Mindfulness Training Can Help Soldiers Cope with Stress

By Rick Nauert PhD
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New research finds that mindfulness training (MT) during predeployment may protect soldiers against attentional lapses and mind wandering — critically important given their high-stress, often dangerous jobs.

“Soldiers are experts at standing at attention,” said neuroscientist Amishi Jha, Ph.D., associate professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Miami, and principal investigator of this project.

“However, maintaining a mind at attention under the intense physical, emotional and cognitive demands they face, is a more difficult task.”
Jha's prior research found that military service members who received 24 hours of MT benefited in their mood and cognitive performance, based on how much time they spent engaging in mindfulness practices daily. Mindfulness is the ability to be aware and attentive of the present moment without emotional reactivity or volatility.

The current study went a step further, seeking to investigate which aspects of MT programs work best to curb attentional lapses and mind wandering when training is shortened to eight hours over eight weeks.

Experts believe the findings are significant because during the stress-filled and high-demand predeployment period, soldiers do not have the time to devote to a lengthier MT regimen. However, this is a time period in which they may need it most.

Having the correct ‘mind-set is crucial for soldiers to perform at a high level. The success of military operations requires that a high volume of information, arriving at fast pace under potentially ambiguous circumstances, be used to make quick decisions and take decisive action.

Likewise, the findings are important for civilians in high-stress, high-performance jobs, whose time may be extremely limited.

“Moment-to-moment information from the environment is necessary to ensure quick, decisive action. In addition to soldiers, police officers, firefighters, trauma surgeons, day traders, pilots, and athletes may all benefit from short-form mindfulness training to curb attentional lapses and mind wandering,” added Jha.

“With the continued deployment of our soldiers to face complex threats around the world, these results are a critical addition to our ever-evolving readiness and resiliency toolkit,” said Maj. Gen. Walter Piatt, Deputy Commanding General of the U.S. Army in Europe.

(External link)
“Ensuring our men and women are both mentally and physically prepared is essential to mission success,” he said. “This study provides important information to help us do that.”

The researchers studied 75 soldiers assigned to two groups of military service with a third group serving as a control. MT was offered the two groups eight to ten months before deployment to Afghanistan.

The study measured attention and performance by looking at the impact of short-form MT on soldiers’ results on a Sustained Attention to Response Task (SART), a test designed to measure attentional lapses and mind wandering.

One of the two groups receiving MT received a type of Mindfulness-based Mind Fitness Training (MMFT)® which emphasized engagement in MT exercises during each of the class meetings.

The second group received a version of MMFT® primarily comprising didactic information and discussions focused on stress and resilience.

The third group of 17 U.S. Marine reservists tested during their predeployment training interval received no training and served as a military control group. The study also included a civilian group who also received no training.

While the SART scores in civilians remained stable over eight weeks of typical civilian life, scores significantly declined in the military control group, underscoring the deleterious effects of the demands of predeployment interval on attention.

After the eight-week course, the MT group with training emphasis outperformed the group with the didactic emphasis as well as the no-training military control group.

Soldiers in both groups who received MT reported being more aware of their attention compared to the military control group at the end of the eight weeks.

In sum, scientists found that training-focused MT promotes cognitive resilience by protecting against degradation of attention during high-stress periods.

Source: University of Miami/EurekAlert
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About Rick Nauert PhD

Dr. Rick Nauert has over 25 years experience in clinical, administrative and academic healthcare. He is currently an associate professor for Rocky Mountain University of Health Professionals doctoral program in health promotion and wellness. Dr. Nauert began his career as a clinical physical therapist and served as a regional manager for a publicly traded multidisciplinary rehabilitation agency for 12 years. He has masters degrees in health-fitness management and healthcare administration and a doctoral degree from The University of Texas at Austin focused on health care informatics, health administration, health education and health policy. His research efforts included the area of telehealth with a specialty in disease management.

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