

4-1-2014

## Mindfulness-Based Adventure Camp for Military Youth

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### Recommended Citation

Le, T. N. (2014). Mindfulness-Based Adventure Camp for Military Youth. *The Journal of Extension*, 52(2), Article 21. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol52/iss2/21>

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## Mindfulness-Based Adventure Camp for Military Youth

### Abstract

Research suggests that military youth have higher rates of anxiety and socio-emotional difficulties as compared to their non-military peers, due in part to the unique stressors of military life. The study reported here provides feasibility findings of a mindfulness-based adventure camp that was conducted in Colorado and Hawaii with 292 military youth, through a partnership with 4-H Extension Professionals /Operations Military Kids. The results suggest that military youth were highly satisfied with the camp experience and that mindfulness tools could be used to help deal with stress. Mindfulness-based programs could be one way for Extension professionals to work with youth.

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## Introduction

The military's "Overseas Contingency Operation," formerly called the "Global War on Terror," has resulted in multiple deployments for military personnel in all sectors of the military. Today, nearly 2 million youth have at least one parent involved in the military (Mmari, Roche, Sudhinaraset, & Blum, 2009). Like their non-military peers, military youth share similar issues such as autonomy and identity development. However, they are also dealing with unique stressors associated with military affiliation.

Military youth often experience the consequences of periodic family relocations, including the inability to establish long-term peer relationships and new school district requirements. This has been shown to result in higher rates of anxiety and socio-emotional difficulties (Chandra et al, 2011, 2010; Mmari et al., 2010; Richardson et al., 2011). There is no doubt that change is a constant factor in the lives of these youth.

The ability to adapt to change and to be with what is, given that most circumstances for military youth are beyond their control (e.g., relocation, parental deployment) is a significant skill and competency that needs to be acquired. Interestingly, a study by Morris and Age (2009) found that deployment of a parent was not related to significant outcomes for military youth; instead, it was youth's healthy coping skills, particularly effortful control. Effortful control concerns the youth's ability

to use a variety of resources to cope with and manage behaviors and emotions. When participants showed greater effortful control, they were also better able to cope with the stress in a healthy, adaptive way.

To date, while programs exist to help families cope, there has been limited research about the effectiveness of these programs as well as about programs and interventions developed specifically for military youth. Adventure-based activities coupled with mindfulness is theorized here to be one strategy to help military youth develop better coping skills particularly as it relates to youth's ability to deal with change and to be with difficult emotions and thoughts.

## **Mindfulness-Based Curriculum**

Mindfulness relates to the ability to bring focus and attention to the present moment, with non-judgment and acceptance, that is, with kindness to oneself regardless of what is arising in the present moment (e.g., a difficult thought, a challenging emotion). It hones one's ability to relate to thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations as they arise with an objective perspective (i.e., not identifying with the thought or emotion, but observing it with curiosity), akin to the development of metacognition in adolescence.

Over the last two decades, empirical evidence has accumulated around the efficacy of mindfulness with respect to both physical and mental health (e.g., Baer, 2003; Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004). Although fewer, studies with the adolescent population also showed that mindfulness is efficacious at reducing anxiety (Semple, Lee, Rosa, & Miller, 2010), depression (Hayes, Boyd, & Sewell, 2010), and behavioral problems (Heppner et al., 2008; Semple et al., 2010). The Department of Defense is currently using mindfulness training/intervention with veterans experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (Schneider, 2010).

The mindfulness curriculum used at the camps was adapted from the Mind Body Awareness Program (MBA; Himelstein, Hastings, Shapiro, & Heery, 2011), a mindfulness program for at-risk youth based on the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction model (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn, 1982) and council practice. The curriculum was adapted to make it culturally relevant for military youth and incorporated learning from the experiential, outdoors activities. Although the original MBA curriculum was designed to address delinquency/violence, many maladaptive behaviors share underlining psychological, affective, and behavioral processes such as unskilled self-regulation, impulsivity, and low self-esteem.

The curriculum adapted for the camp included five modules: introduction to mindfulness; mindfulness of the body; emotional awareness and empathy building; choicefulness; and change & interconnectedness. The topics were designed to illustrate how present moment awareness can affect different aspects of life. Because many youth struggle with impulse control, interpersonal relationships, and self-worth, the counselors used various techniques including games, metaphors, stories, and analogies, to illustrate how mindfulness can be used to transform negative ideas and beliefs.

Mindfulness became an integral component of the camp due to the reported mental health needs of military youth, including alarming increases in hospitalization for mental health treatment and in

outpatient visits. It has also been reported that suicide and post-traumatic stress disorder have increased dramatically among military personnel, including the potential for family members to experience adverse mental health outcomes (Kelley & Jouriles, 2011) and secondary PTSD (Cook, Slater-Williams, & Harrison, 2012).

Mindfulness was embedded in the camp activities to help youth develop stronger, stable minds. Like physical mental fitness, mindfulness was aimed at developing youth's mental fitness.

## Camp Structure & Themes

Based on the literature about the effective elements in adventure-based programming (Gass, 1993), the mindfulness-based adventure camp was centered on the core principles of adventure-based programming: challenge by choice, unfamiliar environment, a climate of change, assessment of group and debriefing, small group format, solutions, and successful behavior. All physical and team-building activities, including the mindfulness sessions, incorporated these principles.

In Colorado, the camp occurred over 4 days/3 nights at a residential camp up in the Rocky Mountains, with a maximum of 45 youth per camp. In total, 225 military youth participated. In Hawaii, the camp also occurred over 4 days/3 nights at a YMCA residential camp facility. In total 70 military youth participated. Both the Colorado and Hawaii camps focused on three major themes: physical fitness (low/high/ropes course, paddle boarding, surfing, and hiking), mental fitness (mindfulness), and personal leadership (mindfulness). Mindfulness sessions were conducted by one counselor in groups of no more than 12 youth maximum. For each day, there was at least 1 hour of a mindfulness session, either in the morning or in the evening, or both times. The counselors were trained in the mindfulness curriculum over 1 full day by MBA trained facilitators.

## Methods

### Participants

In Colorado, 219 military youth, ages 13-19 (mean = 15 yrs. old), 44% female and 56% male, participated in the camp, which was located in Camp Pingree in the Rocky Mountains. In Hawaii, 73 military youth, ages 13-18 (mean = 15 yrs. old), 49% female and 51% male, participated in the camp, which was located at the YMCA on the north shore, Oahu.

### Procedures

The camps were advertised through various Extension venues, including National Guard State Family Program Coordinator, Military OneSource consultant, school liaison officers at the various academies, Airmen and Family Readiness Centers, US Army Child Youth School Services, the Family Readiness Assistants at military installations, Operation Military Kid teams, among others. Interested participants completed a registration packet and were given a slot at the camp on a first-come, first-served basis. Human subject approvals were obtained from the Institutional Review Board at Colorado State University (for the Colorado camp) and the University of Hawaii at Manoa (for the Hawaii camp).

## Measures

Youth were asked to complete an evaluation survey at the end of the fifth mindfulness session. This was required by the funder. They were also encouraged to voluntarily write down what they liked or did not like and to provide any suggestions for the camp. In Hawaii only, youth responded to four additional questions that were added to the funder's survey. These questions were added after realizing from the experiences of the Colorado camp that it would be useful to know whether the youth perceive the mindfulness sessions to be helpful or enjoyable. Specifically, the first question asked participants to rank the activities in terms what they enjoyed the most, the second in terms of helping them to develop skills to deal with stress, and the third in terms of helping them to make new friends and to form strong connections. The last question asked the participants about their level of satisfaction with the camp counselor using 1= very dissatisfied to 5 =very satisfied. The five camp counselors in Colorado and four camp counselors in Hawaii were also encouraged to provide reflections and to note any observations in writing of their experiences.

## Results

Analyses consisted of content coding and identification of themes from the youth's voluntary comments and from the counselors' personal reflections and observations. These analyses were conducted by the author and research assistant. In Colorado, five themes emerged. The first theme was about being in nature and doing outdoor activities; the second theme was about connection and acceptance; the third theme concerned cooperation; the fourth theme was about fun and enjoyment; and the fifth theme was about learning new skills to deal with stress. Youth also talked about the challenges of teenage life and how the mindfulness sessions and being in small groups helped them to learn how to relax.

- "Teenage life can be stressful and wild. It was awesome to be given these tools for self-help and mental relaxation. Every teen should try this."
- "...teaching us different ways for us to cope with things ( i.e. concepts that help us in life like mindfulness)."

Anecdotally, the youth in Colorado were extremely satisfied with the camp experience, and many expressed wanting to come back again next year. Several also asked if there were opportunities to be junior counselors.

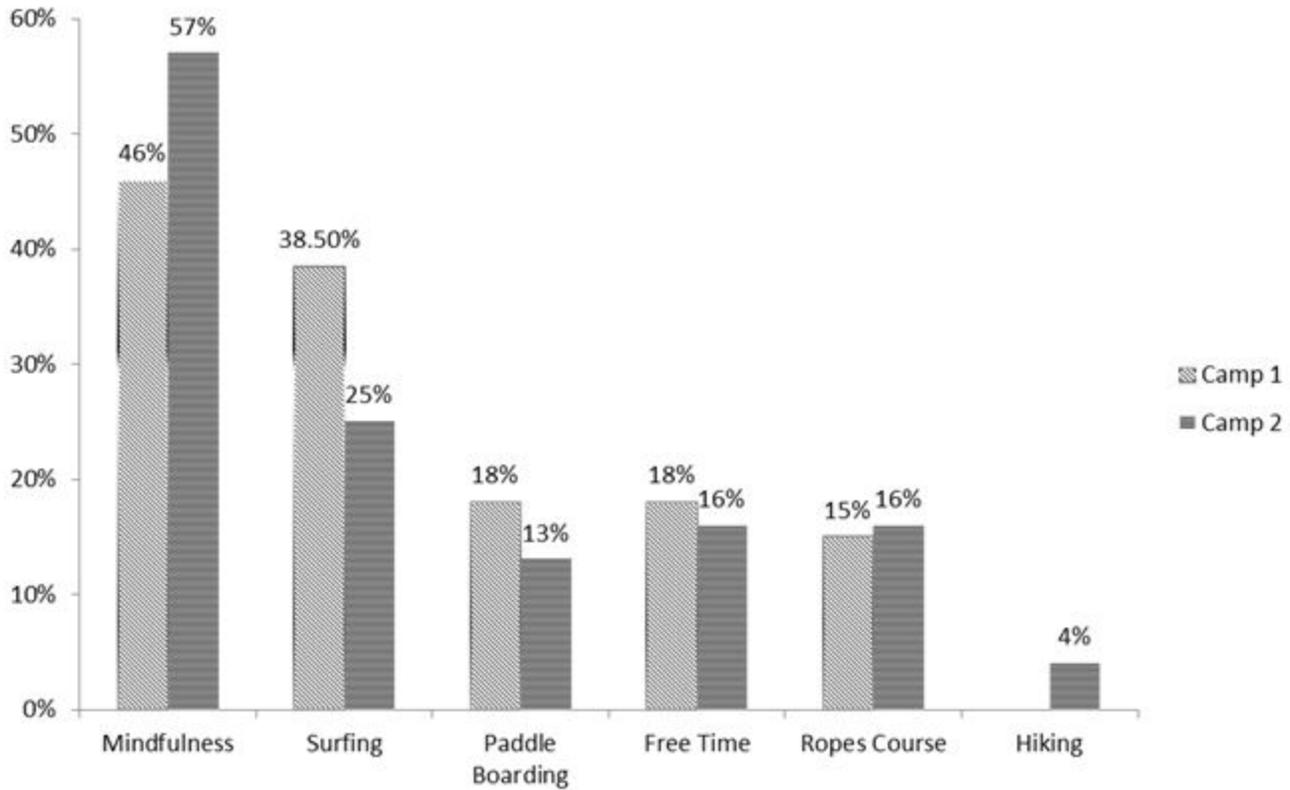
The counselors themselves also shared how the experience of being a camp counselor and facilitating mindfulness sessions transformed their perceptions/ideas about military youth. They did not realize the depth of circumstances and issues that these youth were dealing with and how youth were willing to be so open and vulnerable, and to share and to connect with each other so quickly and deeply. The context of being in a different environment, out in nature, combined with the small, mindfulness group sessions, they believed, helped to facilitate strong connections and bonds.

In Hawaii, in response to the ranking of activities in terms of what the youth enjoyed the most, surfing was ranked #1 by 53% participants, 30% for ropes course, 27% for free time, 13% for

mindfulness, and 12% for paddle boarding. When asked to rank activities in terms of helping them to develop skills to deal with stress, mindfulness came up most often as being #1, followed by surfing, paddle boarding, free time, and ropes course (Figure 1). Mindfulness was also ranked #1 by about a third of the participants in terms of helping them to make new friends and to form strong connections (Figure 2).

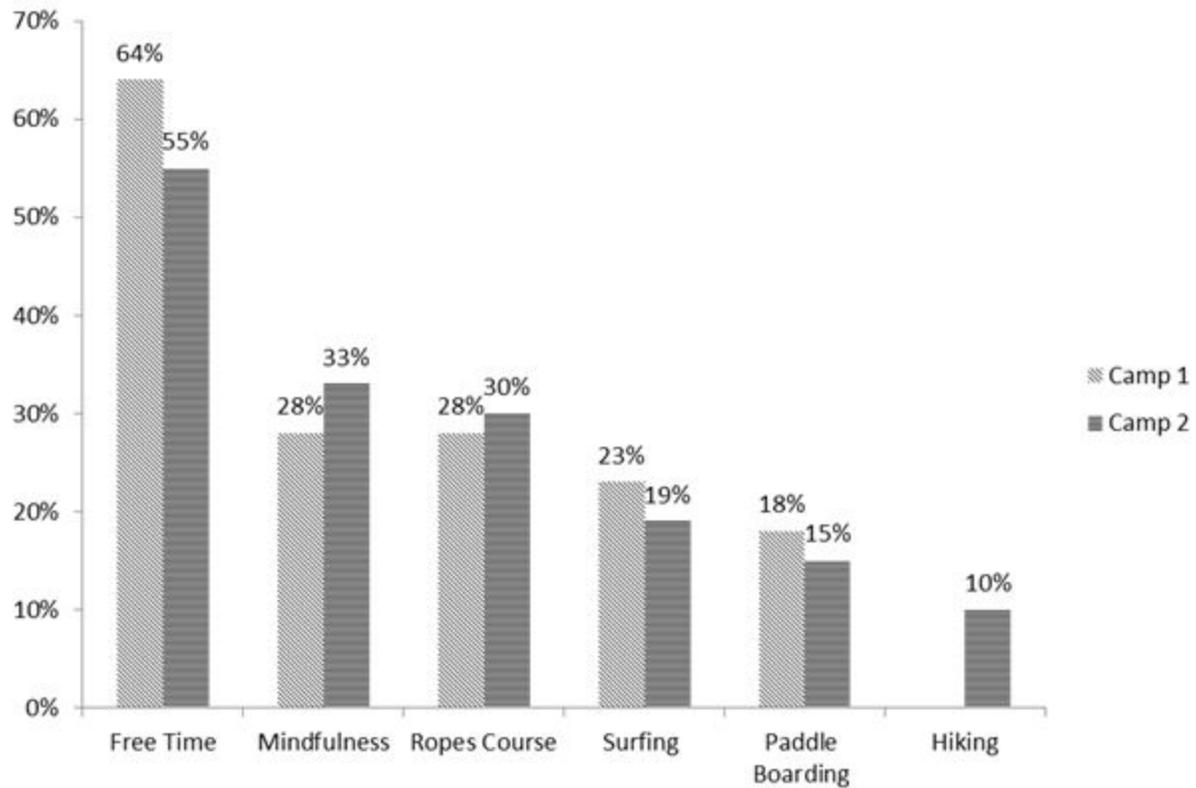
**Figure 1.**

Activity Ranked #1 in Terms of Helping to Develop Skills to Deal with Stress (Hawaii Camp, N=70)



**Figure 2.**

Activity Ranked #1 in Terms of Helping to Make New Friends & to Form Strong Connections (Hawaii Camp, N = 70)



More than 85% reported that they were very satisfied with their camp counselor and that they would like to return to this camp again the next year. Participants also provided spontaneous anonymous comments about how much they enjoyed the camp and how it had changed them:

- "Objectives to describe camp: solidarius, together, helpful, caring, mindful, perfect!"
- "The mindfulness was nice and made me feel like I had a support system."
- "Everyone opened to each other. I learned that I am not alone in this world and I will always have someone to turn to. I can't wait to come back next year!"

The camp counselors of the Hawaii camp also provided extensive personal reflections and feedback. The majority of the comments were about youth sharing and being vulnerable during the mindfulness sessions and their role as counselor to model acceptance and provide encouragement:

- "There were moments that I shed tears while in group as I could empathize with teens and could feel their personal struggles. I continued to listen with an open and accepting heart, free of judgment and attempts to rescue...just encouraged them to at least try to be friendly with the present and to know that this too shall pass."
- "These four teenagers did disclose their experiences, frustrations, challenges, hurt feelings and insecurities about a number of things...being overweight, lack of acceptance for their looks, feelings of loneliness, insignificance to their parents, negative criticism by others, lack of motivation and achievement, sadness that that no one cares to get to know them, insecurities of not having a post high school plan, to name a few. Tears were shed and it became clear how

these thoughts and feelings were real and the impact it had on their well-being and esteem."

Many of the counselors' reflections also touched upon building support, community, and empathy as a foundation for resiliency.

- "I was so impressed to see the strength and courage of these young people as they revealed the details of their heartbreaking stories. I commended each and every one of them for being able to go through all that they had in their young lives and their true resiliency. Seeing that others stood with them in their emotions and experiences created an excellent feeling of acceptance and empathy amongst the group."

Finally, all counselors shared how they were deeply touched by the experience of the camp, the depth of sharing that went on, and how the mindfulness tools could be beneficial to teens.

- "...I wasn't expecting anyone to open up so much within knowing them for only three days, but the outline and the power behind this camp is something remarkable and I think it is something that would benefit teens of ALL backgrounds, not just military. The teenage years can be some of the most difficult and confusing times of someone's life and I believe after this experience that our mindfulness, sharing, and understanding of others, although maybe not the coolest thing, is a valuable experience to help teens grow."

## Discussion

While adventure-based activities are available to military youth and youth in Extension programs like 4-H (Arnold, Bourdeau, & Nagele, 2005; Ripberger, 2008), empirical evidence with respect to military youth's satisfaction and outcomes are currently non-existent. The results here suggest that military youth were highly satisfied with the camp experience, with highlighted themes of acceptance, connection, and cooperation coupled with having fun and learning new skills to deal with stress. These were the main ideas that helped the campers.

Although brief, the camps afforded military youth an opportunity to develop connection and social support through shared experiences, similar to other 4-H adventure programs (Ripberger, 2008). Because the camps were exclusively for military youth, the mindfulness sessions were specifically designed to create a safe space where youth could share and find commonalities in their struggles and challenges as they learn skills to moderate stress.

Cognitive and emotional self-regulation, which includes the ability to modulate responses to stress, is increasingly found to contribute to overall adjustment (Greenberg, 2006). How youth regulate their emotional responses and cope with stressors influences their level of risk for maladaptive developmental trajectories (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001). Helping youth to develop skills to better modulate their responses to stress and emotional states was a specific goal of the camps. Youth's responses as well as the counselors' reflections in Hawaii illustrate that mindfulness specifically helped youth to develop stress-reducing skills. The sessions provided information and tools about becoming aware of one's emotions and feelings, sensations and thoughts in a non-judgmental, accepting way.

Combining physical activity (strengthening the body) with mindfulness (strengthening the mind) may be a good formula to increase youth's self-efficacy to deal with stress, not only military youth but all youth. Physical activity in its own right has been associated with improved health and mental health outcomes for youth, including lower rates of substance use (Pate, Trost, Levin, & Dowda, 2000), anxiety, and depression (Floriani & Kennedy, 2008).

Adventure-based programs specifically have yielded increases in self-concept, perceived feelings of community acceptance and belonging (Glass & Benshoff, 2002) and pro-social behaviors (Cross, 2002). Results from 4-H camps have also yielded similar outcomes (Garton, Miltenberger, & Pruett, 2007).

Mindfulness has been shown in studies with youth to help with aggression, anxiety, and depression (e.g., Burke, 2010; Ciarrochi, Kashdan, Leeson, Heaven, & Jordan, 2011; Heppner et al., 2008; Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). Five modules constituted the mindfulness curriculum and served as a guide for the counselors in the mindfulness sessions. Although there was a specific objective for each module, counselors were allowed to exercise flexibility in terms of incorporating their own ideas (stories, metaphors) and sequence, and to allow the sessions to unfold in a fluid fashion. Bringing awareness and attention to how they were responding to the youth was just as equally important as guiding the youth to become more aware of themselves.

## Conclusion

While little is currently known about the effectiveness of adventure-based camps for military youth, let alone mindfulness-based adventure camps for military youth, preliminary data from the study reported here suggest that such an approach is promising. Mindfulness-based adventure camp has the potential to facilitate peer connection and sense of community and to increase youth's skills to deal with stress. Better self and emotional regulation in turn could decrease risks for developing externalizing and internalizing problem behaviors.

Providing youth with additional tools and skills to handle changes and challenges more effectively in their lives is likely to facilitate resiliency and thriving. Extension can play a vital role in supporting the health and well-being of military youth (Ames et al., 2011), and mindfulness-based adventure camps is potentially another means that Extension professionals could employ to help military youth and youth in general build stress-buffering, resiliency skills.

## Acknowledgments

Funding support for the camps was provided by Purdue University through a grant from DOD/USDA-NIFA. A deep bow of appreciation goes to Ann Bruce, Viviane Ephraimson-Abt, and Claire Nakatsuka. Special thanks to the camp counselors for their service, and to the participating military youth who inspired and humbled us. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Thao Le, Family & Consumer Sciences, University of Hawaii at Manoa, 2515 Campus Road, Miller Hall 201G, Honolulu, HI 96822, email: [thaole3@hawaii.edu](mailto:thaole3@hawaii.edu).

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