Jha Discusses Potential of Mindfulness to Counter High Stress

By Ellen O'Donnell

Imagine that you own a media player constantly stuck on “previous” or “fast forward.” It would be hard to experience your favorite music in real time without being able to just hit “play.”

“I think of the brain as like an MP3 player,” Dr. Amishi Jha said in a recent talk in Lipsett Amphitheater, part of NCCAM’s Integrative Medicine Research Lecture Series. She added that, for many people (especially under stress), the mind is largely occupied reliving the past or anticipating the future, which makes it difficult to fully experience the present and meet its demands. An associate professor of psychology at the University of Miami, she discussed the growing evidence base on a strategy that could help the brain stay on “play” longer: mindfulness meditation.

Study results are suggesting, Jha said, that learning and practicing this form of meditation can help reduce, even prevent, the degradation of the brain’s cognitive control systems—e.g., those related to attention, working memory, emotion regulation and mind-wandering—seen with prolonged periods of high stress. Mindfulness training may also promote psychological health, well-being and resilience, she added.

Jha highlighted several controlled pilot studies conducted by her team in a population that epitomizes high stress: military service members and their spouses. One study recruited a group of Marine reservists preparing for deployment. Half received 8-week training on mindfulness meditation and logged the amount of time (up to 30 minutes daily) they spent practicing outside class. The other half served as a comparison group and did not receive training.

Across two published studies, outcomes were working memory, positive and negative mood and mind-wandering, as well as self-reported measures of mindfulness as a mental state, and of perceived stress.

The researchers found that those in the mindfulness training group who practiced the most outside class had greater increases in working memory, positive mood, as well as significant decreases in negative mood and mind wandering. These benefits were not seen in those in the training group who logged lower amounts of practice time, nor in the no-training comparison group. The training group also described acquiring other skills and benefits from the training, such as improvements in family life and the ability to focus.
Jha is also studying mindfulness training in the military-spouse population (here, compassion training is added as a component). Results are not yet published, Jha said, but are encouraging.

“Data are amassing that show clinical and public health consequences from high stress,” she said. “They include a whole host of psychological, long-term, potentially lifelong disorders, unless appropriate treatment can be applied.” Not only serving in the military, but also expecting a new baby, caring for an elderly and/or sick family member or receiving a major medical diagnosis oneself are all examples of potent stress contexts, Jha said. “And the overarching question is, can mindfulness protect and strengthen the capacities at risk for being degraded due to such contexts?”