
Mindfulness can relieve stress

This user abstract presents the following Campbell systematic review: de Vibe M, Bjørndal A, Tipton E, Hammerstrøm KT, Kowalski K. Mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR) for improving health, quality of life and social functioning in adults.

This article was written by Katrine Strøjer Madsen, SFI Campbell, and has been approved by the authors of the systematic review.

Stress is a key feature of modern life for many people. Unfortunately, there can be negative consequences of too much or prolonged stress. Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programmes provide training in mindfulness as a self-management strategy to reduce stress and manage emotion. A new systematic review from Campbell shows that these programmes can relieve stress and provide people with the tools to cope with a busy lifestyle. Furthermore, the systematic review documents other positive effects of the MBSR programme, such as better mental health and improved quality of life.

1.1 WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

Mindfulness has become an increasingly popular method of dealing with stress. A range of different courses are now available for people seeking training in mindfulness. This review defines mindfulness as the ability to "non-judgementally observe sensations, thoughts, emotions and the environment, while encouraging openness, curiosity and acceptance". The theory behind practicing mindfulness is that training in increasing one's awareness should help to relieve stress and stress related problems.

This systematic review is limited to studies which look at a specific type of mindfulness training called MBSR programmes. MBSR is a well described training course developed by the American stress expert Jon Kabat-Zinn in the late 1970s. Through simple mental and physical exercises, the 8-week course seeks to train participants to be more conscious of what is happening in and around them and to increase their awareness and acceptance of each moment. The goal is that participants learn how they can use increased mindfulness to cope better with challenges in their daily lives.

1.2 POSITIVE EFFECT ON PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

MBSR programmes might be an attractive option for those interested in improving the way they cope with stress. This systematic review demonstrates that MBSR programmes have positive effects on mental health for participants with both physical and psychological problems. Psychological problems, for the purpose of this review, include anxiety, depression and stress, and range from milder to more moderate conditions. The included studies focus on a range of different groups of subjects and the results indicate that MBSR has the same

effect on mental health measures for both clinical and non-clinical populations. The programmes have a greater impact on psychological problems than physical problems. The length of time for an MBSR programme to have an effect is still unknown. There is evidence that MBSR programmes also positively impacts participants' quality of life, personal development, such as coping skills, empathy and the ability to be mindful. The latter impacts are based on weaker research.

1.3 FACTS ABOUT THE SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

The results of the systematic review are based on a meta-analysis of 26 impact studies, which included a total of 1,456 test subjects. All of the included studies are randomised controlled trials, where one patient group received MBSR and another patient group received a different or no treatment. As a result of this setup the effects of the MBSR programme can be isolated. Studies from USA, Norway, Sweden, Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands were included in the systematic review.

The included studies varied in terms of programme characteristics. The MBSR programmes vary in the number of hours of training per week and range from four to eight weeks. One-third of the studies included persons with mild to moderate psychological problems, one-third targeted people with various somatic conditions and one-third of the studies recruited people from the general population. Finally, not all studies measured each of the outcomes of interest. Despite these differences between studies, consistent positive effects across the studies indicate that the programme is relevant and can make a difference.

1.4 LACK OF RESEARCH IN THE AREA

People who struggle with stress and stress-related problems are turning more and more to MBSR programmes for help. It is therefore important to examine whether they work, for whom they work, and under what circumstances they work. Future studies could clarify the effects of MBSR programmes on participants' social well-being and ability to work, which so far have not been described in detail by research. In addition, existing research is not conclusive as to the length of treatment needed in order to see an effect. Finally, more research is needed on the long-term effects of MBSR programmes.

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