Meditation helps to aid resilience, performance

By Dr. David Brown, Regional Director, Psychological Health    July 24, 2017

JOINT BASE LEWIS-MCCHORD, WASH -- I recently led a leadership development session for members of the Regional Health Command-Pacific team that highlighted various types of meditation techniques that have been around for centuries and are now starting to gain more attention in corporations across the nation and the military.

Over the past decade, a technique called mindfulness has been showing significant promise in helping to sharpen skills like attention, memory, listening, emotional resilience, leadership and job performance. Just as the body needs exercise to stay in optimal physical condition, the mind also needs exercise to be at its peak performance.

When practiced regularly, mindfulness can help a person regain their focus and clarity in order to have a more productive work day. For that reason, and others, many organizations have begun to implement mindfulness and meditation programs to enhance their workforces' productivity levels.

Some branches of the United States military have also begun using mindfulness training to increase service members' resilience and help to alleviate stress. In 2015, a University of Miami-led research study funded by the U.S. Army Medical Research and Materiel Command, and led by Dr. Amishi Jha, principal investigator and neuroscientist, showed that mindfulness meditation exercises positively support active-duty Soldiers in protecting and training their minds to stay focused and better prepare them for high-stress combat situations, while also improving overall cognitive resilience and performance.

Another study conducted in 2016 by the University of Michigan looked at how mindfulness-based therapy could be used as potential therapy for combat veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder. The results of that study concluded that mindfulness helped the veteran cohort to successfully manage negative thoughts and sensations connected to post-traumatic stress.
While meditation involves spending time in quiet thought, mindfulness is a mental state achieved by focusing on one's breathing, while calmly acknowledging and accepting one's feelings, thoughts and bodily sensations, without judgment. In other words, it's being 100 percent, fully in the moment, without distractions.

According to published articles on mindfulness, this type of relaxation technique takes practice and a commitment of time. Integrating mindfulness into one's daily routine may be challenging in the beginning, but with practice, mindfulness, which can be performed while seated or walking, has been proven to produce positive results.

For starters, some of the well-known benefits of mindfulness include the ability to maintain one's self control, mental composure and focus. The opposite of those benefits would be distractedness, inattention and lack of engagement.

For example, multitasking might work well for quantity tasks when safety or mistakes are not concerns. But excessive multitasking can leave one feeling drained. Mindfulness, however, allows one to feel organized, rested, resilient and more content.

Psychologists believe this is due to the fact that multitasking and mindfulness exercises use different areas of the brain.

Timothy Wilson, professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, has cited that the human brain receives more than 11 million bits of information at any given moment, but our conscious awareness processes only 40 bits of that information.

Through mindfulness practice, a person is able to recognize how the mind reacts to thoughts, sensations and information, which in turn, creates the necessary space to maintain one's focus and make more grounded and deliberate decisions.

While mindfulness is just one of many techniques, one obvious observation is that there has been an increased interest among corporations and the military regarding the practice of this ancient form of meditation.