

MINDFULNESS-BASED INTERVENTIONS FOR MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION: A COLLABORATIVE REVIEW STUDY

LAY SUMMARY

MINDFULNESS: HELPING PEOPLE TO FEEL GOOD

Public health organisations in the UK are interested in finding ways to improve the mental wellbeing of the general public, as mental wellbeing is linked to better health. One way of doing this is to offer techniques to the public that are effective in promoting mental health.

One set of techniques that many people find helpful is mindfulness training. Mindfulness training is about learning to pay attention to what is happening at the present moment with an attitude of curiosity and kindness. Some mindfulness courses are specifically designed for people who are clinically unwell, but mindfulness practices were traditionally intended for anyone to improve their mental wellbeing.

Mindfulness courses to increase wellbeing and reduce stress have become very popular. Many organisations in the UK offer them, including universities and civil service departments.

If preventative mindfulness courses are effective for most people and people are interested in learning mindfulness, then they could be offered as part of public health programmes. However, the research evidence for offering mindfulness courses in this way is weak:

- While many studies show that preventative mindfulness training is beneficial, most are poorly designed so that you cannot be sure of the results.
- There are concerns that studies with negative findings (showing no benefit) have not been published in prominent scientific journals and so few people know about them.
- Mindfulness courses come in many flavours, and we don't know which ones are more effective, and best value for money, for each circumstance.
- When you compare mindfulness training with other feel-good practices such as physical exercise, it is not clear which one is best. Even less clear is who benefits most from each.
- There is evidence that not everyone benefits from mindfulness training. It may even be harmful for some people.

Policy makers need high quality reviews and analyses that systematically take all of these factors into account before deciding to offer preventative mindfulness training to the public at large. In 2015 an All-Party Parliamentary Group recommended that the National Institute of Health Research invite bids to research the use of mindfulness as a public health preventative intervention.

FINDING OUT WHAT WORKS FOR WHOM

I propose to conduct a systematic review and meta-analysis of all the studies that I can find on mindfulness training for mental health promotion. Systematic reviewing is a research technique that uses clear methods to identify and critique studies. Meta-analysis is a statistical method of combining the data from these studies to show an overall effect; a kind of average result. I plan to

do the most refined and reliable type of meta-analysis, one where all the data from each individual in each study is combined. This approach enables researchers to ask more detailed questions such as which groups of individuals are more likely to be helped by mindfulness training. This complex type of meta-analysis is called an individual participant data (IPD) meta-analysis.

I propose to train in IPD meta-analysis statistical methods, and to conduct an IPD meta-analysis to study the following:

- Comparative effects: To confirm whether mindfulness training reduces distress, anxiety and depression, and improves mental wellbeing, self-care and performance among adults living in the community, compared with no training or other feel-good practices.
- Predictors of differential response: To find out what types of people benefit from the different mindfulness courses available.

I will invite members of the public interested in mental health promotion or mindfulness, health service managers, and mindfulness teachers to get involved early on in the research. Their experience will help to understand aspects of mental health promotion in daily life and society, how different mindfulness courses work for different types of people, and what effects to look out for. Together we will work on all aspects of the project. For example, we will train together in effective communication, and then make a plan to share information about the research and findings with various audiences using academic, stakeholder and public networks.

This study will show whether preventative mindfulness courses really help people, or whether they are 'just a fad'. It will also help to understand who to offer mindfulness to, and in what ways.