

Meditation therapy ‘as effective as drugs’

A new study suggests that the Buddhist-inspired practice of mindfulness is as effective as medication in treating depression. Do religious ideas have a place in modern medicine?



Peace of mind: Buddhist monks have always practised mindfulness as a means to enlightenment.



Five years ago, few people would have heard of the word ‘mindfulness’.

Now it has its own industry, with mobile apps, yoga classes and even adult colouring books which aim to help people connect to the technique. Although the practice has its roots in ancient Buddhist meditation, doctors have found that mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) is as effective as medication when it comes to treating depression.

Nigel Reed, who participated in the study, said that MBCT had allowed him to ‘take control’ of his future and to spot when he was ‘at risk’ of relapsing before it was too late. In total, 44% of the patients who were trained in mindfulness experienced a relapse, as opposed to 47% of those who stayed on medication. For patients with traumatic events such as child abuse in their past, it may even be more effective, as it provides skills which address the ‘underlying mecha-

nisms’ of relapses into depression.

This is not the first scientific study which shows the positive effects of meditation and mindfulness. MRI scans have shown that regular practice can reduce the size of the ‘stress’ area of the brain, while strengthening the pre-frontal cortex which is associated with concentration and awareness. There is also promising evidence that it does not only benefit those with depression, but can also be used to treat other conditions such as anxiety, addiction, and even physical disorders such as chronic pain.

Mindfulness is one of the key aspects of Buddhist meditation, which aims to train the mind to focus on the present moment instead of becoming fixated on the past or the future. In this way, Buddhists hope to ‘free’ the mind from thoughts of desire, judgement and self-image in order to find peace.

Meditation is found at the core of

many of the world’s religions. It was practised by early Christian monks and it is a key part of Hindu tradition. The prophet Muhammad would often go to the mountains to meditate.

MIND, BODY AND SOUL

Anything which helps people to cope with the symptoms of mental illness is great, say more sceptical psychiatrists; but the brain is a physical structure — the nervous system’s central organ — which runs on chemicals, hormones and electricity. If we want to find real cures, we will find them in conventional medicine.

Mental illness is not like physical illness, proponents of mindfulness respond, and it can’t always be approached in the same way. For centuries the mind has been seen as something separate from the body, although the two are obviously linked. It is narrow-minded to dismiss older, more traditional approaches to mental health.



Q & A

Q Isn’t this just another fad?

A It does seem like everywhere you look, there are new ways of practising mindfulness techniques. But while it’s only recently broken into mainstream culture, remember that people have been

meditating for thousands of years. Studies like this one help us to understand its effects so that doctors can make sound medical decisions.

Q Will meditating stop me feeling depressed?

A Meditation can help people to understand their feelings of depression, and cognitive therapy can help them to change certain behaviours and thought patterns.

But it is not a cure. If you think you might be depressed, you should speak to a family member or a medical professional.



SOME PEOPLE SAY...

‘All that we are is the result of what we have thought.’ Buddha

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

► Meditation therapy ‘as effective as drugs’



WORD WATCH

Buddhist – Founded by Buddha two and a half thousand years ago, Buddhism is based on the principles of enlightenment, karma, and rebirth.

Medication – Antidepressants increase levels of neurotransmitters. These are chemicals in the

brain which can help to improve mood. Although trials have shown that they can be effective, doctors are still uncertain on some aspects of how antidepressants work.

The study – GP practices in south-west England split 424 adults into two groups, with one staying on medication, and the other attending eight

weekly group therapy sessions, with daily practice at home and the opportunity to attend four follow-up sessions.

MRI – Magnetic Resonance Imaging is a type of scan which uses a combination of very strong magnets and radio waves. Doctors can use it to examine practically any part of your body, from your brain to your blood vessels.



YOU DECIDE

1. Should mindfulness practice replace antidepressants?
2. Does religion have a place in medical science?



ACTIVITIES

1. Spend five minutes focusing on your breath with your eyes closed. Do you feel different afterwards? Take it in turns to share your thoughts with the class.
2. Design a poster explaining some of the benefits of mindfulness.



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NOTES

