

CLAHRC BITE

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A bite-sized summary of CLAHRC research: Could mindfulness training reduce distress among university students? A randomised controlled trial



**“Students who had been practising mindfulness
had distress scores lower than their baseline
levels even during exam time”**



What?

The Mindful Student Study was a pragmatic randomised controlled trial assessing the provision of an eight-week, mindfulness skills for university students course which aimed to increase resilience to psychological distress during the main examination period.

Who?

All University of Cambridge students without severe mental illness or crisis were invited to take part.

Why?

More young people are going to university, but there is concern about an increasing demand for student mental health services. Mindfulness meditation training is popular amongst young people, but its effectiveness needed confirmation.

Background: Worldwide, increasing numbers of young people (YP) go to university, but there is concern about students' rising need for mental health services. YP's journey through university provides a golden yet under-used opportunity for prevention. Mindfulness meditation training is popular amongst YP. There is evidence for the efficacy of mindfulness training to improve symptoms of common mental disorders such as anxiety and depression, but its effectiveness to increase resilience to stress in university students needed confirmation.

To address this, the University of Cambridge and CLAHRC EoE funded an implementation and evaluation project co-produced between the University Counselling Service, the Academic Division and the Department of Psychiatry. We designed a pragmatic, randomised controlled trial assessing the impact of providing mindfulness teaching before examinations to test the main hypothesis that it reduces students' distress.

Results: The results show that this approach supports student wellbeing and resilience to stress throughout the academic year at a level that is clinically meaningful. Mindfulness participants were one third less likely to be experiencing distress at a clinically relevant level during the examination period. Of the 30 students in each MSS course, on average five will be prevented from experiencing clinical levels of distress during examinations, an effective preventative intervention. Mindfulness did not cause any significant adverse effects. The lack of control for non-specific effects precludes us from attributing our findings entirely to the specific components of mindfulness training but evidence of such effects is available in the literature. This trial, co-produced with students and University officers, is an example of participatory research informing student welfare policy.

Conclusions: We conclude that preventative mindfulness courses are acceptable to students and universities, and are feasible and effective components of a wider student mental health strategy. There is a need for comparative effectiveness research on preventative mental health interventions for students.

References

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2. Galante J, Dufour G, Benton A, Howarth E, Vainre M, Croudace TJ, et al. Protocol for the Mindful Student Study: a randomised controlled trial of the provision of a mindfulness intervention to support university students' well-being and resilience to stress. *BMJ open* [Internet]. 2016; 6. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2016-012300>.

What is NIHR CLAHRC East of England?

The National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Collaboration for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care (CLAHRC) East of England is a five year programme of applied health and social care research which focuses on the needs of people with complex problems, often vulnerable, when multiple agencies are involved in their care: young people, frail older people, those with dementia, learning disabilities, acquired brain injuries or mental ill health.

The CLAHRC East of England collaboration encompasses some thirty-six organisations, with research hubs in the Universities of Cambridge, Hertfordshire and East Anglia working closely with individuals and organisations involved in the whole care pathway.

Service users and carers are at the heart of what we do, in parallel with an ambitious public health research programme.

Co-production and collaboration at all stages of the research process are fundamental to making a positive impact through applied health research.

To find out more:



www.dahrc-eoe.nihr.ac.uk/2016/04/mindfulness-study/



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