

**MIND-FITNESS offered at the European Commission's Joint Research Centre:  
September - October 2018**

**CONTEXT**

These days, people are not really surprised that changes are happening because change has become rather continuous.

However, the pace of volatility, the degree of uncertainty, the level of complexity and the grade of ambiguity amount to a major drain of energy, jeopardizing many people's vitality, unless ... we consciously engage in building our resilience.

The Human Resource department has recognized people's need and desire to strengthen their ability to cope with experiences due to uncertainty.

**THE OBJECTIVE**

Learning to deal with the experiences that accompany changes is the need and want that has been identified as important and urgent.

Both, the preventive effect and the restorative effect are sought after.

Preventive, in order to protect people against sliding, losing their edge or even burnout or drop out.

Restorative in order to support a person who might be returning from a period of feeling stressed-out and to re-establish herself/ himself in a confident way.

The form that the Human Resources department has identified as a valuable answer to the existing need to cope with the effects of stress is a training to achieve more equanimity, reduce anxiety and allow people to be more present in their demanding responsibilities, while not being time-consuming to acquire. In short, the program supports the strengthening of resilience.

Mind-Fitness training is an answer to the need and demand identified: it has its foundation in learning basic strategies to enhance mindfulness and vitality.

**FRAMEWORK – V.U.C.A. in a Changing World**

The most characteristic aspects of continuous change - like volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity – have become known as VUCA, an acronym that has been introduced and developed over the past decade.

These elements form the context in which organizations view their current and future state:

V for Volatility; the nature and dynamics of change, and the nature and speed of change forces and change catalysts.

U for Uncertainty; the lack of predictability, the prospects for surprise, and the sense of awareness and understanding of issues and events.

C for Complexity; the multiplex of forces, the confounding of issues, no cause-and-effect chain and confusion that surround an organization.

A for Ambiguity; the haziness of reality, the potential for misreads, and the mixed meanings of conditions; cause-and-effect confusion.

These elements come together in ways that either confound decisions or sharpen the capacity to look ahead, plan ahead and move ahead. VUCA sets the stage for managing and leading, e.g.

- anticipating the issues that shape conditions
- understanding the consequences of issues and actions
- appreciating the interdependence of variables
- preparing for alternative realities and challenges
- interpreting and addressing relevant opportunities

Attention for these characteristics, accompanying change, therefore sharpens awareness and readiness.

Mind-Fitness-training is addressing the key competences of attention, focus, resilience and adaptability that are vital for healthy inner leadership as well as for persons in formal leadership positions. It contributes to awareness and empathy, key factors of leadership well established by science.

#### **MIND-FITNESS TRAINING – The Promise**

Mind-Fitness draws upon insights from evidence-based scientific studies on the impact of guidance towards a stronger level of mindfulness and vitality.

The scientific findings show that the trainings work because of the plasticity of the human brain and organism. The mind can change the brain due to experiences, behaviour, environment etc. and due to mental activity. Neuroscientific research indicates that experience can actually change both the brain's physical structure (anatomy) and functional organization (physiology).

The impact of mindfulness practice on the brain has been made visible with fMRI scans, among others in studies directed by Richard Davidson and Jon Kabat-Zinn. In other words, neuroplasticity states that the mind influences changes in the brain and in turn the functioning of the brain impacts how the mind operates.

The promise carried by these insights - due to latest neuroscientific research - is that we ourselves can reinforce our brain functions through mind-fitness and thereby boost the brain capacity at our disposal for cognitive functioning.

Building mind-fitness means to develop skills for improving resilience to stress and for enhancing performance. With mind-fitness you maintain peak functioning despite the instability created by challenging situations, conflicting demands and uncertainty.

#### **MIND-FITNESS TRAINING – The Offer**

Basically the training cultivates skills to enhance mindfulness and vitality with specific exercises. To begin with, these exercises build attention control and concentration.

Also, they provide resilience training for coping with the physiological and psychological effects of distress, especially if prolonged.

Resilience is the ability to function effectively during stressful experiences and to bounce back quickly after such experiences. To develop resilience, we need to treat stressful experiences as training situations: consciously recognizing the distress as an option for exercise means tolerating to be pushed outside of our comfort zone and then stimulating our body and mind to recover effectively instead of remaining in the rut.

When we train our mind to become more mindful we protect our vital energy and are less prone to energy leakage and loss. Consciously addressing stress reactions and fostering resilience improve our vitality and our ability to recognize our personal energy boosters and use them optimally.

#### **MIND-FITNESS TRAINING – The Content**

The aspects of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity are all addressed in the mind-fitness-training. Participants are invited to recognize and examine their experiences, and are encouraged to allow and notice what is actually happening without prejudging. The program includes the following facets:

1. Recognizing one's specific energy bandits and energy boosters
2. Attention control and training of focus
3. Awareness of personal habits and how to create wholesome ones
4. Transience and volatility of experiences
5. Significance of sensory experience for reality checks
6. Understanding the mechanisms of recurring thoughts
7. Emotions as pointers for exploration of experiences
8. The complexity of the interplay between sensory experiences, thoughts and emotions
9. Dealing with adversity.

Participants typically self-report changes in their span of attention, focus, resilience and behaviour and so do their co-workers. BeVital offers the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ) at the beginning and the end of the training cycle to supplement self-reporting and colleagues' feedback. This instrument is based on independently developed mindfulness questionnaires, yielding five factors that appear to represent elements of mindfulness as it is currently conceptualized. The five facets are observing, describing, acting with awareness, non-judging of inner experience, and non-reactivity to inner experience. The result of one's questionnaire is offered to the individual participant who can share it with their manager or HR-professional.

#### **MIND-FITNESS TRAINING – The Practical Aspects**

The training takes place at your premises to offer participants the comfort of staying on campus with no need to travel. The training is provided in the language of participants' choice.

The basic training consists of 11 training modules, one introduction with concrete tips, seven trainings at a weekly interval and three at a monthly interval. Other than these 11 face-to-face contact moments with the trainer, the participants practice in between trainings to establish a wholesome exercise routine, just as they would do to learn a language or train their body at a gym.

The seven weekly training modules are set up to transfer skills, the three monthly modules consolidate each individual's practice and connect it more deeply with the challenges and setbacks in life and work, thus contributing to a more mindful life and work.

Essentially, the training introduces participants to a style of living and working that will keep them balanced even amidst major change and challenges. Mind-Fitness-training contributes to quality of life and reduces the dangers of burnout and dropout.

Each module consists of practical part – exercises – and cognitive part – providing the underlying scientific insights gained from research on effectiveness and explanation about what exactly happens biologically that underlays the effectiveness.

Research shows that the changes in the brain only occur as we do the exercises – just like we can only learn to play the piano as we play the piano. Cognitive explanations alone do not change anything, yet in combination with the exercises cognitive knowledge does enhance the effect of the mind-fitness practice: the combination of doing and understanding augments results.

### **BENEFITS**

This mind-fitness training contributes to enabling the individual participant to take responsibility for optimal performance even under demanding circumstances causing feelings of uncertainty and ambiguity. This individual effort is needed parallel to the solutions developed by the organization as a whole.

Practitioners and scientists report and experience e.g. the following benefits:

1. Taming stress and anxiety
2. Soothing the mind
3. Optimizing how you regulate mental ruminations
4. Mitigating impulsivity reactions
5. Decreasing negative inclinations, like aggression, anger, flight, frustration
6. Improving concentration capacity
7. Strengthening positive tendencies, like calmness, serenity, benevolence
8. Fostering a wholesome relationship towards one's experiences

Thus, mind-fitness improves the quality of our life.

In short, individuals increase their capacity to wisely answer to their stressful personal experiences and be more attentive to the joy and satisfaction derived from living and working with deeper awareness and stronger attention.

The Mind-Fitness training offered by BeVital is enhanced when the mental aspects of fitness are supplemented with training in all four aspects of vitality: physical, emotional and interactional.