

2 Sep 2020 - Dr Helen Fitzhugh, University of East Anglia

# Mindfulness at work – can it make a difference to performance and job satisfaction?

A recent trial of mindfulness in policing highlighted the potential benefits of incorporating it into wellbeing strategy

In the early 21st century, the idea of practising 'mindfulness' moved from being a niche activity into public awareness in the UK. Research studies confirmed the effectiveness of medically approved mindfulness courses for addressing common mental health issues. Yet for some, scepticism remains, especially over whether it can help otherwise healthy people at work.

The [Mindfulness Initiative](#) describes mindfulness as: *'paying attention to what's happening in the present moment in the mind, body and external environment, with an attitude of curiosity and kindness'*.

Because this is such a simple idea, people often have misconceptions about mindfulness. One of the challenges is getting past resistance linked to prejudices about the type of people who can benefit: misconceptions that they are people who do not face much stress, who are naturally 'spiritual', or can spend a lot of time just 'sitting'.

These prejudices were challenged by the results of a large-scale randomised controlled trial of mindfulness in policing, completed in 2019. A six-month trial examining the resilience and wellbeing of more than a thousand police officers and staff tested two online mindfulness resources (Headspace – a commercially available app and MindFit Cop – a bespoke new mindfulness course for policing). The trial resulted in strong evidence that practising mindfulness after using online tools can make a meaningful difference to the wellbeing of police officers and staff.

## A robust test

Survey evidence from Mind in 2015 and the Police Federation in 2018 suggested that among police service employees there are high levels of stress and common mental health issues. The College of Policing looked for ways to address this, and one option was investigating whether mindfulness could be useful in policing. I was brought into the College of Policing under a Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) and led a randomised controlled trial across five forces in England and Wales: a large, robust test of what works.

The College team worked with Detective Inspector Jenni McIntyre-Smith from Bedfordshire Police, who was both a serving officer and a qualified mindfulness trainer. With mindfulness trainer Michael Chaskalson she designed the bespoke mindfulness training course 'MindFit Cop'. She also helped to communicate the message that mindfulness training is just another form of strength training; training your mind to be fit and resilient for the job.

The trial split police officers and staff into three groups – one used MindFit Cop, another used Headspace and the third group delayed using either for six months until the trial was over. Including a group who did not use the resources gave a control group, so that any difference in performance and wellbeing between them and the active participants could be more confidently attributed to the mindfulness apps rather than external circumstances. The active participants learnt how to meditate and found out more about the science and applications of mindfulness.

## Making a difference

The research study showed, after six months of access, that both online mindfulness resources (Headspace and MindFit Cop) improved average:

- wellbeing
- life satisfaction
- resilience, and
- work performance.

Headspace was slightly more effective than MindFit Cop initially, but technical issues affected MindFit Cop's take-up and usage in the first month. After six months, the difference in effectiveness between the two resources was much reduced.

Fascinatingly, police officers and staff who felt that they did not have much control over

how they spent their working time experienced even more wellbeing benefit than those who already felt more in control. This has implications for other high-stress roles and contradicts the popular concern that only office-based professionals able to manage their own time and workloads can benefit from mindfulness.

### Understanding continued resistance

Even among a list of interested volunteers, a quarter did not engage with the online resources. We used interviews with 29 participants to identify why. While some found it hard to find a suitable time and place to practise, others experienced issues with registering and logging on to the resources. There was still embarrassment for some about taking ten minutes' break to meditate in the working environment – showing how fears about co-worker reactions to mindfulness can prevent its useful application in the workplace. This insight helped inform suggestions for how to improve MindFit Cop and the promotion of mindfulness in policing in the future.

### What this means

MindFit Cop was made available for free to all police officers and staff on the [Oscar Kilo website](#) in 2019. DI McIntyre-Smith was delighted to bring the benefits of mindfulness to policing, to help people stay mentally healthy when working in a fast-paced, pressurised job.

“I am so pleased with the results of this project and so proud that my work can now be used by everyone working in policing across England and Wales,” she said.

The large-scale trial has implications not just for policing, but for all organisations which may previously have thought their work was too stressful and busy for mindfulness to play a role in their wellbeing strategy. Carrying out this work demonstrated that quite low-key interventions (such as offering people access to online training) can still make tangible differences to people's working and personal lives. In our current socially-distanced world, understanding that activities delivered remotely can improve employee wellbeing and performance is more important than ever.

You can read the full 'Mindfulness in Policing' research report on the [College of Policing website](#).

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## Dr Helen Fitzhugh

Dr Helen Fitzhugh is a member of the [ProPEL Hub](#): a major new initiative designed to help

boost productivity and wellbeing, through using research-based evidence to support the growth of better workplaces in the UK. The CIPD and its members will play a key role in both shaping the content and putting it into practice.

The ProPEL Hub recently joined CIPD Scotland & NI for a [webinar](#) to discuss the importance of employee wellbeing in the workplace and how to ensure the cost-effectiveness of wellbeing solutions.

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