

## EVALUATION OF A MINDFULNESS-BASED PILOT PROGRAM IN SLOVENE ARMED FORCES

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### **Abstract:**

Mindfulness-based programs have shown promising results in both healthy individuals and people with mental health issues. Few researches have furthermore shown the benefits of mindfulness-based programs in the military context. The aim of this paper is to present the preliminary results of the evaluation of a pilot mindfulness-based program for the military. We applied for a pilot mindfulness-based program to members of the Logistics Brigade of Slovene Armed Forces. Three small groups ( $N_{tot}=23$ ) were formed and included in a 9-week program. After the fourth and at the last session they were asked to give their evaluation of the program. In the present study, we analyse the answers to open-ended questions of the first group ( $N=7$ ), that finished the program. We used qualitative analysis following the principals of constructing grounded theory. Preliminary results show that the participants developed a better awareness and understanding of their feelings, sensations and their thoughts and mind. Participants acquired new and successful strategies for stress management and conflict resolution. They reported having developed skills for relaxation, work-related concentration, being less impulsive, appreciating their successes and time spent with loved ones more than before the participation. Working in a group, exchanging experiences and learning from others has been educative and very well-accepted. The most challenging part was the compliance with the home exercises. In our paper, we discuss the possible future for these kinds of programs in the Slovene Armed Forces.

**Keywords:** mindfulness training, military sample, qualitative study, pilot study

## INTRODUCTION

Williams and Kabat-Zinn (2007, pp. 47) define mindfulness as the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to things as they are. It introduces the difference and importance between “doing” and just “being”. The latter is a state of non-reactivity to both pleasant and unpleasant thoughts, emotions and bodily sensations. Practising mindfulness leads to a better awareness of body, mind and their interconnectivity.

Mindfulness-based programs have become a widespread approach for both mental and physical health prevention and intervention. Research has shown promising results how the inclusion in mindfulness-based programs could benefit healthy individuals (Khoury, Sharma, Rush, Fourier, 2015; Hugh-Jones, Rose, Koutsopoulou, & Simms-Ellis, 2017; Eby et al., 2017), individuals with mental health problems (Khoury et al., 2013; van der Velden et al. 2015; Gong et al. 2016; Hoge et al., 2017) as well as people with physical health problems (Bohlmeijer, Prenger, Taal, & Cuijpers, 2010; Abbott et al., 2014; Gong et al., 2016; Hilton et al., 2017).

There are many ways how mindfulness has been included in mental health prevention and intervention. The most common programs and interventions incorporating mindfulness are Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR), Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT), and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) (Baer, 2003). Cultivating and integrating mindfulness in one’s everyday life is common to all of them; however, each has a specific goal (depression relapse prevention, stress management, coping with anxiety, panic attacks and several other specific individual problems) and is performed in different ways (group sessions or individual approach in therapy).

The potential of mindfulness training has also been researched in the context of military cohorts. Researchers report of the protective role of mindfulness-based training (Büssing, Walach, Kohls, Zimmermann, & Trousselard, 2013 ;Call & Jeffery Pitcock & Jeffrey Pyne, 2015; Haase et al., 2014; Jha, Morrison, Parker, & Stanely, 2016; Johnson et al, 2014; Rees, 2011; Stanley, 2010; Stanley, Schaldach, Kiyonaga, & Jha, 2011). Results suggest that engaging in mindfulness training may improve stress and cognitive resilience leading to faster recovery from mental and psychological stress, protecting against attentional lapses in high-demand military trainings, increasing tolerance to unpleasant physical states, helping develop a less reactive mind, improving self-regulation, and bolstering emotional and social intelligence. However, time spent in practice is essential (Stanley et al., 2011; Jha et al., 2016; Haase et al., 2014). The more time is spent practising mindfulness; the stronger are the positive effects of mindfulness-trainings. Jha, Morrison, Dainer-Best and colleagues (2015) findings also show that practice-focused programs may bolster attention performance more than didactic-focused programs. This is important to keep in mind when implementing mindfulness-based programs.

Up to date, mindfulness-based trainings have not been introduced in Slovene Armed Forces. Since mindfulness trainings have the variety of benefits regarding stress and cognitive resilience, decision making, attention performance, social and emotional intelligence, it may have a positive impact on members of Slovene Armed Forces as well. It could be used as a new training approach for improvement of leadership skills, interpersonal relationships, as a prevention program for people in high-stress and high-demanding positions (ex. special forces, pyrotechnics, military depot), for

people with chronic medical conditions and others. To start researching the potential gains of mindfulness training in Slovene Armed Forces, we designed a pilot 9-week mindfulness-based training program for Slovene Armed Forces (MBT-SAF).

### **MINDFULNESS-BASED TRAINING PROGRAM IN SLOVENE ARMED FORCES (MBT-SAF)**

MBT-SAF is a pilot 9-week program based on MBCT (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2007) with some alterations. Since the goal of the program was not primarily depression relapse prevention as it is in MBCT, we made some changes especially in the didactical part of the program. MBCT puts more emphasis on the recognition of negative automatic thoughts, educates on the impact and importance of automatic thoughts in relation to depression relapse. MBCT focuses on recognising depressive patterns and encourages participants to develop preventive strategies. MBT-SAF is aimed at the Slovene military population, where leadership excellence, comradery, and efficiency in work processes are necessary virtues. Therefore we decided to put more emphasis on self-regulation (enhancing better understanding of the importance of one's thoughts and emphasising a different, nonreactive approach towards inter in intra-relational difficulties), recognition and changes of orienting habits, cultivating inter and intrapersonal compassion. The didactical content of MBT-SAF was taken from MBCT, Sensorimotor Psychotherapy (Ogden and Fisher, 2015), Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy approaches.

Before the beginning of the program, candidates had to take a short interview, where the program teacher would look for any counter-indications (acute stress, specific acute mental or physical health problems), discuss the approach, their motivation, expectations and concerns. The program took place during working hours and consisted of 8 sessions of 90 minutes and one session of 6 hours. A few sessions had to be prolonged for 15 - 20 minutes. The whole day silent session was planned after the 6<sup>th</sup> session. Participants were given home practice (homework) after every session. After the 4<sup>th</sup> and last session, participants were given a half-structured evaluation of their experience in the MBT – SAF. Program teacher was available to participants for any questions or further psychological support after each session and after the programme was finished.

MBT-SAF program was conducted by a military psychologist in the Slovene Armed Forces and had completed the MBCT's Teacher's development training 1. She had had prior experiences leading MBCT groups. Overall 23 participants have been included in the program so far.

The aim of our study was to evaluate the program participation, gain insight into participants' experience of program involvement and examining possible benefits of the program.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Our sample consisted of seven members (three men and four women) of Slovene Armed Force that participated in and completed the MBT-SAF programme in winter of 2017 - 2018.

### **Instruments**

Participants filled in the Evaluation questionnaire that was designed especially for this study. Questions targeted following areas: gains, expectations, benefits for work and private life, hardest parts of the program, most beneficial parts, and homework.

### **Procedure**

Participants of the MBT-SAF filled in the paper-pencil Evaluation questionnaire at the end of the program. Their answers were transcribed and later on analysed using the software program ATLAS.ti 8 and followed grounded theory principals, as presented in Charmaz (2006). Four levels of coding and analysis in grounded theory are: (i) initial coding (naming small parts of the text - quotations, with codes, (ii) focused coding (using the most important or frequent codes to synthesise and explain larger segments of data), (iii) axial coding (linking the selected codes into categories and reassembling the data), and (iv) theoretical coding (creating links between codes, relating them to each other and forming a model or a theory).

Two researchers (the authors) were included in the data analyses. One researcher coded the elicited text (answers to evaluation questionnaires). Afterwards, both researchers went through the codes and selected the most relevant ones for further analyses. Later on, they worked together in categorising selected codes and creating a model of MBT-SAF participation experience.

## RESULTS

We were interested in participation experiences of the MBT-SAF trainees. We analysed participants' answers to the evaluation questionnaires. After the initial coding, 118 quotations were coded with 86 codes. After focused coding, we retained 48 codes that were later on connected into nine themes (expectations, characteristics of the MBT-SAF, the hardest and the most beneficial parts of the program, homework, usefulness for private and professional life, effects and benefits, and insights, gained during the program). Themes and codes are connected into a network, representing an overall model of research participation (see Figure 1). The critical issues from the intermediate evaluation are presented separately in the last part of Results.

In the following segments, we present the emerging themes and selected quotations (translated to English) to substantiate our findings.

### 1. Expectations

Participants found the MBT-SAF program to be interesting, educational, a new experience and a challenge. One participant mentioned that it was repetitive.

Trainees reported on having no expectations of the program, the program being in accordance with their expectations or the program even exceeding their expectations.

*"The content was in accordance with my expectations."*

*"I gained much more than expected."*

### 2. Helpful and challenging parts of MBT - SAF

Trainees pointed out discussions and formal practices as the most beneficial parts of the program. Discussions allowed them to understand exercises better and to get feedback and directions on further training.

*"Each part has its beauty. Discussions were very interesting because you get the confirmation that you are doing them the right way. Moreover, through discussions, we gained directions on how to improve our everyday living."*

*"Everyone has their interpretations of the exercises' directions. Discussions help to better understand both the exercises and one's responses to them."*

Homework was also recognized as very beneficial. However, it was also perceived as the hardest part of the program. Four participants reported doing home practices regularly; one did only the minimum, one said that he practised irregularly and one said that he did not do it at all. Nevertheless, all participants acknowledged the importance of home practice for getting the most out of the program participation.

*"It is crucial to stay in touch with the program."*

*"I know that practice helps build automatism."*

Participants were faced with some challenges regarding homework. They were tired or could not find the time to practice at home.

*"I noticed not taking time for myself. In the evenings, when I took time for myself and the mindfulness practice, I was sometimes so tired, that the meditations and exercises made me fall asleep."*

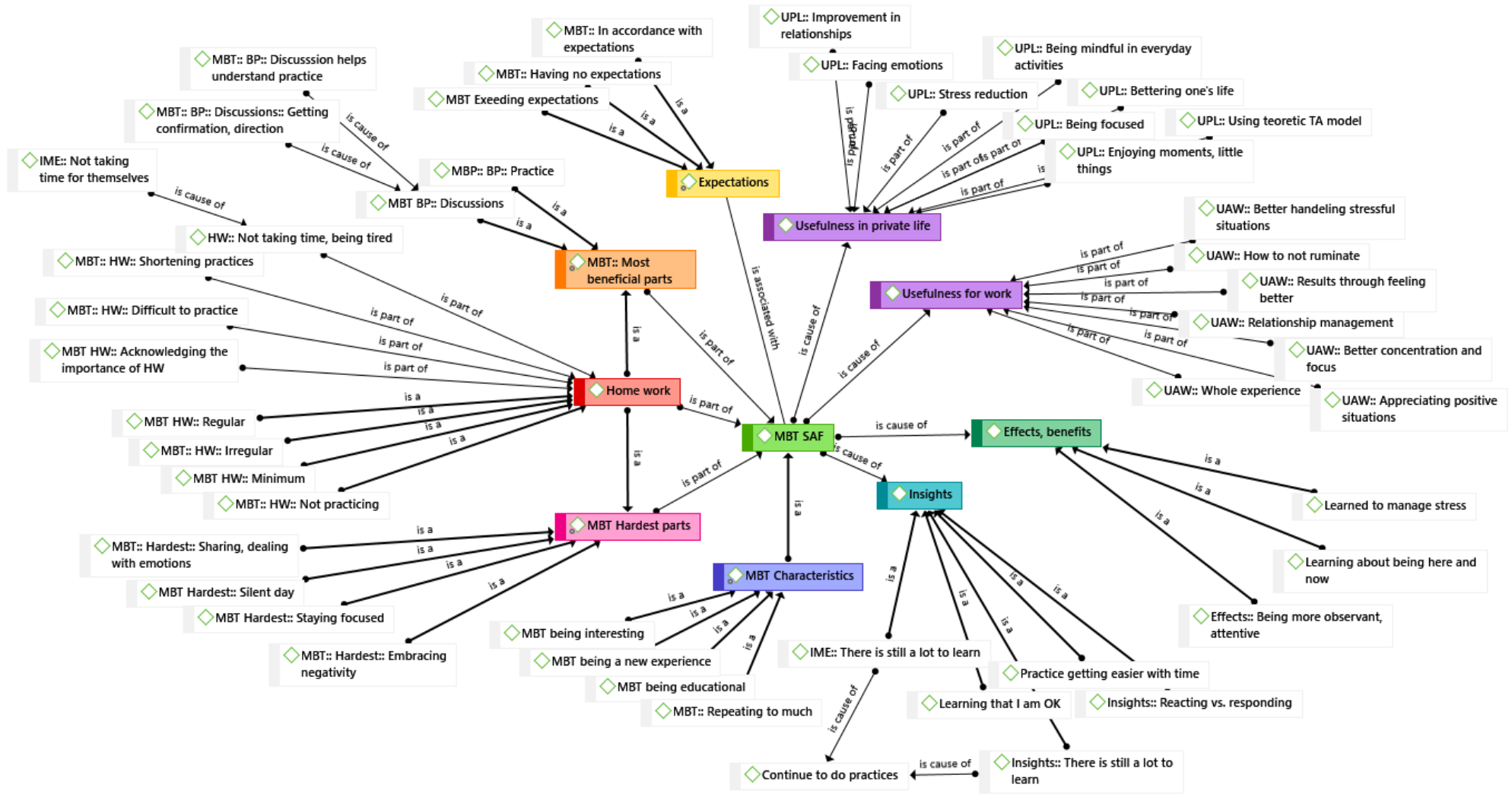


Figure 1. The overall model of MBT-SAF participation experience

Among other parts that were challenging for the participants were sharing their emotions with other group members, staying focused during sitting exercises, embracing negativity (negative emotions, thoughts) and the whole day of silent practice (silent day).

*"The hardest part was exposing my feelings and sensations to others."*

*"The hardest part was the exercise where we could not speak, especially in the beginning. Later on, I acknowledged that it is just an exercise. From that point on it was easier for me to follow the instructions."*

### **3. Benefits, the effectiveness of MBT-SAF**

When asked about the effects or benefits of the program, participants pointed out, that they learned how to manage stress, how to deal with hardship, how to be more observant and attentive to themselves and to others and how to be more mindful (here and now).

*"Mindfulness is the best! I am really happy that we had the possibility to take part of these workshops. By focusing on this moment life becomes "easier". It is easier to manage one thing in the present moment than to deal with unresolved issues from the past."*

*"During the program I learned how to be aware of myself in the present moment, while all the unpleasant memories, hard moments you can acknowledge and then send away as "bits of information", thus being aware of the present moment."*

*"The biggest gain to me is that I learned how to be aware of my own thoughts, actions and events in the present moment."*

*"For the first time I am aware of all the sensations in my body, that I didn't sense or even take time to sense before."*

### **4. Benefits of MBT – SAF for their professional and private everyday life.**

Participants shared how the MBT - SAF can be useful in their private and professional life. They mentioned relationship improvement, stress reduction, being able to focus more and being more mindful of everyday activities. Some of them also mentioned that the programme might enhance enjoyment in little things.

*"To focus on the present moments and enjoying in them ... enjoy in what is present. To just see the small things and appreciate them."*

*"The most important part is an improvement in the quality of relationships. I am more involved and focused when listening to others. I try to listen with my awareness."*

One participant wanted to quit the program after encountering a relational hardship. In a one-on-one session with the Program teacher, the participant managed to see this event as an opportunity of just noticing its own habitual ways of reacting to an unpleasant relational situation and then to respond to it differently. The program teacher helped the participant by further giving a psycho-educational intervention on the topic that arose. The participant stayed and finished the Program.

Possible usefulness of the MBT-SAF programme for participants' work encompassed stress and relationship management, the benefits of better attention and focus, and appreciation of positive work situations.

*"I think I will manage stressful and conflict situations better."*

*"Of course it will be useful in improving attention at work and more importantly in keeping positive relationships with co-workers."*

*“To focus on the work I am currently working on, complete it before starting something new, even though it is very hard in many situations.”*

As it is evident also from participant’s insights, even the harder parts of the program can get easier with practice.

*“Often home practice was hard to do because of all the unpleasant sensations (tingling, tensions, and pain), that is why I took longer breaks. I still do the exercises and I will keep doing them. I am getting better at it; it is getting easier.”*

An essential insight during and at the end of the program was also that there is still a lot to learn, which can be associated with the continued practice.

*“I think that up till now I have been able to observe my sensations and feelings. I have not been able yet to change my response to these sensations, which I really hope to be able to achieve with practice one day.”*

*“... and I will keep doing the exercises to help myself in everyday life as much as possible.”*

## **5. Intermediate evaluation**

After the fourth session, participants were invited to share their problems, issues and insights regarding the MBT-SAF program. From their descriptions, we can see that the most puzzling issues were not taking the time for themselves, not being able to do the recommended home practices and that the program is harder than they expected.

*“The training is much harder than expected, which is good; the harder the learning process, the bigger the challenge.”*

Furthermore, after only four weeks, participants noticed changes; they were more aware of their wandering thoughts, they experienced pleasant feelings during the practice and having better focus over time.

*“I practised twice the body scan; however I had many problems with mind wandering.”*

*“I have the feeling that every day I am doing better. With every exercise, I can keep my attention for longer or better said my thoughts don't wander as much.”*

*“I have though a very comforting, relaxing sensation while observing the breath.”*



## DISCUSSION

MBT – SAF is a pilot program, following the structure of the well-researched MBCT program with some didactical changes. We were interested in understanding whether and how mindfulness training could contribute to some of the virtues of the Slovene Armed Forces and discuss the possibilities of integrating mindfulness in regular trainings.

Participants' feedbacks show that there are some benefits of participation in the MBT-SAF as expected based on prior research (Stanley, 2010; Rees, 2011; Stanley, Schaldach, Kiyonaga, & Jha, 2011; Büssing, Walach, Kohls, Zimmermann, & Trousselard, 2013; Haase et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2014; Call, Pitcock, & Pyne, 2015; Jha et al., 2016). Even though stress management was not the primary emphasis of the program, participants reported that they could see that the skills and knowledge acquired in the program would help them cope with stress. They noticed being more attentive towards their sensations and feelings, which helped them gain a better understanding of their own body and mind. This knowledge might help them maintain mental and physical health and consequently, contribute to lower absenteeism. According to these findings, MBT-SAF could also be used as a predeployment program.

Some participants noticed that they learned how to deal with difficulties in a different, non-reactive manner. The skill of dealing with difficulties by putting oneself in the role of the observer could be the reflexion of metacognition. This could be a very promising output of MBT-SAF for the Slovene military since metacognitive skills are essential in decision-making processes, conflict resolutions, when dealing with high-stress situations or situations that require staying very focused no matter what internal or external impulses arise (special forces, pyrotechnics, ammunition warehouses). Furthermore, some participants noticed that their attention improved and that they were able to stay focused on just one task until they finished it. Only then they would go to the next one. This could contribute to more efficient headquarter processes since employees would know how to deal with intrusive thoughts, sensations and emotions. Mindfulness exercises, in fact, teach trainees how to deal with the unpleasant feelings and intrusive thoughts, when bored, tired or when facing difficulty. As we can see from participants' feedbacks, they did find it challenging to persist in the relatively repetitive, non-simulative practices. However, they all saw the positive outcomes from it. In everyday military processes repetitive, sometimes dull administrative or other procedures have to be followed. Repetition and boredom might lead to attentional lapses, rumination and potentially also burnout. The experience from mindfulness practice could help employees cope with these everyday situations to stay focused on the given tasks, not respond to internal or external distractors, thus leading to a variety of workplace benefits (Good, et al., 2016).

As mentioned in prior research on mindfulness, these exercises can influence neuroplasticity (Stanley, 2010), thus leading to some neural changes that might buster metacognition, emotional intelligence, and improve stress coping. However, every change takes time. It is not surprising that mindfulness trainings are more efficient when participants practice regularly (Stanley et al., 2011; Haase et al., 2014; Jha et al., 2016). This enables neural changes. Discipline, persistence in exercises was a challenge for the participants, as we could also notice in their feedbacks. Giving enough time for discussions and doing an intermediate evaluation helped the program teacher to psycho-educate the participants on why it is important to have discipline with home practice. Moreover, at every session, the teacher emphasised that the aim of the exercises was not feeling good and relaxed, but

was learning a different approach towards the “here and now”, and not towards the pleasant and unpleasant. Not feeling good and relaxed could demotivate those participants that would have these expectations. Discussions and intermediate evaluation were an excellent way to help participants understand the benefits of the difficulties they were facing.

Beneficial was also the experience of being able to share difficulties in a group. Not being afraid or ashamed of one's difficulties, but being open about it and learning in a compassionate environment how to accept differences could help build a trusting working environment, therefore, improving relationships in troops and headquarter units. We can see from some feedbacks that in this group participation in MBT – SAF did somewhat improve relationships both with co-workers and at home.

A significant gain of MBT-SAF that the participants mentioned was also being able to notice and enjoy simple moments. Being able to notice and appreciate positive things and appreciate everyday interactions with others might contribute to ones' quality of life, their mental health and good relationships.

### **THE PERSPECTIVE OF MBT-SAF**

We can see that mindfulness-based training could benefit the Slovene Armed Forces in several ways. MBT -SAF could be used in training programs for leaders; it could be used in units with high-stress tasks (Special Forces, pyrotechnicians, pilots ...), it could be aimed at those at risk of mental health problems, in predeployment programs etc.

There are some significant findings that would have to be addressed when implementing MBT-SAF. First of all the results of our pilot study and prior research emphasise the importance of home practice. In up-coming groups, it would be a priority to establish a more rigid way of following trainees' adherence to home practice. In MBCT groups this is not an allowed common practice since participants have a history of depression. Guilt for non-adherence could trigger depressive symptoms and could present a risk for depression relapse. In the military, employees are used to a more controlling, structured and rigid environment. Implementing a better follow up on their independent home practice could help establish better discipline with practices. More practice might lead to better outcomes.

In this pilot program participants' motivation was in question. The program took place during work time. Some of them came to the program because of curiosity. Others had some mental, physical or relational issues they wanted to address. In some cases, the motivation for participation was weak or undefined. It could be the non-adherence to home practice was also due to the fact, that they were not motivated enough to sacrifice their time. The possible gains for them were not motivating enough. When implementing MBT-SAF or similar mindfulness-based programs, that require dedication, it is essential to understand better, which motivational factors are crucial to obtaining the desired results. Much time could be wasted if we were to implement such programs for people, who would not be able to cooperate properly.

### **LIMITATIONS**

The program teacher was also the researcher. This could have affected the evaluations since participants knew the teacher would read their insights. The group was very small, and we based our study on half-structured questionnaires instead of in-depth interviews. The group was very heterogeneous (age, units, specialties, some were co-workers others not) which is beneficial to the group dynamic and the program but less for the evaluating effects of such programs among military members. In further studies, we could focus on the benefits of MBT-SAF by forming a group of co-workers of the same unit, a group of leaders, a group of employees of the same specialty (ex. Pyrotechnicians), by controlling for their mental health statuses.

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