

# RESILIENCE & MINDFULNESS TRAINING

## AT BEND FIRE DEPARTMENT:

- ◆ DEVELOPMENT OF THE PLAN
- ◆ DELIVERY OF THE TRAINING
- ◆ RESULTS



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# Agency-Wide Resilience & Mindfulness Training at Bend Fire Department: Development, Delivery, Results

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Brant Rogers <sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction; Development

During early 2017 Brandon Ladd <sup>2</sup>, Andy Barram <sup>3</sup>, Bill King <sup>4</sup> and Brant Rogers, the planning team, collaborated on development of a brief resilience and mindfulness training method to introduce relevant concepts, evidence and the experiential practice of mindfulness to everyone in the agency during a one-week period. The agency was awarded the Helen Lorenz Grant in early 2017 to fund the training.

The training framework and curriculum were designed to offer training during work hours to everyone in the agency; firefighters, day staff, families, maintenance crews, and others. Rather than attempt to involve a few personnel in the more intensive and proven 8-week or other more involved trainings (see below) planning was pointed toward a simple introduction to the benefits with brief, direct experience of mindfulness practice. The general intention was to offer the agency's culture a training that would demystify the practice of mindfulness and to frame it in a very practical way as a mode of meeting the challenges of this high-stress, trauma-laden profession.

## Summary:

**Background and Objective:** Systematic, appropriately adapted mindfulness trainings have proven to be extremely effective interventions to help people enhance resilience while minimizing the impacts of stress, burnout, organizational disfunction, mood disorders, chronic pain and many other conditions. Recent research has shown such trainings are effective for first responder professionals. This training was designed to be a simple, accessible agency-wide introduction to the evidence for and experiential practice of mindfulness.

**Methods:** Firefighters and day-staff at Bend Fire Department attended at least one 2-hour mindfulness training session during working hours during a one week period; approximately 65 personnel, 70% of the agency. The training was approximately one hour experiential and one hour conceptual and didactic.

**Findings:** A self-report post-training survey found that the training was broadly well-received and effective; personal and professional benefits, continued interest, stress awareness, health, sleep, work relationships, continued practice.

**Implications:** While research shows that well-established 8-week mindfulness-based trainings for small cohorts of first responders is extremely effective, this simple introductory, all-agency training shows a number of benefits; personal and organizational. This may be a practical way of introducing practical elements and encouraging in-depth and efficacious trainings while enhancing self-care for firefighters and staff.

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<sup>4</sup> **Bill King** is the Behavioral Health Specialist with the Tualatin Valley Fire & Rescue.

In recent years mindfulness-based meditation, yoga and other mind-body practices have become more widely known to first responder cultures. Credible research is beginning to find that such practices are effective ways of mitigating trauma, stress and burnout (Von Der Kolk, 2015). During 2014 in one of the nation's first mindfulness trainings designed for a firefighting agency, Tualatin Valley Fire & Rescue (TVF&R) considered the mindfulness meditation training model developed at the University of Massachusetts Medical School known as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR).

This model has over thirty years of research demonstrating its efficacy in helping people enhance resilience and reduce the negative effects of stress. Working with Brant Rogers, a certified MBSR trainer, TVF&R modified the 8-week MBSR curriculum to accommodate the particular nature of the culture of firefighters and called it Mindfulness-Based Resilience Training (MBRT). Since the spring of 2015 approximately 130 TVF&R personnel have gone through MBRT (King, et al; 2017).

Trainings like these have been studied for over three decades and show the down-to-earth value of learning the practice of mindfulness (Ludwig & Kabat-Zinn, 2008). Testing before and after such trainings shows dramatic and statistically significant improvements in a wide array of both mental and physical health measures as well as durable levels of cognitive function under duress.

This held true for TVF&R's training in pre/post testing (King et al, 2017). Likewise police officers in a similar 8-Week MBRT program developed with Brant showed dramatic improvements in measures of burnout, resiliences, stress levels, cognitive function, sleep levels, family problems, organizational stress and more (Christopher et al, 2015).

While mindfulness trainings like the one developed at TVF&R described above are new and very unique, Bend Fire Department's

agency-wide training is yet another unique and potentially very practical training method for the profession and may well be considered by agencies nation-wide as a way of complementing critical incident and peer support programs by supporting firefighter resilience, health and well-being.

## **Delivery of the Training**

During a one-week period in late July 2017 the agency arranged for ten shift-friendly 2-hour trainings for firefighters, leadership, peer support, and various day staff to attend during working hours. The majority of agency personnel, approximately 65, attended at least one of the 2-hour trainings; 4 to 25 people attended the sessions depending on shift /workday availability.

The two-hour training sessions were designed to provide a clear and direct explanation of the evidence for the value of mindfulness practice for firefighters. Basic research, written testimonials and video interviews of first responders who completed mindfulness-based trainings were combined with question/answer didactic learning for about 45 minutes of the two-hour sessions.

A full hour of each session was dedicated to introducing and practicing modes of experiential mindfulness practice that have proven effective in MBRT curricula taught by Brant:

- 3-minute 'mindful pause'
- Mindful movement, physical exercise
- 20 minute body-scan awareness meditation
- 10-minute sitting meditation practice
- Brief interpersonal reflection after each of these practices.

About a quarter hour of each session was devoted to describing and encouraging use of the Headspace App as a way of continuing to reap the benefits of what was learned in the two-hour introduction (Headspace, 2017).

Bill King, the Behavioral Health Specialist at TVF&R, offered one 2-hour training specifically for the Peer Support Team. He shared his

experience with his agency’s peer support and Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) work and how mindfulness training has complemented and supported these.

Appropriate resilience and mindfulness themed references (Rogers 2014; Von Der Kolk, 2015), a firefighter-relevant binder of resources and articles compiled by Brant, and a one-year subscription to *Mindful Magazine* were provided to the library of each fire station to support those interested in learning more.

### Results of the Training

Monitoring the results of this training was a high priority for the planning team. Considering that mindfulness training in general and this training method in particular are very new for the profession it was determined that some form of evaluation would be crucial to provide evidence of practical value.

With limited time in each session and with so many individuals involved, the planning team developed an online, anonymous, 18-question survey to administer after the training’s completion. Questions were primarily concerned with participants’ opinions about the effectiveness and value of the training.

Questions were both multiple choice and brief essay. The survey was designed to be completed within 5 minutes on any computer or hand-held device with access to the internet.

Everyone in the agency was asked to attend one of the 2-hour trainings with 65 able to attend. More than half of the trainees, 36 or 55% completed the survey within 6 weeks of the training week.

### Summary of the Survey Data

**Personnel:** The vast majority of those who responded to the survey were firefighters, 32 (88%) of those, 10 were peer support members. Four administrative staff responded.

**Trainee’s General Experience: Q1,** The first survey question asked folks to write one or two words to describe the their personal experience of the training. Reviewing all the answers to this question in the box below it is obvious that the vast majority of respondents found something positive in the training. The words intriguing, relaxing, helpful, and interesting occur multiple times with such words as inspiring, interesting, necessary, affirming, beneficial and relevant.

- **Q6 and Q7;** Multiple choice answers on the next page showed that the vast majority of participants learned at least some concepts and skills that apply immediately to their job and the their personal life.
- **Q9 and Q10;** Likewise respondents indicated almost universally, over 80%, that they would recommend this kind of training to others in the agency. Also, over 80% would like to see further training like this in the agency.

**Q1 Write one or two words describing your experience of the Training**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>affirming, inspiring</i></li> <li>• <i>another tool in the toolbox</i></li> <li>• <i>beneficial</i></li> <li>• <i>curiosity</i></li> <li>• <i>ehhh...interesting</i></li> <li>• <i>enjoyable and enlightening</i></li> <li>• <i>eye opening, encouraging</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>fine, relaxing</i></li> <li>• <i>good info</i></li> <li>• <i>good usable information</i></li> <li>• <i>helpful</i></li> <li>• <i>helpful positive</i></li> <li>• <i>insightful and refreshing</i></li> <li>• <i>interesting</i></li> <li>• <i>intriguing</i></li> <li>• <i>intriguing</i></li> <li>• <i>intriguing</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>intriguing/too long</i></li> <li>• <i>low stress</i></li> <li>• <i>mildly useful</i></li> <li>• <i>missed it</i></li> <li>• <i>necessary &amp; relevant</i></li> <li>• <i>not useful</i></li> <li>• <i>odd</i></li> <li>• <i>was nice</i></li> <li>• <i>potentially helpful</i></li> <li>• <i>relaxing</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>relaxing</i></li> <li>• <i>relaxing</i></li> <li>• <i>relaxing</i></li> <li>• <i>renewal &amp; refreshing</i></li> <li>• <i>restful</i></li> <li>• <i>rewarding</i></li> </ul>
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Bill King, Behavioral Health Specialist at TVF&R presentation to Peer Support Team about mindfulness practice .



Practicing a mindful pause.



Mindful movement was part of each 2-hour training.



Movement with awareness supports the ability to prevent injury, proactive self-care, and presence under physical duress.

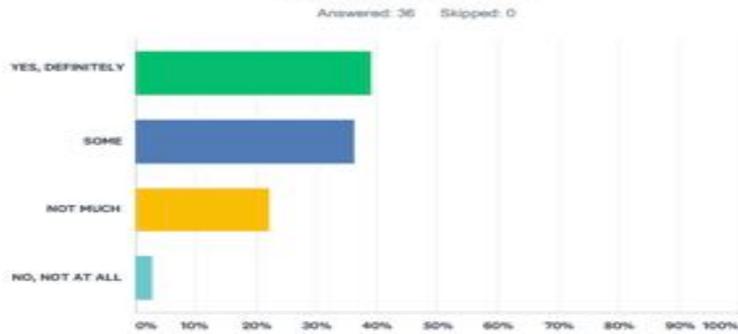


Cooperative movement with awareness was another exercise during the trainings.

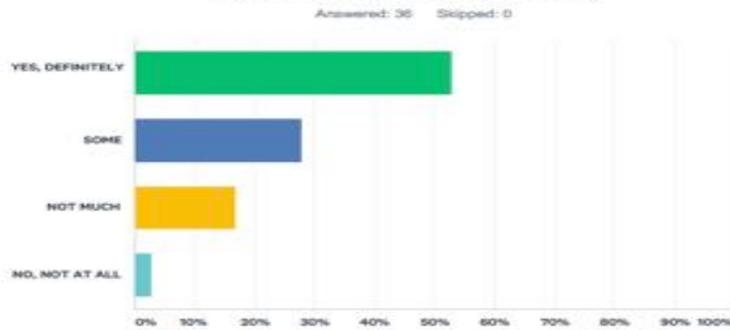


Body scan awareness training supports the ability to stay present even when at ease.

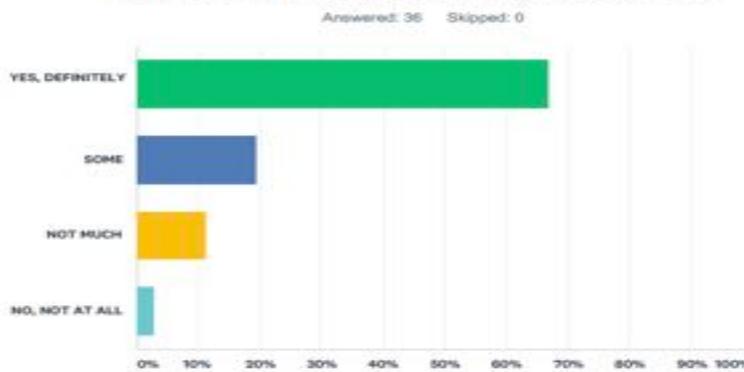
**Q6 I learned concepts and skills that I can immediately apply to benefit my job (check one):**



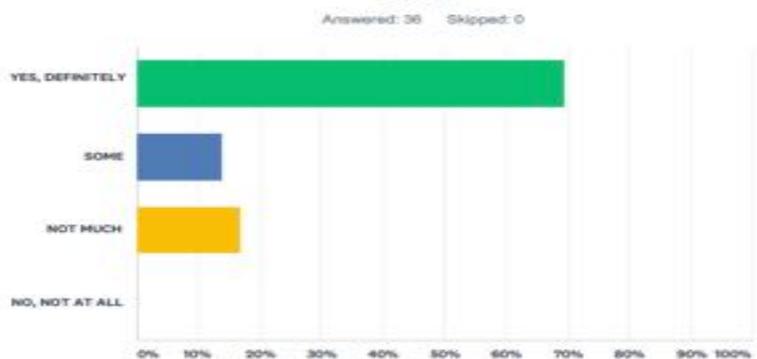
**Q7 I learned concepts and skills that I can immediately apply to benefit my personal life (check one):**



**Q9 I will recommend this kind of training to other members of my team, shift, department, and/or family (check one):**



**Q10 I would like to see further training like this for the agency (check one):**

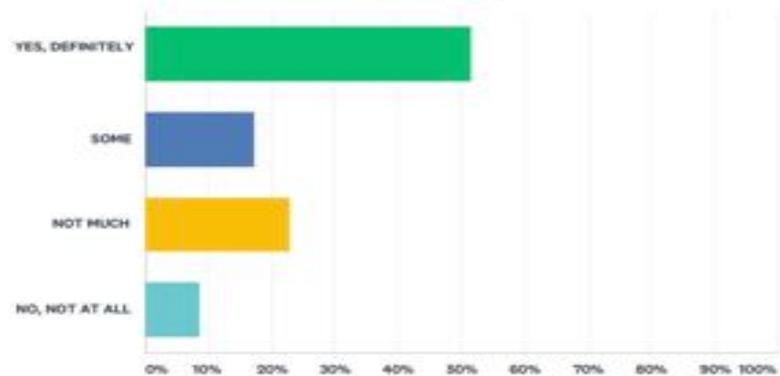


**Trainees Acknowledge Tangible Consequences:**

- **STRESS AWARENESS - Q11;** The vast majority, about 70% of respondents acknowledged to at least some extent they are more aware of what is stressful in their lives while about 30% found little or no such consequence.

**Q11 I have more awareness of what is stressful in my life as a result of this training. (check one):**

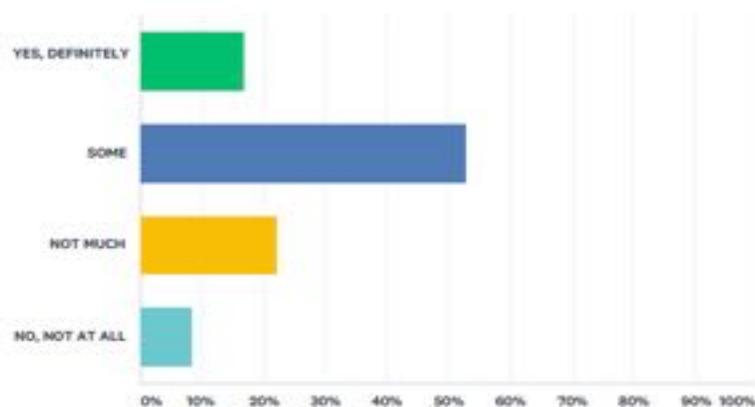
Answered: 35 Skipped: 1



- **ABILITY TO HANDLE STRESSFUL SITUATIONS - Q12;** A similar percentage of respondents found that their ability to handle stressful situations was improved at least some, though not as definitely as simple awareness (Q11). Similarly about 30% found little or no such value.

**Q12 I am more able to handle stressful situations appropriately as a result of this training. (check one):**

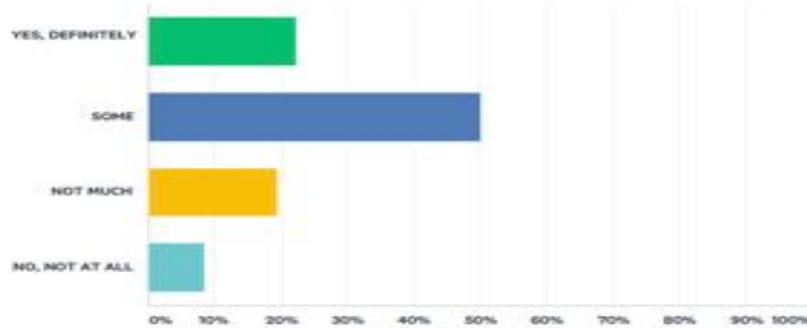
Answered: 36 Skipped: 0



- **BETTER AT CORRECTING NEGATIVE HEALTH HABITS & BEHAVIORS - Q13;** Like Q11 and Q12 the majority of trainees found at least some value here with a minority finding little or no value.

**Q13 I am better at correcting negative health habits/behaviors as a result of this training. (check one):**

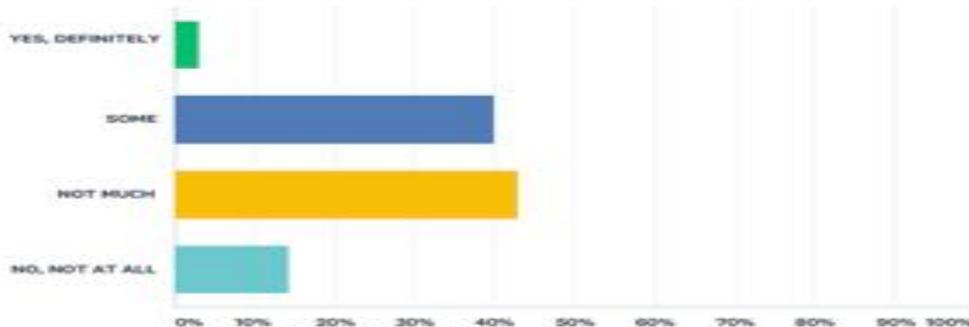
Answered: 36 Skipped: 0



- **SLEEPING BETTER - Q14;** About 40% of trainees found some value in the training for sleep while 60% found little or no value.

**Q14 I sleep better a result of this training. (check one):**

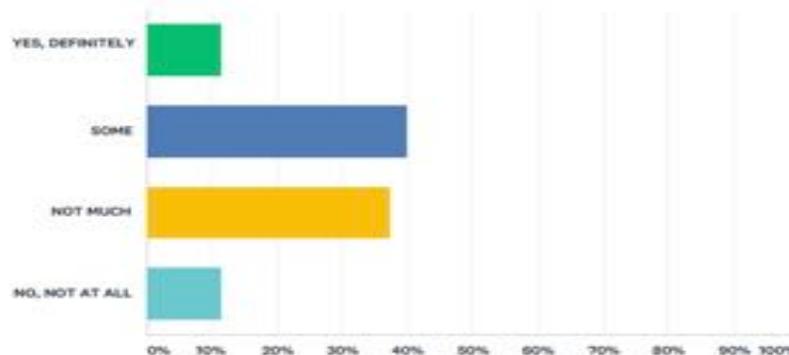
Answered: 35 Skipped: 1



- **RELATING BETTER AT WORK - Q15;** About half of the trainees found at least to some degree that they related better to the coworkers as a result of this training.

**Q15 I relate to the folks at work better as a result of this training. (check one):**

Answered: 35 Skipped: 1



### Trainee's Statements About What They Liked and Disliked:

- **LIKED MOST - Q16;** This short essay question posed an open-ended opportunity to note what participants liked. By-and-large they articulated a broad array of things they liked about the training. Many of the comments acknowledged the value they found in sharing this with peers and acknowledged how they appreciate the agency introducing this.

#### Q16 What did you like most about this training?

- *The reminder to stay present and ability to calm myself.*
- *Experiencing it with others in my department.*
- *The app and having more people willing to try stress reduction.*
- *I liked the fact that we're talking about it as a group.*
- *Learning how easy it can be to do little things daily to really improve your quality of life.*
- *Expressed the importance of creating space in the ol' noggin.'*
- *The way Brant was able to answer questions and try to relate with people new to mindfulness.*
- *I liked learning to try and let thoughts go that are negative or worrisome and being mindful on how I feel as well as others.*
- *Solid, entry level training on recognizing stress and basic techniques to lower its impact.*
- *I've done the ten day headspace and I have more self awareness.*
- *The reminder that mental health affects our whole body health.*
- *There are many of us that have never been exposed to this kind of thinking and awareness. Mindfulness should be used in every aspect of life and all of us should understand it.*
- *Everyone was open to the concept, whatever they think.*
- *Other methods of stress relief are more effective for me.*
- *I have been practicing meditation for a few years. I love seeing it as a department training.*
- *That the department is trying to help out their employees.*
- *Excellent and non threatening delivery from Brant.*
- *Another idea to try when you are having issues.*
- *I liked the introduction to the practice.*
- *Learned a new relaxation technique.*
- *Peers opening up to each other.*
- *Relaxing and body rest techniques.*
- *Introduction to mindfulness.*
- *How easy it is to use.*
- *The Headspace App.*
- *When I fell asleep.*
- *Relaxed atmosphere.*
- *Ego was left at the door.*
- *It was different.*
- *Community.*
- *Relaxing.*
- *Yoga.*



- **LIKED LEAST - Q17;** There were a diversity of thoughtful comments here. None noted acute difficulties for trainees though a common dislike was that trainees were distracted by the dispatch chatter and radios in the room (10 such answers). There hadn't been prearrangement to minimize this because everyone was on duty and calls for service kept up. The second most common 'dislike' answer was that there was nothing they disliked (7 such answers)

### Q17 What did you like least about this training?

- *Large group setting. But understand limitations of FD training sessions.*
- *The training was great and there wasn't anything about it specifically that I didn't like. Not having the interruptions from calls would have been nice but that's how this job is.*
- *The group activities. Simply doesn't translate to the contemporary workplace as it is now, and certainly not relevant to practice done in private.*
- *It very much felt like any other yoga, stress management, or crisis intervention class I've ever attended. It felt like capitalization on the term "Mindfulness" to repackage what we all have been told for a very long time.*
- *The human body is designed to work best when it gets to take a break, stretch/relax/breathe.*
- *They're called socks not stockings. The last thing I want to picture is a bunch of firefighters on the floor in stockings.*
- *May have been better suited for off duty time?*
- *I think it needs to be made clear that this practice does not produce immediate results. It may take time well beyond the 10 days to see benefit.*
- *Oddly, because it is new training, on top of existing training and increased call volume, I find trying to get mindfulness or headspace done is another stressor in life.*
- *I think the space for this style of training would be better suited in the forest.*
- *Noted they disliked the many dispatch radio interruptions (10x).*
- *Not as profound as I thought the process would have been.*
- *More guidance on setting up the headspace app.*
- *That I fell asleep and almost missed a call.*
- *Noted there was nothing they disliked (7x).*
- *Went over some things I already knew.*
- *The group exercises with the rope.*
- *The awkward instructor.*
- *We got the short version.*
- *Just not my thing.*
- *All the stretching.*
- *Group exercises.*
- *PP*



- **SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENTS - Q17;** There were many thoughtful comments here. Once again there were a number of comments about dispatch distractions and further, timing of the training to minimize call volume. Also, in few comments, trainees indicated a desire for leadership to be in the trainings alongside firefighters. A number of comments acknowledged the value of such training and noted more would be helpful. A couple of comments indicated that they found little added value in the training in that what they do already is helpful for resilience.

### Q18 What suggestions do you have for improvements to this training?

- *The crews that are on duty doing this training need to be on delayed response with someone out of the room monitoring the radio.*
- *This isn't for everyone, and that wasn't portrayed in the training. Maybe have other options to help out with stress/sleeping/bad calls/etc.*
- *The concept seems beneficial, but it also seemed like he was trying to teach a two week class in two hours and may have missed some beneficial information.*
- *Some of the questions above did not allow for an accurate evaluation of the training. For example: #11. I fully recognize what is stressful in my life before I attended this training. #14. Despite tremendous stress in my life, I sleep very well when given the opportunity. Nothing to do with that.*
- *I have to ask if the Fire Service as a whole is finally recognizing that one very large safety concern/liability while on duty is the cumulative effect interrupted sleep has on safety, effectiveness and mental health specifically. Is this class an attempt to help mitigate the problem short of having to completely change how the fire service schedules working hours versus the human need for sleep?*
- *#15 Implies that I learned a new concept from this particular training that now allows me to relate better at work. Even if a person has not had this training and practices taking a break, stretch/relax and breathing, they are more likely to relate better with others.*
- *I don't believe this training can be improved on. Individuals can either preemptively taking a break, stretch/relax and breath or, they have to experience stress outside their normal tolerance levels that then inspires them to seek ways to cope.*
- *It would be nice to see members of the management team attend these sessions. I think in their eyes this is just lip service. Makes many of us sad. Today's fire service is nothing like what they use as their reference.*
- *Don't schedule during the summer. Run one session per day in the mornings when call volume is low.*
- *Potential off duty timing or have BC monitor radio traffic, so you can completely relax and participate in the full effect of the training.*
- *We need more buy in from admin. The line guys cannot continue to be the leaders in wellness. We absolutely need a wellness administrator that oversees and ensures that we adhere to mental and physical wellness. It would be cost efficient in reduced sick leave to have a more robust wellness program. We need a non line position overseeing these programs.*
- *More group dynamic training. The loop/trust exercises were cool.*
- *Less distractions. Hire people to cover so the radios are off.*
- *This was a solid, basic class on stress management.*
- *Bring it back around at least 2, maybe 3-4 times a year?*
- *Noted they didn't have suggestions (13x).*
- *Dedicated time with out interruptions.*
- *More follow up in order to monitor progress.*
- *Confined to single crews, delayed and able to.*
- *More time to do the lab again.*
- *Keep up the good work.*
- *Expand the training.*



**Moving Forward:** The Headspace App was a central component of the training as a method of continuing and deepening the practices learned during the Resilience and Mindfulness Training.

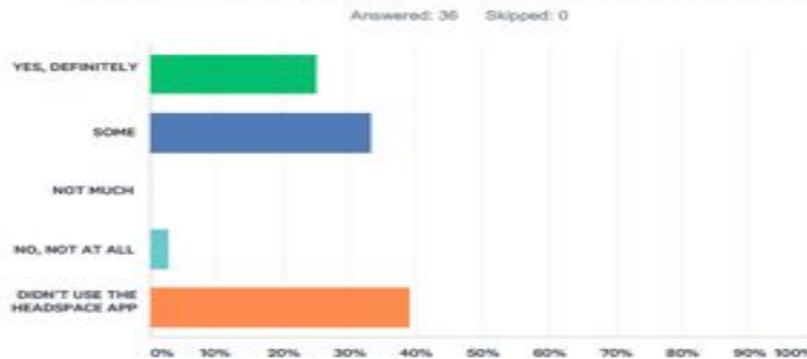
- **COMPLETION OF THE HEADSPACE 10-DAY Q3;** Over 40% of the respondents had completed the 10-Day Headspace basic course as recommended during the training.

**Q3 I have completed, or will complete this week, the HeadSpace 10-Day Challenge described in the training.**



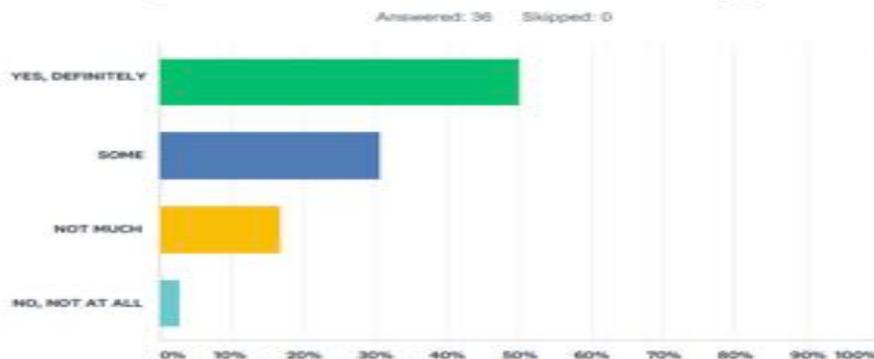
- **VALUE OF HEADSPACE Q5;** About half of the training participants have found that it helped them learn to apply what they learned in the training. About 40% didn't use the app at all.

**Q5 The Headspace app has helped me learn to apply what I learned in my Resilience & Mindfulness training (check one):**



- **Continuation of Practice Q8;** About 80% of the respondents indicate that they will continue to practice what they learned at least some.

**Q8 I will practice what I learned in some way (check one):**



## General Considerations & Discussion

There is undeniable evidence in recent research that the practice of mindfulness can be a very effective complement to medical care and therapy. In recent years, multi-week mindfulness-based trainings designed for first responders have likewise proven helpful for a variety of health status measures critical for people in these trauma-laden professions (Christopher, et al 2016). There is evidence also that these trainings can enhance organizational effectiveness (Jha, et al 2014). In fact such trainings are proving helpful for peer support and Critical Incident and Stress Management (CISM) programs (King et al, 2017)

Bend Fire Department's approach in this training was unique in that it was a broadly applied agency-wide training and very abbreviated 2-hours introductory sessions for the trainees. Rather than train a few agency personnel with a proven, intensive 8-week training, the planning team opted for this abbreviated training aimed at demystifying mindfulness while enhancing the agency's cultural awareness and experience of the value of such a practice.

Taken as a whole, the training's survey shows that the vast majority of trainees found at least some value in a number of ways and indicated that it was an effective and helpful exercise. Most noted that they learned something of value and that they could immediately apply this to their work and personal lives while noting that they would recommend this sort of training to others at work. Most trainees noted the practicalities of the training; more aware of stress, more able to deal with stress, better self-care, improved interpersonal relationships. Most also indicated that they would continue to practice what they learned in the training.

The limitations of the measure of effectiveness in the brief, post-training self-report survey will be obvious; 55% survey completion rate, no pre-post training comparisons, no control group, opinion-based questions. However, the diversity of questions and question formats provided ample opportunity for trainees to offer both positive and negative assessments of their experience and their sense of the training's value. Regardless of the limitations of this survey, the training has without doubt impacted a large number of firefighters and day staff in a positive way and inspired them to learn more about how they might stay healthy and effective in the face of this challenging, trauma-laden profession.

While accomplishing the goals of the agency's planning team, the training has offered an example to other agencies across the nation for a very practical way of enhancing the health, wellbeing, and effectiveness of their personnel.

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