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MEDITATION, MILITARY STYLE

Consider this sort of a boot camp for the mind -- the US military is now training soldiers in a type of meditation that helps them become resilient so they can handle the intense stress of the battlefield. The hope is that this program will result in a reduction in the number of armed services personnel who suffer psychologically after deployment. Just as we civilians have borrowed boot camp's tough-love strategy as an effective way to get physically strong and fit, it seems to me that we also might benefit by borrowing from the techniques our armed forces use to strengthen their psyches for difficult times. After all, who gets through life without facing some tough emotional challenges?

The training program for soldiers is called Mindfulness-based Mind Fitness Training (MMFT, pronounced "M-fit"). When I talked with John Schaldach, MMFT's director of training, he told me that people often mistakenly assume that MMFT is simply using mindfulness for stress reduction. While that's "hugely helpful" for most types of stress, he told me that MMFT goes beyond that. The program helps soldiers develop resilience by pairing mindfulness with other skills to help them regulate their responses to stress, to maintain peak functioning at all times and to make effective decisions during situations in which they might otherwise panic. It also helps them come down from the high pitch and edge that they must maintain for combat so they can respond appropriately to ordinary life.

LEARNING THE WAY

Soldiers preparing for deployment undergo 20 hours of MMFT training over eight weeks. They begin with awareness exercises, learning to focus attention on what happens when they experience the stress response and its aftermath. Rather than shutting these sensations down or becoming overwhelmed (two common reactions), participants learn to *notice* and *tolerate* them, which supports the body's natural capacity for self-regulation.

Example: After intense stress, the human nervous system needs to discharge the excess energy that was mobilized for "fight or flight." Commonly, people experience twitching or trembling, heaviness in the limbs, heat flashes, chills and/or crying. If this release of energy is interrupted, the nervous system can become imbalanced -- and that can be the seed for psychological problems to develop later on.

"The rational mind is the main thing that blocks the body's natural ability to self-regulate," Schaldach explained, noting that the nonconscious survival part of the brain governs the stress response. "When the thinking mind gets involved, it can interfere with the stress response's natural cycle of arousal and recovery. Teaching soldiers to understand what's happening and to use mindfulness skills for stabilization helps the conscious mind cooperate with the body instead of fighting it."

Finally, soldiers learn to apply all this self-awareness and self-control to managing their actions. "They become much more skilled in accessing a choice -- rather than reacting from habit -- even under tremendous pressure," Schaldach said.

GOOD FOR ALL

Schaldach told me that participants have experienced remarkable changes from MMFT training. "Many say it is the missing piece in military training they had never had until now," he said. A 2010 Defense Department study showed that Marines who practice MMFT exercises just 15 minutes a day demonstrated improvements in working memory capacity. This mental capacity is critical for situational awareness and the ability to make good creative decisions. These are skills that every one of us would benefit from honing, even in civilian life, to better handle the demands of job, family, finances -- even rush hour traffic -- more effectively. We all have had the experience of strong emotions dictating our behavior in ways that we regret later. Our internal stress response causes us to respond from habit -- the survival brain simply takes over and reacts. Training such as MMFT can help create a little more space during a heated encounter with a loved one or coworker, so that we can respond thoughtfully and in a way that will be most effective.

MMFT training is currently available only to groups or organizations. To find out more or to arrange for a trainer to come to your location, visit:

www.Mind-Fitness-Training.org/faq.html.

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Source(s):

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www.Mind-Fitness-Training.org.