

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction – a Psycho-Educational Approach in the Management of Situational and Lifestyle Stress

People experiencing high levels of stress, and the chronically unwell often report a feeling of being trapped in a dimension of life that holds limited possibilities for them. The dominant narrative is one of resignation, hopelessness and despair.

Falling within the realm of both preventive and integrative medicine, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) offers by means of the practice of cultivated awareness, a pathway for people through change and difficult times. It has also been shown to elevate mood, energy levels and enthusiasm, and rekindle interest in, and appreciation of life itself.

MBSR is a psycho-educational programme designed to teach people through formal and informal mindfulness practices how to take better care of themselves as a complement to what the health care system can do for them. It was originally developed in the late seventies as a way to improve the lives of chronic or seriously-ill patients who, due to the nature of their diagnoses, physicians could do no more. Over time through medical referral and later self-referral MBSR has become increasingly recognised as an effective programme in the treatment of elevated stress and anxiety.

To this end, MBSR may be a useful adjunctive intervention for health care practitioners when treating people for stress and anxiety, and in the management of chronic and life-threatening illness.

MBSR was developed at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center Stress Reduction Clinic by molecular biologist, Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn. It focuses on the progressive acquisition of mindful awareness, or mindfulness. The approach is based on the premise that greater awareness will increase perception and insight, improve self efficacy and control, reduce negative affect and provide a more differentiated picture of wellness in which stress and ailments play natural roles while still allowing for an improved quality of life.

Mindfulness may be described as dispassionate, non-evaluative and sustained moment to moment awareness of perceptible mental states and processes. The mindfulness techniques used in MBSR derive from a Buddhist model of meditation. These are highly-refined systematic attentional strategies aimed at developing both stability of mind and body (technically referred to in Buddhism as *samatha*) and deep insight (*vipassana*) to stabilise and improve mental and physical conditions inhibiting an individual's capacity to respond effectively.¹

The practice of mindfulness encourages a willingness to look deeply into emotional states and life circumstances that one might otherwise avoid, even highly aversive ones. When this happens a shift in perception may occur giving considerable relief from negative thought and affect.

Kabat-Zinn says that whatever an individual's circumstances, it is possible to work with a situation by holding it with awareness, and that this may ultimately be more productive and rewarding than moving to a negative emotional state, resistance or denial.

¹ *MBSR Qualifications and Recommended Guidelines for Providers*, Santorelli S, Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society, University of Massachusetts Medical School, 2001(revised 2004)

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In MBSR, people are taught how to incorporate techniques such as formal and informal mindfulness practices such as meditation, gentle hatha yoga and somatic awareness exercises into everyday life to relax and to handle stressful situations with greater ease. Training in meditation practice starts slowly building up from short periods of just a few minutes, to longer sessions of up to 40 minutes. In particular, the 'body scan' and the mindful yoga help to develop interoceptive and proprioceptive awareness.

Groups of between 15 and 40 participants may contain a wide demographic ranging from individuals simply seeking strategies to enhance their well-being and to better manage everyday stress to those experiencing chronic and/or debilitating medical conditions.

MBSR points out that we all have profound and innate inner resources to learn how to experience and manage difficult experiences. It does this by first emphasising what we all have in common - for instance, the fact that everybody's mind goes through periods of agitation and calmness, and that everyone suffers at times from physical and emotional pain including anxiety and depression.

Kabat-Zinn says that MBSR is based on the premise that in spite of whatever health or life-style crisis an individual may be experiencing, this is just one part of the larger fabric of a person's life. There is, upon reflection, much more that is right within a person's life, interactions, experiences and memories than wrong. For instance, while an individual may experience cancer, he may enjoy a richness in intimate relationships, the ability to live independently or the capacity to still work in a rewarding occupation.

Kabat-Zinn suggests that mindfulness, the practice of 'paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, non-judgementally and in the present moment' enables a person to recognise and re-experience that in spite of such a difficult diagnosis there is in fact a lot more to life that is potentially rich, positive and satisfying. He describes mindfulness-based approaches as being part of what is increasingly becoming known as 'participatory medicine'. This is an approach where people learn to take responsibility for improving their health and well-being through informed exercise, healthy lifestyle practices and nutritional awareness.

Kabat-Zinn is perhaps best-recognised for developing a programme of mindfulness that is readily accessible to a western audience and for bringing mindfulness-based approaches to mainstream medicine. Since 1979 he has been involved in numerous research studies on the efficacy of mindfulness and MBSR in the management of chronic ill-health.

There are now more than one thousand research studies on MBSR worldwide in peer-reviewed journals noting that it may improve immune function and reduce chronic pain, anxiety, depression, excessive stress, serum cholesterol levels and blood pressure.

Research also shows that mindfulness education such as MBSR can change the way emotions are regulated in the pre-frontal cortex, affecting the way that we think and feel.²

In Australia, there is a growing interest in the use of mindfulness-based interventions among therapeutic practitioners.

² *The Power of Paying Attention: What Jon Kabat-Zinn Has Against Spirituality*, Psychotherapy Networker (Nov/Dec 2004)

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Approaches include:-

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT)
Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)
Mindfulness-Integrated Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (MiCBT)
Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT)
Hakoumi

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction differs significantly from these therapeutic approaches in that it is based on an educational construct. Participants choose to attend a series of trainings to learn about mindfulness, to practise various aspects of mindfulness such as yoga and meditation, even mindful eating and to practise its seamless integration into everyday life. The integration of mindfulness into everyday life is predicated upon the ability to practise regularly.

To this end participants are required to commit at the time of enrolment to carry out 45 minute homework assignments which consist mainly of formal and informal meditation practice, mindful yoga and body awareness techniques which can be applied and practised as part of everyday life.

For participants who fully engage in the programme the effects may be profound and long-lasting. Research over more than two decades indicates benefits such as:-

- an increased ability to relax
- an improved capacity to cope with pain that may not go away
- elevated self-esteem
- the ability to cope more effectively with stressful situations in the short and long term
- more enthusiasm and heightened energy levels

Research initiatives include:-

- Dietary Therapy and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction in the secondary prevention of prostate cancer: *A pilot study in the Dept. of Medicine and the Division of Preventive and Behavioural Medicine*
- Clinical Efficacy of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction for medical patients diagnosed with Fibromyalgia, Irritable Bowel Syndrome and Chronic Fatigue Syndrome: *A collaborative cost-effectiveness/ cost utilization study with Signa/ Mhealth Source HMO*
- Facing the Challenge of Stem Cell and Bone Marrow Transplantation: Implementing Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction: *A collaboration with the Bone Marrow Transplantation Unit at UMMMC*

MBSR research over 28 years has shown a consistent demonstration of clinically relevant reductions in medical and psychological symptoms across a wide range of diagnoses including chronic pain [Kabat-Zinn, 1982; Kabat-Zinn, Lipworth & Burney, 1985; Kabat-Zinn et al 1986] and in medical patients with a secondary diagnoses of anxiety/ and or panic [Kabat-Zinn, 1982].

Research has also found a consistent demonstration of enhanced psychological hardiness after MBSR for up to three years of follow-up including a heightened sense of self, and self in relationship, a greater ability to act effectively under high levels of stress and an appreciation in the value of engaging in own ongoing health and well-being through yoga, meditation and the systematic cultivation of awareness [Kabat-Zinn, Skillings & Salmon, manuscript submitted].

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There are now over 270 centres worldwide teaching MBSR. More than 17,000 people have completed MBSR and more than four thousand health care professionals have trained in MBSR facilitation worldwide. Central to the ability of MBSR instructors to teach this work are:- an extended personal experience with daily meditation, the capacity to articulate the essence of formal and informal mindfulness practice in a western vocabulary and highly-developed skills in group dynamics and interactive teaching.

The author, Alison Keane trained under the direction of Drs Kabat-Zinn and Saki Santorelli at a 'Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction in Mind Body Medicine: Residential Training/ Retreat' at Mount Madonna in northern California in 2007. Alison is a Brisbane psychotherapist and writer. In 2001, due to her curiosity about the healing pathways of Eastern traditions she made an unconventional decision, at the time, to train as a hatha yoga and remedial yoga teacher. This training and her personal yoga practice in the tradition of astanga yoga significantly deepened her understanding and appreciation of the relationship between mind and body. Alison's experience as a mindfulness educator is informed by a long-standing personal meditation practice, an ever-evolving compassion, and application in her work of solution-focused brief therapy, narrative therapy, and Acceptance & Commitment Therapy (ACT).