Fort Drum soldiers, spouses help researchers assess mindfulness training

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PUBLISHED: WEDNESDAY, JUNE 5, 2013 AT 4:30 AM
UPDATED: WEDNESDAY, JUNE 5, 2013 AT 7:57 AM

In an undated photo, Gen. Walter E. Piatt, deputy commanding general for support of the 10th Mountain Division, undergoes a brain activity test with Dr. Amishi P. Jha, researcher at the University of Miami, Fla.

FORT DRUM — Soldiers and spouses from the post are helping researchers gauge the effectiveness of mindfulness training, a process designed to reduce stress and improve concentration and memory.

The local soldiers will serve as the control group for the University of Miami study, which will measure differences between the training and other stress reduction methods for soldiers of the 25th Infantry Division, Schofield Barracks, Hawaii.
Additionally, the spouse study of mindfulness training is the first nationwide for the university's program.

Mindfulness training emphasizes focus on the moment through a wide range of techniques, allowing participants to avoid carryover stress and improve their situational awareness and memory in pressure-filled moments.

“If we can get our minds to focus on the here and now, we can cut down some of the ruminating that happens in high-stress situations,” said Dr. Amishi P. Jha, an associate professor at the university and lead researcher for the twin studies.

The approximately 40 soldiers, from the 10th Mountain Division’s 3rd Brigade Combat Team, were matched to their Schofield Barracks counterparts based on categories such as rank, work and number of deployments. Soldiers were tested at eight-week intervals without receiving the training as they prepare for a stint at the Joint Readiness Training Center, Fort Polk, La.

The two-part evaluation, done at the post’s Mission Training Complex, first had soldiers go through a series of tests and games on a laptop to measure their focus, then connect to a machine that measured their brain activity.

“Here we can have a very specific metric of what’s going on in the brain,” said Martin Paczynski, a post-doctoral fellow with the university who coordinated the research locally.

Dr. Jha projected the results from the soldier study will be published within the next few months.

The program came to Fort Drum with the help of Brig. Gen. Walter E. Piatt, deputy commanding general for support of the 10th Mountain Division, who led a brigade at Schofield Barracks that was studied in the early phases of the program. Dr. Jha said finding the brigade was important as her team struggled to identify a group of soldiers with a similar background to the initial Schofield Barracks group.

Gen. Piatt said he hoped efforts such as mindfulness training could become as widespread as doing pushups for physical fitness training or firing a weapon for military training.

“We know the benefits of training, but we still don’t know the best way to train our minds,” he said.

The spouse study, Dr. Jha said, came as a result of feedback from soldiers who already did the mindfulness training.

“If they benefited themselves, their first response was ‘Get this to my wife, she would benefit from this more than I would,’” she said.

Post officers assembled 21 soldiers’ spouses from a range of ranks and at least one deployment to go through the training in a special course initially designed for teachers. The course, provided to the spouses free, would have cost between $500 to $700 elsewhere.

After initial tests, the spouses were given the computer testing after going through eight weeks of the training and documenting their progress.

The first group of spouses just finished their testing last week. Researchers said they were
Looking for another spouse group at Fort Drum to participate in the study as a control group that will eventually receive the training.

Dr. Jha said she hoped the results of the initial spouse testing would warrant additional research support from the military.

More information about the twin studies can be found at www.amishi.com.

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