Past research has shown that mindfulness training—learning to deliberately stay in the moment without judgment or emotion—can protect people in high-stress situations, affecting how traumatic the experience becomes. Now, a new study shows that mindfulness training might even help soldiers perform under the extreme stress of combat—and better deal with the aftereffects.

For eight weeks, Amishi Jha, a psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania, and Elizabeth Stanley, a professor of security studies at Georgetown University and a former U.S. Army officer, gave mindfulness training to a group of Marines preparing for deployment to Iraq. The training taught the Marines skills they could use to manage stress, regulate symptoms in their body and mind after a stressful experience, increase their psychological resilience, and improve their performance—making it particularly relevant to their lives. The researchers found that the training improved their working memory and how well they regulated their emotions, and the more time the Marines spent practicing the mindfulness exercises, the more their mood, problem-solving abilities, and emotional control improved.

Jha’s conclusion is that:

just as daily physical exercise leads to physical fitness, engaging in mindfulness exercises on a regular basis may improve mind-fitness. Working memory is an important feature of mind-fitness. Not only does it safeguard against distraction and emotional reactivity, but it also provides a mental workspace to ensure quick-and-considered decisions and action plans. Building mind-fitness with mindfulness training may help anyone who must maintain peak performance in the face of extremely stressful circumstances, from first responders, relief workers and trauma surgeons to professional and Olympic athletes.