Meet the Experts Bringing Mindfulness to the Military

The first-ever International Mindfulness in Defence Symposium brings together researchers, teachers, and military leaders to explore how mindfulness can support resilience and wisdom for service members.

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This month, military leaders from around the world will meet for a first-of-a-kind virtual symposium to share how they’ve been using mindfulness within their formations, and to learn from each other. They’ll hear from some leading mindfulness experts.
neuroscientist and professor of psychology at the University of Miami. For the past 15 years she has been researching how to best promote resilience in high-stress cohorts—such as those who serve in the military—using contemplative and mind training techniques that strengthen the brain’s attention networks. Major Burgess, a squadron leader with 30 years of military service including tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, has been offering courses aimed at integrating mindfulness into the existing culture of physical training within Defence for a decade. For his work in this area, in 2020 he was awarded one of the UK’s highest honors—the Most Excellent Order Of The British Empire (MBE). Mindful spoke with Dr. Amishi Jha and Major Pat Burgess about the symposium and about the role mindfulness can play for service members.

Mindful: What is this symposium about?

Major Pat Burgess: The International Mindfulness in Defence Symposium is an opportunity for nations to collaborate, to share best practice and to hear what others are doing around mindfulness. When it comes to mindfulness in active duty and veteran populations, there’s lots of information and good work around mindfulness for psychological illness for disorders such as PTSD and suicidality. While this is a worthy and growing effort, it is not the focus of this event. This symposium’s focus is about keeping people fit—it’s about keeping service members holistically fit and making sure that they understand that they own that fitness. We’ve put together some phenomenal speakers to talk about how, on a strategic level, mindfulness can be implemented, research on the benefits of mindfulness for performance and optimized wellness, and then breaking it down into the individual countries for them to convey what they’re actually doing with mindfulness. Together, we’re keen to share notes on successes, lessons learned, and how can we bring this all together and take the next steps forward. The UK Ministry of Defence is honored to host this event and has been pleased with the international interest in this topic.

Mindful: Amishi, why was it important to you to be involved in this conference?

Dr. Amishi Jha: Back in 2018, I was invited to the first ever meeting at the UK Parliament on mindfulness for military, policing, and emergency services. It was a great opportunity to meet UK military leaders, who took note of the growing evidence base regarding the utility of mindfulness training for service members. In 2019, at a NATO meeting in Berlin convened to discuss military wellness and effectiveness, I was asked t
have been actively working with not only the US Army and Special Operations Forces, but with the New Zealand Defence Force and the Royal Australian Navy on mindfulness-based programs. All of these various pieces were the seeds that made me quite enthusiastic in collaborating with Major Burgess to organize this groundbreaking symposium. I had a growing sense that this could become an international effort of offering mindfulness training to support military service members to do their jobs with more discernment, clarity, and resilience.

Grassroots Mindfulness Training

**Mindful:** To what degree are defense departments around the world already using mindfulness in a formal way?

**Major Burgess:** I wouldn’t say that it’s at the forefront of the formal approach, certainly not in the UK. Individuals are bringing mindfulness to the fore. Personally, I’ve created my own courses and courseware, which is hosted on the Army Internet page, so that not just the Army, but veterans and the general population can gain access to it as well, for free. And as for most other nations, I think they’re in a similar situation. I think we’re behind the US for sure. I mean, looking at the research papers I’ve seen from Amishi, I think the US are probably at the very forefront of this.

**Dr. Jha:** My lab has been researching mindfulness training in high-stress groups for some time. We’re interested in finding out what works and what doesn’t work—systematically pursuing solutions that are most feasible, effective, and scalable. The good news is that we’re getting some clear answers on best practices for delivery of mindfulness training to benefit attention, psychological health, and operational performance. Currently, delivery of mindfulness training to military service members in the US is mostly constrained to grant-funded research studies. As I think of the future, my hope is that military leaders and decision makers follow the science—benefiting from research findings, including the 15-plus years my lab has spent pursuing best practices for offering mindfulness training to active duty cohorts.

One of the benefits of coming together for this symposium is that we can share notes on research findings and innovative approaches being pursued. For example, what I find fascinating about Patrick’s approach is that he is integrating mindfulness into the
are doing it in the context of strategic thinking and strategic leadership, as well as wellness and resilience. So there are different pockets in which mindfulness sits. And the effort, for the most part is patchy, ad hoc, and guided by champions within these defense organizations. This effort is truly in its infancy.

At the same time, part of my interest in this meeting is to give military leaders across multiple nations an opportunity to understand the breadth and depth of how mindfulness can be creatively and successfully offered in Defence to benefit many aspects of what service members and military leaders themselves are called to do.

**Mindful:** What do you make of it being such a grassroots effort at this point?

**Major Burgess:** There is progression. We have got some research going on with Dr. Jutta Tobias in the UK who is doing some work with the Royal Navy and the Royal Marines to create some data. So, I think it’s emerging now because it’s supposed to emerge now, the time’s right. There’s been a lot of stuff going on in the background, lots of small programs, lots of advocates doing their thing, trying to make it work. But I think we’re now in a situation where we’re starting to see this gather some serious momentum and I think we’re in the right place at the right time.

**Dr. Jha:** Frankly, the way that the militaries of the world are now approaching mindfulness is aligned with the way school systems have done it and the way medical systems have done it, the way businesses have done it, where it does often start as grassroot approaches. And then research is often conducted to formally put grassroot solutions to the test—to move beyond anecdotal reports of benefits. The approach that’s happening now in Defence is very much in line with the ways we’ve seen mindfulness proliferate throughout many different sectors. Defence is unique in many ways, but regardless of what the professional mission may be, we’re talking about human beings being able to do their work in the best possible way they can with clarity of mind and with emotional regulation. And if there were ever a sector of our society that should have such skills offered, it should be the military, in my view. Why? Because it’s extremely consequential in terms of making sure that they are fully aware of their own minds to do their work. Errors costs lives, and lapses destabilize peace.

I wanted to honor what Patrick said regarding Jutta Tobias. She is one of the leaders of mindfulness training for military teams. It’s a welcome addition to have more
and cultivated during basic training, continuing throughout professional development over the career lifecycle of a military service member.

Our work suggests that the contextualization of mindfulness really matters. So, for example, if you’re talking about mindfulness training and its utility for teachers or healthcare providers versus service members, the principles may be the same. The practices may be the same. But the conversations regarding the integration into one’s professional life are likely going to be different. Based on this, one of the programs we have developed and researched, mindfulness-based attention training, was structured to have a core foundational program that could remain the same across various groups, but other aspects were designed to allow those unique conversations to happen. The aim was to maximize the chances that participants would see the value of integrating mindfulness into their professional lives. I see a parallel here to discussions we can have with other nations’ militaries—we can inquire together on what may be foundational for all in the defense profession, and what may be unique based on the nature of the mission or national role and identity?

Mindfulness is a Common Language

**Major Burgess:** And that’s what makes this forum so important—that we’ve got collaboration from different countries sharing their ways of doing it. Because if you hear other organizations or other defense forces saying that this is what they’re doing, all of a sudden it seems like a step that you can take together. It doesn’t have to be the same program we’re talking about, not the “one size fits all” stamp, this is your sealed package. But what it does mean is that we’re moving forward together. And when someone gets ahead, everybody else can catch up rather than just being independently left in the wilderness.

We know that we live in a very challenging world, but we also know that there are things that we can do to keep our soldiers performing at the best that they can be in all aspects of their service life. And not just our soldiers: this is the whole of Defence—civilian, and military—from the strategic thinkers to the tactical. If we can get all of them working at their optimal, being the best human beings that they can be, then I think we’re doing the right thing. And that’s what this is about for me.
Regarding our efforts, the opportunity for leadership of our various nations to understand what is happening, not aiming toward a single solution, but common principles of best practice. That’s what I’m interested in—promoting and understanding of best practice, because I don’t want anybody else to have to waste their time doing things that we know were not effective. And I also now deeply understand the challenges that anybody who wants to implement programs in the Defence context is likely to get—from would-be participants as well as leaders. For example, “make it shorter.” And what I say is “make it as short as you can, but not shorter than it should be to actually have beneficial effects.”

And I would say the biggest picture for me—and this is aligned to my intention behind working with the military, most broadly is this: If we want peace in our world, we must work toward allowing those individuals who are at the tension point between peace or war to have access to their peak minds—to have access to their full capacity for discernment, emotional stability, and perspective taking, all the while following their ethical code.

Our international community is going to face massive challenges and we will need to collaborate and we will need to help each other. None of us can ignore that the climate crisis is upon us. We will need to work together. And what would it feel like to have common language regarding how to stay resilient through the incredible challenges that we will face—and that our militaries will be facing as the frontline humanitarian support for those disasters as they unfold? So to me, with such an effort, we’re helping ourselves, our future selves, and our children to ensure that the militaries of the world that are moving in this direction are better able to function together because they share mindfulness, as well as the mission itself.

Major Burgess: You want to be the best that you can be at the job you’re doing. If you’re armed with the tools that you get from mindfulness, the discernment, the emotional intelligence, the awareness, it turns you into a better human being and therefore a much better soldier. And part of what I teach in the physical attention training is about paying attention to the physical feelings and sensations in the body and importantly, your environment. And when you’re in a situation that could be stressful, if you’re linked into those things and you’re aware that the mind is trying to tell you a story and catastrophize, you’re much better able to act on what’s really happening in front of you rather than what your imagination is telling you. And then you’re going to make some
Mindful: We see the kind of collaboration you’re both talking about in this partnership between your two worlds, Amishi and Patrick.

Dr. Jha: It is an unusual partnership to have a researcher and an actual service member who’s on the ground and delivering these practices, in addition to being a tank commander and expert in his military career. I think that piece is really important to highlight because those kinds of partnerships will also be key.

Major Burgess: And this is not a day job for me—there is no Staff Officer of Mindfulness. The stuff that I do, the programs I create, that’s done in what we could consider spare time. And that’s just fine because it’s so important. And to be able to share a common language with Amishi and the other nations to get across that boundary—this is not just an international boundary. This is a boundary between science and delivery. This is a boundary between military and civilian. So when we’re talking about a common language, we know mindfulness is an effective common language. We’re demonstrating it right here, right now.

The Mindfulness in Defence Symposium happens September 30.

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