New Research on Mindfulness Meditation: Summer 2020

A roundup of new mindfulness research on improving stress resilience, taking your practice outdoors, and lessening cognitive decline.

BY B GRACE BULLOCK PHD | APRIL 21, 2020

Protecting Soldiers’ Brains

https://www.mindful.org/new-research-on-mindfulness-meditation-summer-2020/
Active-duty soldiers face mental and emotional challenges that diminish attention and memory. New research by Mindfulness-Based Attention Training (MBAT) codevelopers Dr. Amishi Jha and Scott Rogers finds that mindfulness instruction may lessen cognitive decline due to mental and emotional stress. MBAT combines mindfulness principles and practices with skills relevant to soldiers, aiming to reduce stress and build resilience.

Before the study, professional military trainers completed a 12-week MBAT training practicum and eight weeks of training to teach MBAT to soldiers. Mindfulness trainers who had not worked with soldiers also completed the practicum. Next, 180 healthy, active-duty, male army volunteers received MBAT instruction from either a military trainer or a mindfulness trainer, via weekly two-hour instruction and daily audio-guided sessions over four weeks, on themes of concentration, body awareness, open monitoring, and connection. Soldiers in a control group received no mindfulness training. Both at study’s end and four weeks later, the military trainer group showed the smallest decline in attention and memory. They also spent more time meditating on their own, suggesting that training tailored to their needs may be most effective in preventing stress-related cognitive decline.

Improving Stress Resilience

More on the benefits of MBAT: a four-week Mindfulness-Based Attention Training program may bolster firefighters’ attention, mood, and stress resilience. In a new study, 121 firefighters were assigned to an MBAT group, a relaxation training group, or a no-treatment control group. As in the study with soldiers, MBAT participants received formal mindfulness instruction on concentration, body awareness, open monitoring, and connection, along with eight audio-guided practices, and were asked to complete at least one per day. The relaxation program used guided imagery, breathing exercises, and progressive muscle relaxation, plus audio practices. Before and after training, all participants completed an attention test and answered questions about their mood and psychological resilience. Those in the MBAT group reported greater increases in psychological resilience than the others. Also, the more time firefighters spent practicing mindfulness at home, the more likely they were to increase their attention and positive mood. Results suggest that mindfulness may help first responders cope with high-intensity job demands.

Taking Mindfulness Research Outdoors
Outdoor spaces ranged from small gardens to large wilderness areas.

Results showed that practicing mindfulness in natural settings generally yielded positive effects. Programs that occurred in the wild, and those that used informal mindfulness practices (like open awareness), tended to be linked to better outcomes than those requiring formal meditation, as were those that focused on producing a mindful state, rather than building a mindful disposition. Authors believe “the experience of the natural environment, which is so fascinating that it calls for soft attention, thereby allowing disengagement” may explain the benefits of practicing outdoors. They also suggest that being in nature may lessen our mind’s tendency to wander, allowing us to better remain in the present.
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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.
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