

Blending Power with Force: The Power of Mindfulness and its relevance to the Australian Defence Force

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Introduction

The Commander of the coalition forces in Iraq, US Army Major General Walter Piatt, had the job of walking the tightrope every minute of his role. On the one hand, there was the relentless pursuit of enemies, while on the other lay the delicate diplomacy with tribal leaders to restore peace. At his disposal, he had the use of extensive force using a trove of modern weaponry and streams of tech-generated data.

In his own words, Major General Piatt stated that his best decisions relied on a tool so ancient yet replete with power. He often began daily operations by breathing deliberately, slack-jawed, staring steadily at a palm tree. Some may describe the practice as mindfulness, while others might call it meditation.¹ Ultimately, this practice allowed him to become grounded in the moment by creating a deep sense of present-moment awareness.

Mindfulness is a time-honoured concept in many spiritual and religious traditions. Over the last 40 years, western psychology has started to recognise many benefits of mindfulness training, and it has become a tool used in resilience training as well as an effective intervention in a range of psychiatric disorders.² The simple definition relates to three aspects. First, mindfulness is a process of awareness, not thinking. It involves paying attention to experience 'in the moment' instead of being caught up with random, 'fleeting' thoughts. Second, it involves a particular aspect of openness and curiosity, even if the experience is unpleasant. Third, mindfulness involves flexibility of attention: the ability to consciously direct, broaden or focus attention on different aspects of experience.

In this article we attempt to delve further into the relevance and potential application of mindfulness for the Australian Defence Force (ADF).

Challenges for the evolving ADF

The words 'employability' and 'deployability' are familiar to anyone exposed to a military environment. These terms are used as surrogate markers to indicate an individual's readiness to function efficiently and effectively in the field and for the ADF, this is paramount. For an individual to succeed in the field, they require more than just rigorous technical and physical preparation; they also depend heavily on mental resilience.³ As far as the physical preparedness of its members is concerned, the bar is already set high upon entry. The processes and assessments at intake have already separated the physically fit from the unfit. However, matters pertaining to mental health are subtle and create somewhat of a sticking point. It is a matter of ongoing and ever-increasing concern that members of the Defence Force are reporting significant mental health issues despite having such high standards of physical fitness. Depression, anxiety, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), drugs and alcohol dependence are just some of the more prevalent mental health challenges that face members of the ADF. However, the cause for most concern is the high rates of Veteran suicide and suicidality. According to the latest report by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, the rate of suicide was highest in ex-serving males who were 24% more likely to die by suicide than non-serving Australian males.⁴

Despite the ADF's best efforts and intentions, mental health and resilience remains an area of ongoing concern. A sound body is not fully competent without a sound mind; this is where mindfulness warrants greater attention.

In recent years, mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) have experienced exponential growth in research development. There have been multiple systemic reviews and meta-analyses

that have demonstrated the benefits of MBIs as a complementary adjunctive intervention for veterans with PTSD and other psychiatric disorders.⁵⁻⁷

Mindfulness in the military setting

Mindfulness has been practised for centuries, derived from the Buddhist practice of *sati*.⁸ The health benefits of mindfulness became more recognised in the late 1970s through work done by Jon Kabat Zin. He started this practice at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center to help patients with chronic pain that had been labelled as 'hopeless' by their treating specialists. Jon Kabat Zin firmly believed that patients had to be deliberately involved in their own healing. Subsequent studies have revealed significant health benefits in many fields for those practising mindfulness regularly.^{9,10}

Several scientific studies have since been delivering high-quality outcomes suggesting consistent efficacy of this relatively 'benign' practice for physical health and the development of mental abilities such as better focus, better decision making and resilience. Specific to the military, a study published in the American Journal of Psychiatry highlighted the beneficial role played by mindfulness-based training in building resilience in the US Marines undertaken prior to deployment.⁴ Johnson et al. demonstrated that marines who participated in 8 weeks of mindfulness-based mind fitness training showed enhanced interoceptive awareness and improved response to and recovery from stressful training.¹¹

The strategic benefits derived from the practice of mindfulness are not limited to the scope of assisting small groups of elite soldiers to accomplish their mission, as was highlighted in a study by Fraher et al.¹² The authors describe the term 'mindfulness in action' as a skill that encapsulates 'comfort with uncertainty' and 'positive orientation towards failure', attributes that can benefit commanders and soldiers alike, in any situation. This ability to make better quality decisions considering situational concerns and priorities is a skill that can be developed. In a world full of distractions where our attention span has been gradually shrinking, many decisions we make are reactionary. They are reactions and not responses. Responses require thoughtful consideration and situational awareness, and this is where the role of mindfulness comes in. Anxiety, depression, PTSD and addictions are reactions in a broader sense and warrant a more integrated approach in their handling.

In addition, mindfulness has been shown to improve leadership, team building and communication effectiveness. Allowing military leaders to develop

situational awareness, including understanding themselves, their emotions, their blind spots and their ability to be empathetic, enhances their ability to make more impactful and meaningful decisions. This also directly influences their ability to communicate effectively and build team morale. Arendt et al. showed a positive link between leaders who practised mindfulness and the wellbeing of their followers.¹³

The current consensus within the military is that mental resilience is a dynamic state comprised of different components that can change depending on the situation, context and individual, all of which can be cultivated through appropriate training.¹⁴ Current models of mental resilience training focus on developing the core skills of emotional, cognitive and behavioural control, explicitly in a military and operationally relevant context right from the initial stages of a soldier's career. An empirical model was initially trialled in the British Army between 2014 and 2016 as a framework to develop a Mental Resilience Training syllabus. Seven basic psychological skills were taught to soldiers, including goal setting, dealing with negative thoughts, positive self-talk, emotional regulation, arousal reduction by understanding the physiology of anxiety and fear, pain tolerance by accepting and embracing pain, and mental rehearsal and positive imagery. Initial evaluations of this training were extremely positive, and it was subsequently rolled out across the entire British Army Recruitment and Training Division.¹⁵

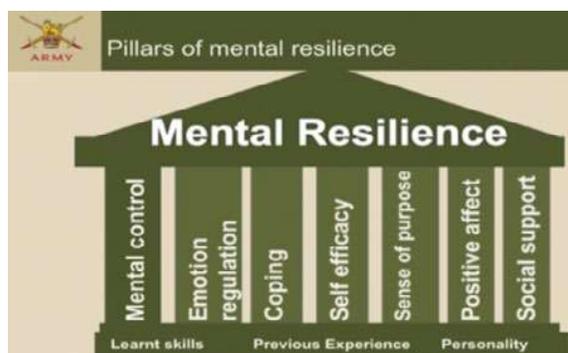


Figure 1. Psychological model of mental resilience¹⁵

Delivering mindfulness to the ADF: challenges and possibilities

'It's not what you learn, It's the way you learn it that matters'

JR Rim

Defence organisations across the globe are giving serious consideration to incorporating mindfulness

for their members. Major General Piatt has reasonable grounds to believe that practising mindfulness helps develop new ways of readiness for the forces. He referred to this training as doing 'mental push-ups' for developing the resilience 'muscle'.¹ Multiple studies have examined the impact of mindfulness training in managing prolonged and repetitive stress during deployment, showing that even short periods of mindfulness training can reduce performance lapses and enhance a soldier's ability to manage stress.^{16,17} Mindfulness can be taught relatively quickly, with allocations made for self-practice and refreshers. COVID-19 has unveiled the possibility of learning such skills in a hybrid fashion, either face-to-face or online.

It is acknowledged that the ADF has been receptive to mindfulness-based training. The Royal Australian Airforce (RAAF) have trialled corporate-based mindfulness training as part of resilience training, and HQ Forces Command has commenced a weekly lunchtime mindfulness drop-in session. Australia's Special Operations Command have also incorporated a mindfulness module in their Human Performance Optimisation Program as has the Royal Australian Navy through its Navy People Wellbeing Program.³ The feedback has been reassuring, setting the stage for a wider application of this tool. Ultimately, delivering mindfulness training to the broader defence force organisation in a structured and measured manner would allow all members to benefit from enhanced interpersonal integration and collaboration.

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