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STRESS RELIEF

Meditation Fit for a Marine

NEW EXPERIMENTS WITH THE MILITARY AFFIRM THE BENEFITS OF MINDFULNESS.

by VANESSA GREGORY

TWO SUMMERS AGO AT the Marine Corps Base in Quantico, Virginia, a group of reservists prepared for a tour of duty in Iraq. Twelve-hour days were jammed with rifle qualifications, counterinsurgency training, emergency medical courses, and — last but not least — moments spent in total silence. “You’d see men sitting in the lotus position in their field uniforms with rifles across their backs,” recalls Major Jason Spitaletta. The Marines were part of a study, partially funded by the Department of Defense, testing what’s best described to the layperson as meditation’s potential to increase the mind’s performance under the duress of war.

Spitaletta, a psychology graduate student in civilian life, had persuaded his commanding officer to participate after reading a provocative briefing sent to the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. In the paper, an ex-Army officer named Elizabeth Stanley illustrated meditation’s effect on emotions, which could help healthy soldiers stay calm and alert in chaotic situations — like the aftermath of an IED explosion.

Researchers tested the Marines for something called “working memory capacity,” a term that brain scientists use to define a cognitive resource that is much more than simple recall. Working memory capacity

powers complex thoughts. It’s what we call upon to figure out restaurant tips, break down spreadsheets, or even settle ethical dilemmas like whether or not to pull a trigger. The level of this resource can be depleted throughout the day. A morning disagreement with a co-worker — or a roadside bomb for that matter — can make it harder to solve a problem that requires math skills a few hours later in the day. In the battlefield low levels of working memory capacity might mean the difference between life and death.

The results of the Marines’ experiences,

published in the peer-reviewed scientific journal *Emotion*, showed that the men who embraced meditation walked out of pre-deployment training with minds that were more agile than those who didn’t. They also reported improved athletic performance, relief from anxiety, better sleep, and stronger memory. “I wasn’t scatterbrained anymore,” says Major Jeff Davis, a 39-year-old infantry officer. “I had no problem concentrating when I was upset.”

Meditation, of course, has made headlines for years for a range of health benefits, from reducing symptoms of depression ▶



MEDITATION (cont.)

▶ to lowering blood pressure and speeding healing. One UCLA study found that meditation slows the progression of HIV by reducing stress that hurts immune function. But many of those studies involved experienced practitioners; some of these Marines had never meditated before but still made mental strides, suggesting the practice is more accessible to first-timers and faster-acting than commonly thought.

The Marines engaged in a form of secular meditation called mindfulness, which is characterized by paying attention to the present. A beginner exercise,

MINDFULNESS IS LIKE GOING FOR A RUN — AT FIRST IT'S TOUGH TO FIT INTO YOUR SCHEDULE, BUT THEN IT JUST BECOMES NORMAL.

for example, involved concentrating on an area of contact between the body and whatever it's touching, like a chair, for about five minutes. Whenever their minds wandered, the Marines were instructed to refocus. "It doesn't take you to some transcendental state," Davis says. "It's not as foofy as that." Some of the men, accustomed to excelling at everything they did, were surprised at how much focus they had to muster. As the weeks passed, Stanley introduced more complicated exercises. The Marines practiced "shuttling" their attention between contact points and sounds like wind or the hum of electricity. That may seem remedial, but consciously switching between focal points exacerbates the mind's natural tendency to wander, and focus can easily drift to a dozen thoughts instead of two.

Near the end of training, the Marines attended a mindfulness retreat at the mansion of John Kluge, a former television mogul whose foundation also partially funded the study. The men spent an entire day in silence, trying to be mindful about every move they made. But some men, like Hermes Oliva, a Navy medic assigned to the unit, still weren't buying it. "We're barefoot on this guy's lawn doing yoga, and we're supposed to

be silent," he says. "We're like, 'You've got to be kidding me.'"

However, once Oliva was stationed in Iraq's Anbar province as the sole medic for 60 Marines and 200 Iraqi soldiers, he "did a 180." He remembered Stanley's lectures about how mindfulness could cultivate an ability to more easily endure racing thoughts and the body's primal fight-or-flight responses — those physical manifestations of stress that include shaking and a knotted stomach. "In my tent at night all by myself, I started doing those exercises," he says. "It would help me recognize the symptoms in my body before they got out of control."

It doesn't take a situation as intense as Iraq to trap people in unhealthy stress cycles. Everyday life has the potential to weaken the immune system and diminish psychological resilience, especially in the age of e-mail, text messaging, and nonstop multitasking. Davis, who remains on active duty in Quantico, continues to meditate every day. "I can't think of any aspect of my life that this hasn't helped me in — academically, as a dad," he says. He compared mindfulness to a physical workout like running: At first it seems impossible to fit in your schedule, but after a while it becomes normal. What's the minimum to get results? Scientists aren't certain, but none of the Marines in the *Emotion* study actually stuck to the full 30-minutes-daily regimen — the high-practice group saw benefits with an average meditation time of just 15 minutes a day. What's important, notes Stanley, is to be consistent on a day-to-day basis.

Stanley has founded a nonprofit, the Mind Fitness Training Institute, to work with people in high-stress jobs: firefighters, paramedics, police officers, and disaster-response teams. Meanwhile, Stanley is conducting a follow-up study with Army soldiers to learn more about how the mind pays attention. The results will add to the exploding field of mindfulness-centered research. Hard neuroscience data on meditation has raised the topic's profile in the scientific community, and it may soon become more socially mainstream as well. Americans haven't always gone to the gym, but today no one questions the importance of regular workouts for physical health. ■