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## Mindfulness: Building Resiliency in the Canadian Armed Forces

by Jordan Beatty

### Introduction

**T**he Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) is a professional and highly trained military with a deep-rooted culture in combat operations forged from the World Wars to present day conflict. Senior leadership is trusted to command NATO missions and is an ally across G20 nations. The CAF is an expert at training physical-body awareness through drill instruction, where every movement is timed, controlled, and exact. However, improvements can be made to training the mind to “stand at attention” as well. The mind requires just as much training for operations and is a great concern for the modern military. The topic of mindfulness and the practice of self-monitoring one’s present emotional state is emerging within the study of organizational behaviour both at an individual and group level. The CAF needs to keep pace with new practices at the organizational level for the well-being of soldiers, and the institution itself. More specifically, incorporating mindfulness into the military lifestyle will increase soldier resiliency and motivation during daily operations. Through a review of mindfulness literature as it relates to military performance, three major points will be explored throughout the article. First, practicing mindfulness leads to an overall increase in positive emotion and acceptance, an essential leadership quality for CAF personnel. Second,

coping with stress, task performance, and working memory are improved through mindfulness techniques. Lastly, how mindfulness can be trained will be explored, focusing on its adaptability to high intensity schedules and use on operations. These components of mindfulness will show its value and worthwhile investment for the CAF.

### Discussion

**T**he origins of mindfulness date back to eastern religious practices, but the study has filtered into the Western business world as a secular practice. The practice itself equates to a mental state where one brings their attention to present moment feelings and sensations, acknowledging them in a non-judgmental manner.<sup>1</sup> Popularity rose from advances in clinical psychology and the mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program introduced in 1979 by Dr Kabat-Zinn, a professor of medicine at the University of Massachusetts medical school.<sup>2</sup> Large organizations such as Google, Cisco, and Microsoft are among hundreds that have hired mindfulness coaching firms to teach their leadership about the benefits of mindfulness. The emergence of mindfulness at the organizational level is due to the multitude of benefits reported, including better working memory and decision-making,<sup>3</sup> an increase in positive emotions,<sup>4</sup> reduction in stress and increase



characteristics of leaders and their ability to magnify positive emotion. Their study of leaders and emotion present the fact that leaders must be self-aware of their

in resiliency,<sup>5</sup> and better work life balance.<sup>6</sup> In addition, mindfulness training is linked to empirically-validated neuroscience benefits, such as sleep, which is reported to have a large financial effect (millions) on companies due to productivity loss and health care costs.<sup>7</sup> Although strategically implemented at the organizational level, mindfulness is individually focussed on increasing the well-being of employees.

Company leadership are targeted for mindfulness training to effect culture change within the organization. Charisma, or what renowned transformational leadership scholars Bass and Riggio<sup>8</sup> defined as idealized influence, is a sought-after quality in many leadership models ever since Max Weber, the father of bureaucracy, defined it as a “god like” characteristic.<sup>9</sup> These leaders have the ability to recognize potential and inspire others to innovate.<sup>10</sup> Creating positive emotion and an optimistic culture is what mindfulness accomplishes.<sup>11</sup> The creation of a positive atmosphere is much more powerful than the simple absence of negative emotion. The overall emotional characteristics of leaders allow them to shape organizational culture. Psychologists within the Swedish Defence University, Ohlsson and Larsson propose an organization emotion shaping theory that is rooted on the emotional

emotions and intelligent enough to recognize the different emotions of followers.<sup>12</sup> Mindfulness training provides a gateway into this type of leadership.

Leadership benefits are of great importance to the military, but further underscoring these benefits are task performance, decision making and resilience. Here, mindfulness training indicates several advantages, even extending to prevention of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Dr. Amishi Jha, a neuroscientist at the University of Miami, conducted extensive studies on the effect of mindfulness training on military members. Focus was placed on building cognitive resilience and assessing the performance of working memory.<sup>13</sup> Working memory is described as the mind’s ability to recall learned information and use it in the present moment. Failure to do so for soldiers can have dire consequences. A satellite guided bomb being dropped on American soldiers in Afghanistan, 2002 can be used as example. The joint terminal attack controller had just changed the batteries in their GPS system and through their working memory should have recalled that the coordinates were now displaying their own position and not the target.<sup>14</sup> Dr. Jha found that mindfulness training reduced the degradation of soldier’s working memory after being exposed to long stress intervals. Training the mind consistently to focus attention on the present made it more likely to perform correspondingly under stress. Similarly, psychiatrist Dr. Douglas Johnson and his research team from the University of California found that U.S. Marines given mindfulness training reacted and recovered more quickly during sessions of combat-stress training.<sup>15</sup>

Treating the effects of traumatizing moments is a challenge the military has struggled with for years. During an investigation into how mindfulness would benefit current clinical treatments of PTSD it was found that the training could aid soldiers in their ability to engage with treatments, reduce effects of triggers, accept symptoms easier, and increase the mind’s flexibility when addressing harmful flashbacks.<sup>16</sup> Further, it was noted that delivering this type of training to soldiers with PTSD through smartphone apps reached a larger base of affected personnel, breaching through the stigma of mental health issues.<sup>17</sup> The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has developed a mobile application ‘Mindfulness Coach’ aimed at providing this type of training to those suffering from PTSD. It is a user-friendly resource available to veterans and serving soldiers allowing them to conduct two to five minute sessions on their own with virtual instruction. The cognitive resilience benefits of mindfulness training further help prevent developing PTSD.<sup>18</sup>

Next to operations, militaries focus on training more than anything else, and the CAF is no different in this respect. Delivering training is an institutional challenge for financial and resource reasons. Mindfulness training offers several different approaches from classroom to smartphone, which should be explored for proper implementation.



Max Weber, the famous German political economist and sociologist.

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The aforementioned MBSR program is delivered as an eight-week package including formal instruction, usually in a group setting, with a one-day retreat, and daily homework. Techniques taught are body scanning and meditation. Another program, mindfulness in motion (MIM), allows for delivery of training during working hours and on-site.<sup>19</sup> U.S. military variants of the program include mindfulness-based mind fitness training (MMFT), Battlemind, and BOOT STRAP. MMFT is an eight-hour variant of MBSR and is contextualized for military personnel.<sup>20</sup> Battlemind and BOOT STRAP aim to defeat the conflicting nature of mindfulness training with military culture. The perception of silence and peacefulness is outlandish to most trained soldiers. Battlemind is a short training session (50 minutes) that boasts the topic ‘armor for you mind’ and has been proven effective in soldiers re-deploying from Iraq.<sup>21</sup> Techniques for practicing mindfulness are included. The BOOT STRAP program contrasts as an early introductory program directly into boot camp training. It consists of 45-minute classes per week and homework including a personnel log of time spent practicing mindfulness techniques.<sup>22</sup> The delivery of mindfulness training varies and is flexible which suits the competing demands of personnel and time resources often faced in military training.

The literature suggests that mindfulness is an emerging organizational management technique, particularly aimed at the well-being of employees with a goal to reducing turnover and human resource spending. Publicly, several tests and programs have been applied to the military context and overall show potential. The CAF must consider how mindfulness can be applied to the organization in a manner that is acceptable to soldiers, thus reaping full benefits of the training.

The benefits of mindfulness to CAF leadership are obvious. This stress reducing and attention focusing practice is like physical training for the mind. Military leaders consistently promote both physical and mental training, yet the execution of mental training is not as clear to soldiers as lifting weights at the gym. Mindfulness provides a practical approach to this type of training. In addition, military leadership is burdened with responsibility in and out of operations. The culture of taking on this burden gets heavier and heavier as the leader rises through the ranks, creating senior leaders who may not be operating at peak potential, whether they believe it or not. The avoidance of taking care of oneself is common among military leaders, they put their subordinate’s well-being before their own. Mindfulness offers the mental well-being option for leaders, which in turn benefits followers as the leader’s attention becomes more focussed and decisions more appropriate. Recognizing this cognitive aspect of leadership allows what Ohlsson and Larsson suggested, the ability to increase positive emotions throughout the organization. A more positive unit is therefore more motivated on a daily basis. The necessary requirement of mindfulness training for leadership is to promote and educate its use and make it more normal within the organization. Leading by example through mindfulness will have a strong effect on whether soldiers believe it works or not.

The literature strongly supports that mindfulness reduces stress. Soldiers are subjected to stresses through training, operations and frequent relocation of their families. Mindfulness will provide a low resource tool to help with these stresses. Soldiers exposed to mindfulness training self-assessed as being better able to cope with the stress of deployment and family separation.<sup>23</sup> Overall, work-life balance improved. The CAF has realized through its concerted effort as an organization to promote resiliency that it will benefit from more balanced soldiers in countless ways. Mindfulness adds to this effort and generates more benefit at the grass roots tactical level through better attentiveness to performance in battle, and through better shielding of soldiers from mental injuries. The timing of mindfulness training is critical, as the resiliency advantages serve soldiers better than attempting treatment for PTSD later due to the risk of reawakening trauma during practice.<sup>24</sup> Because mindfulness is simple to practice, even in austere conditions, soldiers can use it to cope with stressful events when needed, ‘kick-starting’ the return to normal mental health and remaining in the fight.

Implementing training is always a challenge. Evidence suggests that training models must be seen as legitimate by students for them to fully engage in the training. The CAF tends to create online checklist training items that are likely not absorbed at the level mindfulness should be. Practicing mindfulness will benefit members best if it is understood to be normal procedure like



“I wish I knew this earlier on!” across the leadership, motivating them to support further programs and education at the lower levels of the organization.

Second, a training model that is low in resources and flexible is best suited for the already training intensive schedule of soldiers in the CAF. A study is recommended to assess the openness of soldiers to receiving mindfulness training including how it is delivered and a review of all popular culture delivery of information through mobile applications. Attention should be paid to the scalability of training programs to support austere and challenging

physical training. Indoctrination of mental training like with the BOOT STRAP model is likely best to achieve this. Until enough generations of soldiers grow through the organization with this training other efforts will need to be in place to educate current ranks and leadership. In delivery of training, the smartphone has become the gateway for information among younger generations. This must be considered as an option for reasons of maintaining legitimacy, ease of access, and minimizing resources. The positive aspect of smartphone delivery is that the literature on mindfulness training through this method supports its use. In fact, this delivery method of training was demonstrated to be just as effective as an eight-week in-class course.<sup>25</sup>

environments. The specific techniques in practicing mindfulness should be reviewed for suitability, particularly those noted as higher performing for soldiers such as transcendental meditation.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, part of receiving support from soldiers for the training requires their opinions as well. Focus groups that are comprehensive of all ranks and trades should be held to include all members of the CAF in the development of a program. Simply consulting experts will not suffice, but rather building a program from the bottom up with expert advice and guidance will yield better overall implementation.

Implementing mindfulness into the military lifestyle is a good step forward, but it must be taken carefully. There are several complex aspects to applying this practice to everyday military life.

First, the leaders who hold a sense of loneliness due to ignoring their own welfare must be addressed. It is recommended that a training program focussed on senior leadership burn-out and work-life balance be implemented to prove at the highest level that mindfulness training works. This program would create a sense of



## Conclusion

The *mental* drilling of soldiers is just as important for the CAF as is the discipline taught through *physical* drill. This mental drilling has often been accomplished through challenging and tough training scenarios, including sleep deprivation and unflagging battle rhythms. Mindfulness literature suggests that training the practice of focussing one's attention will achieve the benefits of mental performance under stress, with the added ability to recover quickly in the midst of chaos and shock. Further, evidence shows that those practicing mindfulness enjoy their jobs more and have less strain on the organization with respect to health issues. In summary, leaders learn to better care for themselves, and in turn, provide better care to their subordinates. Soldiers become more attentive while performing critical tasks and better balanced between their work and family. The training of mindfulness has potential to be adaptable to the military schedule and a part of its existing culture. Moreover, the CAF remains in-line with emerging successful organizational practices in the private sector.

Through inclusive research of the implementation of mindfulness training, the CAF can approach this culture change appropriately. As literature continues to expand regarding mindfulness and large organizations begin to report on the paybacks and areas of improvement, the CAF can adapt to best practices and remain on the forward edge of this topic. In an era where retention is difficult, and an employment where the consequences of mistakes are dire, bettering the well-being of soldiers individually must become a top priority.

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## NOTES

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