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A New Component of US Military Combat Preparedness: Meditation

McLean, VA – May 8, 2012 – Between 2004 and 2008, suicide rates among U.S. Army personnel increased by 80 percent, according to a study published in the medical journal *Injury Prevention*. Prior to committing suicide, many military members completed tours of duty in Iraq or Afghanistan and suffered from anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and substance-abuse disorders.

In response to this serious health problem, efforts have been made to shore up the delivery of mental health services to returning veterans. But is there anything that can be done *prior to deployment* to help “vaccinate” soldiers from the damaging effects of extreme or prolonged stress of combat? One exciting approach is being taken by the Mind-Fitness Training Institute (MFTI), a non-profit organization located in Alexandria, Virginia. MFTI trains soldiers and civilian emergency responders in mindfulness meditation, a practice which has been shown to increase one’s resiliency in the face of significant physical, mental and emotional challenges.

According to Dr. Gary Kaplan, founder and director of the Kaplan Center for Integrative Medicine, which specializes in treating people suffering from chronic pain, “A growing body of medical research proves that meditation not only modifies brain function, it can actually change the way we experience physical and emotional pain. We are seeing how mindfulness meditation can help people bounce back after highly stressful situations, thus decreasing the occurrence of PTSD.”

What is mindfulness meditation? It is an exercise in awareness which tunes into the flow of breath. Your attention focuses on present thoughts and feelings, without reacting to or judging it. One of the goals of mindfulness meditation is to allow you to accept experiences and memories you find difficult, rather than to continue struggling to get away from them. There is much clinical evidence that meditating can help improve depression and increase one’s overall sense of well-being by providing a method of letting go of fearful thoughts and decreasing emotional reactivity. Dr. Kaplan adds that “mindfulness training can improve attention, increase immune function, and produce brain changes that support more effective handling of one’s emotions under stress. A recent study has also shown meditation to produce changes in regions of the brain involved in learning and memory, regulation of one’s emotions, and self-awareness. This new study is very exciting because it suggests that meditation may be able to help heal the brains of people who suffer with chronic pain, depression, and anxiety disorders.”

Elizabeth Stanley Ph.D., the founder of MFTI, has conducted studies with military personnel that show regular practice of mindfulness meditation corresponded with decreases in perceived stress and the development of fewer functional impairments in high stress contexts.

Dr. Kaplan adds, “While mindfulness meditation certainly helps those who suffer from chronic pain or who work in high stress situations, it is a practice that can benefit virtually everyone.” For these reasons Dr. Kaplan encourages anyone, whether you are a member of the military, an emergency responder, a caretaker, or someone suffering from a chronic pain condition, to look at the research and embrace meditation as an integral component of your own healing process. If you would like to learn more about the Mind Fitness Training Institute or become a supporter, visit www.mind-fitness-training-institute.com/index.html

About Dr. Gary Kaplan and The Kaplan Center for Integrative Medicine: The Center's founder and medical director is Dr. Gary Kaplan. Board-certified in Family Medicine, Pain Medicine and Medical Acupuncture, Dr. Kaplan is also a Clinical Associate Professor at Georgetown University School of Medicine, and he has served as a consultant at the National Institutes of Medicine (NIH). To learn more about The Kaplan Center for Integrative Medicine, visit the website at www.kaplanclinic.com.

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