four weeks of mindfulness training, they may well be more capable of dealing with the humanitarian, environmental, and security challenges that our country and the world face.’

Mindfulness is garnering increasing support within the US military. Lt. Gen. Eric Shoomaker, M.D., 42nd Army Surgeon General and former commanding general of the U.S. Army Medical Command said: ‘Dr Jha and her colleagues have demonstrated that mindfulness training may provide the best prospect for success in

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Dr Jha believes that anyone who needs to perform for sustained periods at the highest of levels will benefit from mindfulness. But it is not just the likes of firefighters, police officers, athletes, trauma surgeons, nurses, and judges who might benefit says Dr Jha.

‘Mindfulness training may also help in stressful everyday moments by strengthening those cognitive capacities that get readily depleted when the mind is hijacked by anger, fear, worry, and rumination.’

Dr Danny Penman is co-author of the million-selling ‘Mindfulness: Finding Peace in a Frantic World’. @DrDannyPenman.

References
[i] Mindfulness training as cognitive training in high-demand cohorts: An initial study in elite military service members; Anthony P.Zanesco, Ekaterina, Denkova, Scott L.Rogers, William K.MacNulty, Amishi P.Jha; Progress in Brain Research; https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.pbr.2018.10.001

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