



BUILDING MENTAL RESILIENCY: MINDFUL OF MINDFULNESS

Major Benjamin Siversky

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Major Benjamin Siversky

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AIM

1. The aim of this paper is to recommend to the Commander Canadian Army (CCA), that mindfulness training (MT), described as “a mental mode characterized by attention to present-moment experience without judgement, elaboration, or emotional reactivity”,¹ be introduced into the Canadian Army (CA) training system. The recommendation is grounded in both academic research, and CA doctrine; addresses the requirements of the current and future operating environment and is presented in recognition of the current CA staffing, and tempo challenges. In total it presents an opportunity to further prepare CA members for all that stands before them, in defence of their nation, and her interests.

INTRODUCTION

2. It is no secret that the current and future operating environment that the CA soldier and officer faces is filled with daunting challenges that will demand their very best. Whether in Canada’s Defence Policy, Strong Secure Engaged, or the Canadian Army modernization strategy, Advancing with Purpose, the message is clear, the CA will face complexity, uncertainty, a rapidly evolving technological battlefield, and an adversary who operates in both the conventional and non-conventional space. When coupled with a staffing crisis, along with an operational tempo that sees no abatement, it is no wonder that the Government of Canada has placed people, “at the core of everything”² and made a commitment to ensure Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) members and their families have what they need to become physically and psychologically resilient.³

3. Physical resiliency has always been a central tenant of the military, but it is only recently that a greater emphasis and focus has been placed on mental resilience. In fact, the CAF, alongside its western partners, has made great strides in this field and now boasts a robust mental health and resiliency program in its Road To Mental Readiness (R2MR) program. However, when considering those challenges discussed above, it behooves the CAF to continue to seek new ways to help its members strengthen their mental health and resiliency. One such way is through MT, “an evidence-based intervention to support participants’ innate resources to cope with stress in life.”⁴ As such,

¹ Yeh-Hung, Chen Fa-Chung, Chiu Yao-Nan, Lin Yu-Lin Chang, “The Effectiveness of Mindfulness Based-Stress-Reduction for Military Cadets on Perceived Stress.” *Psychological Reports*, Vol. 125, No 4 (2022): 1916-1917

² “Strong, Secured, Engaged: Canada’s Defence Policy,” *Government of Canada*, 2017, <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/dnd-mdn/documents/reports/2018/strong-secure-engaged/canada-defence-policy-report.pdf>. (accessed 12 Feb 2024). 19

³ Ibid 12

⁴ Yeh-Hung, Fa-Chung, Yao-Nan, Yu-Lin Chang, “The Effectiveness of Mindfulness Based-Stress-Reduction for Military Cadets on Perceived Stress.” 1916

the CA should implement MT to augment the CAF's R2MR program, and further enhance the mental resiliency of its members. To demonstrate this position, the paper will 1) elaborate on the demands placed on the CA member, 2) discuss the international recognition that mental resiliency training has achieved, and 3) why MT would be a positive addition to CA mental resiliency training. Before concluding with recommendations for the CCA, this paper will look at the limitations or difficulties associated with implementing a mindfulness program.

DISCUSSION

4. As mentioned the CAF is facing a staffing crisis, in that it is short 16,500 regular force members, out of a total strength of 115,000 (both regular and reserve force), an almost 15% deficit.⁵ Moreover, it is also working its way out of a culture crisis where a recent survey noted 1,960 regular force members reported being sexually assaulted in the previous year.⁶ Added to this are the regular stressors of army life: deployments, both short notice and forecasted, tasks away from home, and the mental and physical stress that result from conducting army exercises and operations, i.e. of a high intensity and sustained over long periods. Indeed, military personnel are "at increased risk for post-traumatic stress disorder and stress-related burnout."⁷ Specifically in Canada the CAF's international deployments over recent years have "further contributed to burnout and exhaustion,"⁸ which have further exacerbated personnel issues and ultimately challenged its readiness.

5. At the very time that the CAF is facing these challenges, the CA is also entering a new age of great power competition,⁹ facing peer adversaries such as Russia and China¹⁰ who employ tactics and strategies both above and below the level of armed conflict. All the while it continues to deal with violent extremism, national disasters, capacity building, and deterrence operations. Moreover, to maintain operational effectiveness, all of this is now to be conducted in a pan-domain environment¹¹ where the CA member must respect, understand, and engage with all 5 domains of the battlespace, land, air,

⁵ Scott Taylor, "Canada's military closing out the year on a low note." Hill Times, Dec 18, 2023, <https://www.hilltimes.com/story/2023/12/18/canadas-military-closing-out-the-year-on-a-low-note/406439/>. (accessed 12 Feb 2024).

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Emma C. Wolfe, Andrew G. Thompson, Tad T. Bruny , F. Caroline Davis, Daniel Grover, Zachary Haga, Thomas Doyle, Anjali Goyal, Hannah Shaich & Heather L. Urry, "Ultra-brief training in cognitive reappraisal or mindfulness reduces anxiety and improves motor performance efficiency under stress." *Anxiety, Stress, & Coping*, Vol. 36, No 5 (9 Jan 2023): 555

⁸ Irina Goldenberg and Nancy Otis, "Canadian Armed Forces Reconstitution: The Critical Role of Personnel Retention." *Canadian Defence Policy in Theory and Practice Vol 2, Canada and International Affairs*, (Aug 2023): 30

⁹ "National Defence in a Time of Global Reordering: Strategic Overview," *Government of Canada*, 2022, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/transition-materials/mnd-transition-material-2021-dnd/tab16-strategic-overview.html>. (accessed 14 Feb 2024)

¹⁰ "Pan-Domain Force Employment Concept", *Canadian Armed Forces*, 2023. 5

¹¹ Ibid 5

maritime, cyber, and space, (without forgetting the informational space)¹² while maintaining literacy with rapidly evolving technology. At its simplest, this means the CA member must be prepared to deal with “an increasing rate of change in the operating environment.”¹³ As the PFEC notes, conflict remains a “human activity against a human adversary but with increased demands upon those involved, particularly in a cognitive sense.”¹⁴

6. All told the CA soldier or officer is in a tenuous position, asked to balance the ever-increasing demands of their trade against their individual needs or the needs of their families. What is also clear is that managing this balance can evince negative symptoms regarding mental health and mental abilities. However, this reality is not lost on western militaries, and appreciating their members are their greatest asset against a complex and ultra-dynamic conflict environment, numerous militaries have implemented several comprehensive mental resiliency training programmes.

7. Armed with a fulsome appreciation of the importance of guarding mental health and building mental resiliency for their members, western militaries wasted no time in developing and implementing mental resiliency programs. One such example is the U.K. Army’s Mental Resiliency Training (MRT) program, developed from a “large meta-analysis study by the Defence Human Capability and Science Technology Centre.”¹⁵ With the MRT the U.K. Army integrated its mental resiliency training directly into its larger training program, thus demonstrating to its soldiers how to train “the psychological skills necessary to stay present, aware, willing, clear and focused.”¹⁶ By focusing on and integrating “the principles of emotional, cognitive and behavioural control” into realistic military training, the U.K. Army has enhanced their soldiers’ ability to regulate stress, manage their cognitive control, manage their emotions, and build self-confidence.¹⁷ These skills were delivered over the course of the Combat Infantryman’s Course (CIC), which is a 28-week basic level course for recruits, and were augmented by numerous training aides, such as a mobile app, handbooks, and videos.¹⁸ As a result of these efforts the U.K. Army has seen “tangible improvements” in their infantry recruits and continues with the program to this day.

8. Not surprisingly Canada also has a mental resiliency program, R2MR, which is quite robust and integrated throughout a member’s career. R2MR recognizes that it is the military’s job to prepare its members psychologically “for the various challenges and

¹² Ibid 15

¹³ Ibid 24

¹⁴ Ibid 32

¹⁵ Duncan Precious, and A. Lindsay, “Mental Resiliency Training.” *J R Med Corps*, 2019. 106

¹⁶ Ibid 106

¹⁷ Ibid 106

¹⁸ Ibid 108

scenarios they may face in a given situation.”¹⁹ It is a program that emphasises 1) the Performance Cycle (preparation, performance, and recovery; 2) the Big Four +, (“activation control, visualisation, goal setting, and self-talk”)²⁰; and 3) the mental health continuum, which allows the member to self-regulate and determine if they should seek support. The program is delivered throughout a member’s career; in basic training, in numerous leadership training courses, and in occupation specific training.²¹ There is also pre and post deployment specific training, training that can be delivered to the whole family, and professional development sessions that can be delivered to units.²² All in, the R2MR is a comprehensive suite of courses that is designed to “improve well-being and short-term performance, while mitigating any negative long-term mental health problems” for both CAF members and their families.²³

9. There are numerous other examples of military mental resiliency training programs, such as the U.S. Army’s 10-day Master Resilience Training Course,²⁴ and the Australian Army’s BattleSMART (Self-Management and Resilience Training)²⁵, but have these mental resiliency training programs reached the pinnacle of what can be done? Recent studies into the effectiveness of MT would suggest otherwise, and as this paper argues, MT is a perfect complement for contemporary mental resiliency training programmes.

10. As more and more attention has turned towards building mental resiliency to bolster operational effectiveness, some militaries have begun exploring and implementing MT. A commonly referred to MT practice is Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), an 8 week course which includes practicing yoga, meditation, body-scan meditation, and mindful walking and eating.²⁶ It is from this practice that the U.S. military created its Mindfulness-Based Mind Fitness Training (MMFT), which comprises of 24 hours of MT spread out over 8 weeks, all of which is adapted to military specific skills and requirements.²⁷ Since 2010 a number of studies on MMFT have been conducted with the following results; U.S. Marines preparing to deploy to Afghanistan demonstrated an ability to recover more quickly from combat training (than those who did not receive MMFT); soldiers deploying to Iraq who had received MMFT “significantly corresponded to more positive emotions and few negative emotions,”; and

¹⁹ “The Road to Mental Readiness.” *Government of Canada*, 2023, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/benefits-military/health-support/road-to-mental-readiness.html>. (accessed 10 Feb, 2024).

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Marius Orhon, “The Leader’s Guide to Building Resilient Soldiers.” *U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, NCO Journal*, September 2020. 3

²⁵ “Smart Soldier Presents Human Dimension Volume 1.” Australian Army, 2017. 32

²⁶ Yeh-Hung, Fa-Chung, Yao-Nan, Yu-Lin Chang, “The Effectiveness of Mindfulness Based-Stress-Reduction for Military Cadets on Perceived Stress.” 1917

²⁷ Ibid 1917

for a group of soldiers already deployed to Afghanistan, MMFT was demonstrated to have a restraining effect on “stress-induced attentional lapses.”²⁸ In another study conducted with military cadets, a tailored MBSR program was delivered, and found that the MT was able to significantly reduce the cadets’ “perceived stress.”²⁹

11. Overall the evidence demonstrates that MT on military members can result in “better cognitive performance”³⁰, improvements in “mental toughness”³¹, and can decrease depression, anxiety, and workplace stress, while increasing “emotional regulation.”³² In another study on military members, the link between stress, depression and hopelessness was emphasized, with the crux of the study positing that MT was an effective way to manage all three.³³ Now consider all this in an operational context. In *Advancing with Purpose: The Canadian Army Modernization Strategy*, a document designed to guide the Canadian army into the immediate future, an emphasis is placed on the requirement to operate in a dispersed manner, “the Canadian Army will employ adaptive dispersion – the ability to operate widely dispersed yet retain the ability to aggregate quickly.”³⁴ This necessitates that more and more CAF soldiers and officers will be expected to operate further away from their CoC, in likely degraded communication environments, under extremely physically and mentally demanding situations. These are the exact scenarios that induce high levels of stress and anxiety, and where MT would have a positive impact.

12. In *Land Power*, the CA’s land doctrine publication, it details the army’s fighting power, upon which all else depends, and how it is built upon three components, physical, moral, and intellectual.³⁵ According to CA doctrine, the intellectual component is made up of education, doctrine, as well the perception and an understanding of the operational environment³⁶, all of which will need to be recalled and applied over periods of sustained stress (physical, and mental), and high intensity, and as such necessitates mental acuity. As Gen Mattis puts it “the most important six inches on the battlefield is between your ears.”³⁷ What he is referring to is the requirement for “service members to be mentally fit

²⁸ Ibid 1918

²⁹ Ibid 1918

³⁰ Thomas H. Nassif, Amanda L. Adrian, Ian A. Gutierrez, Alexis C. Dixon, Scott L. Rogers, Amishi P. Jha, and Amy B. Adler, “Optimizing Performance and Mental Skills With Mindfulness-Based Attention Training: Two Field Studies With Operational Units.” *Military Medicine*, Vol. 188, April 2023. 761

³¹ Ibid 762

³² Kelly R. M. Ihme, and Peggy Sundstrom, “The mindful shield: The effects of MT on resilience and leadership in military leaders.” *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care*, Vol. 57, 2021. 676

³³ Yoojin Jang, Jung-Hee Ha, and Juliet Jue, “Examining the Moderating Effect of Mindfulness on the Relationship between Soldiers’ Perceived Stress and Hopelessness.” *Sustainability*, Vol. 13, 2021. 6

³⁴ “Advancing with Purpose: The Canadian Army Modernization Strategy.” *Government of Canada, Canadian Armed Forces*, 2020. 15

³⁵ “Land Operations: B-GL-300-001/FP-001.” *Government of Canada, Canadian Armed Forces*, 2008. 4-1

³⁶ Ibid 4-2

³⁷ Nassif, Adrian, Gutierrez, Dixon, Rogers, Jha, and Adler, “Optimizing Performance and Mental Skills With Mindfulness-Based Attention Training: Two Field Studies With Operational Units.” 761

to perform optimally in high-stress occupations.”³⁸ If the mind is the most important tool the CA member has, it behooves the CA to use every available means to develop it.

13. Leadership, paramount to successful CA operations, whether practiced formally through the Chain of Command, or informally through Mission Command, is another area where MT has demonstrated positive results. In a study conducted with the Kansas Air National Guard, researchers found that MT led to “greater transformational leadership behaviours.”³⁹ The study reminded the reader that a leader who is unable to manage their stress effectively will likely “manifest poor outcomes such as anxiety, depression, burnout” and ultimately “create disorder in the workplace.”⁴⁰

14. It is fair to say that fitting MT into the schedule of a CA member (recruit or trade-qualified), would face certain challenges, be it logistical or scheduling, as was found in a U.S. Army study on MT.⁴¹ Specifically it found special consideration needed to be paid to “program structure, duration, and modality” and to build programs with “the hierarchical structure of the military in mind.”⁴² It also suggested that having military members deliver the program may be more beneficial. However, the MBAT highlights how these challenges can be overcome, wherein they create a bespoke program to match the 8 hours of required classroom training to the training audiences schedule and use a ‘train-the-trainer’ method, “thus negating the need for specialized employees to deliver the course. Regardless the difficulties to be mitigated, it is this paper’s belief that the investment up front, challenging as it may be, will pay dividends for the institution in the form of more mentally resilient CA members.

CONCLUSION

15. As the CA enters a new age of pan-domain conflict, defined by complexity, great power competition, rapidly evolving technology, and conflict above and below a threshold of violence, it also faces a staffing crisis and an unrelenting tempo of operations. To empower CA members to navigate this space comprehensive mental resiliency training is delivered, but the CA can do better. Implementing MT to augment R2MR will not only further equip CA members to ‘stay in the fight’ but most importantly, excel while doing it.

³⁸ Ibid 761

³⁹ Ihme and Sundstrom, “The mindful shield: The effects of MT on resilience and leadership in military leaders.” 676

⁴⁰ Ibid 675

⁴¹ Kimberley A. Hepner, Erika Litvin Bloom, Sydne Newberry, Jessica L. Sousa, Karen Chan Osilla, Marika Booth, Armenda Bialas, and Carolyn M. Rutter, “The Impact of Mindfulness Meditation Programs on Performance Related Outcomes”. *RAND Corporation*, 2022. ix

⁴² Ibid ix

RECOMMENDATION

16. Trial a MT program, structured along the U.S. MMFT or MBAT model for an infantry company (light or mechanized), to determine suitability for the CA at large.
17. Develop a MT education program to raise awareness amongst CA soldiers about the benefits of Mindfulness, and how to practice it at home. This can be in the form of pamphlets, posters, or presentations by experts in the field. An example of this is in the Australian Army's publication 'Smart Soldier Presents: Human Dimension', where they outline the benefits of MT and how to practice it.⁴³
18. Engage with Defence Research and Development Canada (DRDC) to develop app-based tools that can augment MT by teaching and supporting Mindfulness practices to CA members.

⁴³ "Smart Soldier Presents Human Dimension Volume 1." 14

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