

## **Mindfulness for GPs and primary care teams**

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### **What is Mindfulness?**

Mindfulness is based on meditative techniques.

It is primarily about increasing ones awareness of self and surroundings in the present moment.

Different forms of mindfulness can start at an early age (increased awareness in surroundings for example from the age of five years) and it does not have religious affiliations.

We have all practiced mindfulness at some point in our lives but more often practice mindlessness. An example of a 'mindless' action would be sitting eating dinner in front of the television without thinking about it and suddenly realising you have an empty plate (being on autopilot). A more mindful way of eating might be to pay attention to the sensory experiences - the texture, taste, smell, and appearance of the food, and the sounds when you bite into your food.

Practitioners of mindfulness describe how everyday life is often fast paced, full and lived on 'autopilot.' This autopilot lifestyle means we may become disconnected from our own lives – we are not actually 'present' and aware of the context, circumstances or environment we live in. This means we may pay less attention and have less insight into our thoughts, feelings, and body sensations. We may fail to notice the good things currently taking place and habitually examine past events to try and anticipate the future. This retrospective way of living our lives leads to rumination on failings, self criticism and judgmental thoughts which may be overwhelming in some and manifest as anxiety, stress reactions and affect our mood.

Mindfulness will not cure everything, solve all our problems or eliminate life's pressures but by practicing mindfulness we can interrupt these automatic processes and are able to focus less on reacting to incoming stimuli, and more on stepping back and observing them without judgment in a calmer way and accepting the thoughts and feelings for what they are without attributing significance or apportioning blame.

Mindfulness practice allows the participant to notice when automatic processes are occurring and to alter their reaction. Training helps people to become more aware of their thoughts, feelings, and body sensations so that instead of being overwhelmed by them, they're better able to manage them.

### **Is mindfulness only a treatment for mental health problems?**

There are different forms of mindfulness. For people who are motivated and able, there are a number of Apps and websites, CD roms and books that can be used as a preventative first step or self-management approach.

It is part of the '**five steps to wellbeing**', which recommend to maintain our wellbeing we connect, keep active, give, keep learning and are mindful ([www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/improve-mental-wellbeing.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/improve-mental-wellbeing.aspx)).

There are also more formal mindfulness programmes being developed. Again these programmes can work on the early intervention principles e.g. school mindfulness programmes, mindfulness based **stress reduction** programmes in the workplace<sup>1 2</sup> Research into individuals with "problematic" levels of stress in the workplace found significant improvement in perceived levels of stress over the course. There is a need though for longer term follow up research.<sup>3</sup>

Mindfulness has been found to be of benefit in preventing relapses in people with **recurrent depression**,<sup>4</sup> so could be used as part of a stratified approach to preventing depression.<sup>5</sup> Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy is recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence for the prevention of relapse in recurrent depression.<sup>6</sup>

### **What can GPs and practice nurses recommend mindfulness for?**

So we can recommend mindfulness as part of the stepped care approach to the management of common mental health problems<sup>7</sup> as it can form part of an initial self help/ self management strategy for **stress related problems and anxiety** or perhaps as an alternative to long term medication for people with recurrent depression.

There are mindfulness programmes that are more structured and have a more formal therapeutic element- MBCT Mindfulness Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. This is normally taught as 8-week group programmes with 'homework'- practice and exercises at home in-between. These more formal programmes have been found to be as effective as "treatment as usual" for **common mental health problems**.<sup>8</sup> However, we need to remember that CMHPs are a very broad group and mindfulness may not be suitable for everybody.<sup>9</sup> There is research supporting the treatment of depression with mindfulness approaches but the research is inconclusive at present about its benefits in anxiety.<sup>10</sup> Mindfulness based cognitive behavioural therapy is increasingly available as part of IAPT services.<sup>11</sup>

### **What is the future for mindfulness?**

Mindfulness is not a cure or panacea for all ills but another tool in the toolbox that we can use to help people experiencing stress related problems and some other common mental health problems.

With the recent announcement of the 'Choosing wisely' campaign (<http://www.choosingwisely.org/>) mindfulness offers an alternative approach in some situations to medication.

There are no formal studies that have evaluated patient satisfaction with mindfulness as an outcome.

Mindfulness is accessible. Preventative mindfulness programmes are widely available on the internet and through Apps with some being free of charge. MBCT doesn't necessarily have to be delivered through specialist psychologists which may be useful in areas where it can be difficult to recruit these practitioners.

There is evidence that mindfulness may reduce the frequency of visits from 'frequent attenders', which could be valuable given current pressures within primary care.<sup>12</sup>

Mindfulness (abbreviated and full programmes) delivered to primary care physicians and nurses may improve job satisfaction, quality of life and compassion benefiting healthcare staff and patients<sup>13</sup>

## Resources

<http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/help-information/mental-health-a-z/M/mindfulness/>

<http://mindfulnessinschools.org/>

<http://bemindful.co.uk/>

## References

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