

# Integrating individual and collective mindfulness in a high-stress military setting

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A new study suggests that a "blended" eight-week mindfulness program that adds team mindfulness training (TMT) to a shortened version of the mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) course for individual

mindfulness is just as effective as the standard MBSR course alone. It may even offer further benefit by increasing collective stress management skills.

Led by Dr. Jutta Tobias Mortlock, Co-director of the Center for Excellence in Mindfulness Research (CEMR) at City, University of London, in collaboration with Dr. Alison Carter, Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of Employment Studies (IES), the study bridges the gap between the well-established body of research supporting the benefits of individual mindfulness practice, epitomized by the eight-week MBSR course, and the burgeoning science on team and collective mindfulness. MBSR has been shown to reduce [stress](#), anxiety, depression, and pain. Collective mindfulness is strongly linked to organizational resilience.

The study was conducted in a high-stress military context: military officers in training in the British Army and in the Royal Navy, and was supported by the Defense Science and Technology Laboratory (DSTL). A mixed method approach was used that consisted of two research phases.

Twenty-three junior officers-to-be from the British Army participated in a pre-pilot study which trialed the newly designed team mindfulness training (TMT) intervention: half the time was dedicated to training participants in individual stress management skills using the MBSR curriculum, with the remainder focusing on training collective stress management skills using the principles of collective mindfulness.

A larger pilot study, in which 105 Royal Navy officer cadets took part, then compared the TMT intervention against the standard eight-week MBSR course. The effect of participating in either [intervention group](#) was measured by assessing individual resilience, collective mindfulness, and individual performance. While the two former measures were self-

reported, the last was assessed using an objective computer-test of working memory, as a proxy for performance at work. All measures were taken at three time points: directly before, directly after and two months after the intervention. Participants also took part in semi-structured interviews.

The study found that participating in both intervention groups led to significantly increased individual resilience and working memory, with no significant difference between the two groups.

While neither group showed statistically significant improvements in collective mindfulness over time, the TMT group experienced a near-significant collective mindfulness increase after participating in the training.

In addition, results from analyses of the interviews suggest that participants in the TMT group seem more able to report that they had learned to manage difficult work stress collectively. Most notably, however, only individuals from the TMT group (and none from the MBSR group) indicated they were able to apply their newly learned MBSR skills to stressful work challenges. This suggests that a collectively mindful team atmosphere supported the application of individual stress management skills when it really mattered.

The authors suggest that the study opens up ground for follow-up research that may help address recently reported counterintuitive effects of individually-focused workplace mindfulness, such as lower work motivation after brief periods of mindful meditation.

They also stress that this study brings back the prosocial orientation to mindfulness practice that may have been eclipsed by the more recent mindfulness-as-self-help movement. This prosocial aspiration is a core tenet of mindfulness traditions: to generate transformative capacity to

overcome stress and suffering in oneself as well as for all.

First author of the study, Dr. Jutta Tobias Mortlock, says that their "intervention considers mindfulness as a team sport. Combining individual with collective mindfulness makes mindfulness training more powerful. And offering mindfulness practices to organizations that stretch beyond individually-focused meditation helps extend the transformative potential of mindfulness for organizations."

Dr. Alison Carter, principal investigator of the study and co-author of its publication, says that "this work shifts the needle from self-focused mindfulness towards creating a mindful culture in workplaces. This is both helpful and practical because when people at work look out for each other, then stress at work becomes a collective responsibility rather than something that needs to be shouldered by individuals in isolation of others. And we know that managing stress collectively is more effective than managing stress alone."

The study is published in *Frontiers in Psychology*.

**More information:** Jutta Tobias Mortlock et al, Extending the Transformative Potential of Mindfulness Through Team Mindfulness Training, Integrating Individual With Collective Mindfulness, in a High-Stress Military Setting, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.867110](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.867110)

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