

Seeking a stress-free existence



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Mindfulness might appear to be a fad, but the technique is underpinned by evidence

WOMEN'S interest in mindfulness as a tool for improving health appears to have markedly increased.

While more research is required to understand the reasons for this, several things can be inferred.

Firstly, mindfulness appears with increasing frequency in mainstream media and is now something of a pop culture phenomenon. Nevertheless, many claims are supported by sound research.

There is a growing body of evidence supporting the efficacy of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) for the management of common mental health presentations such as stress, anxiety and depression. (See box).

Secondly, studies suggest that over the past few decades, people's perception of life-stress has increased dramatically.

Indeed, as a long-time mindfulness trainer, when I ask people what brings them to a mindfulness course, there is one word I hear more than any other: stress.

Studies show that stressful life events are the single biggest determinant of anxiety and depression.

Thirdly, there is a long-standing gender disparity in the area of mental health. According to the World Health Organization, while men and women have similar overall rates of mental health problems, there are significant differences for specific conditions.

Alcohol dependence, for example, is more common among men, whereas women are more likely to experience anxiety and depression. Women are also more likely to seek help for mental health issues from their primary healthcare provider.

I have seen a similar pattern in my work – the majority of participants in my mindfulness courses over the years have been women. I often hear comments such as: "I wish my husband would do this, he needs it just as much as I do." Despite progress towards gender balance, women still seem more willing to deal with their mental health.

How can mental health be improved with mindfulness? It can be seen as a type of mental fitness – a way of becoming more aware of, and better able to manage, one's habitual thoughts and feelings.

Just as physical exercise strengthens your body, regular mindfulness practise rewires your brain to make you more calm and clear. Indeed, neurobiological studies demonstrate that mindfulness training strengthens the parts of the brain involved with attention and emotional regulation.

This calm and clarity is beneficial, as a mental health intervention and for prevention.

Official standards for mindfulness training are being developed in the UK and elsewhere. In the meantime, GPs' relevant patients should be referred to an experienced mindfulness trainer. If there is an existing

mental health issue, such training should be provided under the guidance of, or in tandem with, an appropriate mental health professional.

We can take advantage of women's interest in mindfulness to strengthen mental wellness. ■

Mindful evidence

- A UK meta-analysis of 209 studies (12,145 participants) showed MBIs had "large and clinically significant effects in treating anxiety and depression" with lasting benefits.
- MBIs reduce self-reported measures of stress, anger, rumination, and physiological symptoms, while improving positive outlook, empathy, sense of cohesion, self-compassion and overall quality of life.
- A 2015 report said mindfulness was an "important innovation in mental health" and recommended it become part of official UK public healthcare policy.

Source: themindfulnessinitiative.org.uk

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