Mindfulness Training for Military, Firefighters Can Boost Resiliency, Attention

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New research reveals that firefighters and military personnel who participated in mindfulness training programs tailored to their professions experienced improved attention and resilience.

These improvements can better equip these professionals to manage stressors on the frontlines of their high-demand occupations, say University of Miami researchers.

Recognizing the similarities faced by first responders and active-duty military service personnel in high-stress, high-demand environments, Amishi Jha, a cognitive neuroscientist and associate professor of psychology in the University’s College of Arts and Sciences, built upon previous research utilizing Mindfulness-based Attention Training (MBAT).
The MBAT program was developed in 2013 by Jha and Scott L. Rogers, director of the Mindfulness in Law Program at the University of Miami School of Law, for delivery to psychologically and physically healthy individuals in high-demand, time-pressed workplace environments. It comprises four central themes: concentration, body awareness, open monitoring and connection.

“For firefighters, soldiers, as well as medical professionals, business leaders and many others, success matters, not only for themselves but for all they serve and lead,” Jha said.

“Many of our participants are highly motivated to learn how to gain a ‘mental edge’ so they can succeed in very demanding circumstances. In these projects, we contextualized our training to highlight why and how mindfulness training offered in the MBAT program provides tools and skills to succeed, even under volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous circumstances.”

In one of the papers, published in the journal *Psychiatry Research*, researchers partnered with the Miami-Dade Fire Rescue Department to investigate resilience, mood, and attention in 121 Miami-Dade firefighters. Resilience can mitigate the damaging effects of occupational stress on the mental health of first responders.

Overall, the researchers wanted to see if resilience is trainable, and if so, how mindfulness training, which emphasizes present moment attention and nonreactivity, might compare to a well-matched comparison program involving relaxation (i.e., visualization and progressive muscle relaxation).

The firefighters were assigned to one of three groups. Two groups received either mindfulness training or relaxation training, respectively, while the third received no training and served as a control group.

Findings from the firefighter study include:

- psychological resilience showed a greater increase over time in firefighters who received 4-week mindfulness training compared to those who received relaxation training, or no training at all;

- self-reported positive mood and attentional performance also showed a greater increase over the 4-week study interval in participants from the mindfulness group who spent more days per week engaging in guided mindfulness exercises.

A second study, published in the journal *Mindfulness*, investigated train-the-trainer delivery of MBAT by trainers who were highly experienced in mindfulness or novices.
The novice trainers were military trainers and therefore highly familiar with soldiers’ professional challenges. A total of 180 active-duty soldiers from the U.S. Army were recruited to participate in the study and assigned to be in one of three groups. Two of the groups received training from the experienced or novice trainers, respectively, and the third received no training.

In this study, the research team wanted to investigate whether military trainers with no experience in mindfulness could successfully deliver MBAT to soldiers after being trained for just 12 weeks.

The findings of this study include the following:

- intensive military field training designed to prepare soldiers for deployment can degrade cognitive capacities, such as their attention skills;
- soldiers who received MBAT from military trainers had less cognitive decline than those in the other two groups;
- these results provide a cost-effective and time-efficient strategy for rapid dissemination of short-form mindfulness training to military cohorts.

“While mindfulness training is growing in popularity, accessibility to training is limited, especially for groups where the professional climate is time pressured with its own unique culture, challenges, and demands,” Jha said of the train-the-trainer research approach.

The findings from both studies suggest that it is possible to improve accessibility of mindfulness training programs for such high-demand professionals.

“What we learned here is that in addition to ensuring that mindfulness training is contextualized for participants’ professional lives, trainers’ context familiarity is key, perhaps even more so than having extensive mindfulness expertise,” said Jha.

“We also learned that trainers can be ‘trained up’ to effectively deliver mindfulness training in as little as 12 weeks. Knowing this should help empower those who wish to make mindfulness training more accessible for specialized professions.”

Source: University of Miami
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