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Meditation and Mindfulness:
Combating Negative Mindsets and Mental Health Afflictions
While Promoting Positives such as Confidence and General Well-Being

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Abstract

Popular opinion holds that meditation and mindfulness render positive effects. However, minimal empirical evidence has been submitted except in the last seven years since it has gained attention. This study uses data from these recent years to gather a concise view of the effects of meditation and mindfulness practices in combatting anxiety, depression, and poor self-esteem as well as the increase in positives such as confidence and general well-being.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D. has been promoting meditation and mindfulness as treatment for stress since the 1980s. He has applied the practice to physical ailments as well as mental maladies (Kabat-Zinn, 2014b). Some researchers apply the foundation of his work to their own in order to discover if the practices minimize the effects of stress, anxiety and depression. Recently, investigation into increasing positive mindsets has gained attention. These last two areas are the ones that I'm interested in.

Data from various studies prove there is a marked reduction in anxiety attacks and depression. Participants report increased feelings of confidence, capability, and well-being. The samples vary in size as well as demographics, but the results suggest an overall benefit in favor of the practice of meditation and mindfulness. To gather more empirical data and contribute to expanding the limited conversation on this matter, I designed and executed a study of my own, interviewing many people from a variety demographics and walks of life to determine the validity of meditation and mindfulness practices in combatting negative mindsets and mental illnesses and promoting positivities.

Introduction

Jamie¹ walked into the room of the health center and her anxiety was high. Meditation was new to her and she wasn't even sure it would work. But with both her anxiety and depression plaguing her on a daily basis, her therapist asked her to give this a chance before they investigated the option of increasing the dosages of her medications. She sat down on a soft cushion placed on the floor. With the sounds of gentle music caressing her consciousness and the light incense entering her breath she followed the instructions provided by the instructor's hypnotic voice. Soon she felt the stress in her muscles melt away, her problems felt smaller too. After the class, she thanked the instructor. While she was walking out of the building, the sun seemed brighter, she stood taller, and she felt a bit lighter. She felt empowered to face the world.

I'm sure you've heard people refer to their "happy place." This place is subjective, whether it be an island paradise, a childhood treehouse, or a comfortable room that you've constructed in your consciousness. Essentially, it helps you feel safe, relaxed, and of course, happy. One way to reach this place is by meditating. For example, by the use of breath and intonation, you can find yourself centered and grounded very quickly:

Deep breath in, deep breath out, repeat.

Deep breath in, deep breath out, repeat.

Deep breath in, deep breath out, repeat.

Another deep breath in, and then from the depths of your being comes a solid tone that builds in strength.

Oooooooooooooooooooooooooohmmmmmmmmmmmmmm!

¹ All interviewee names are pseudonyms

Deep breath in and again,

Oooooooooooooooooooooooooohmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm!

And again,

Oooooooooooooooooooooooooohmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm!

This is the Universal sound. This sound helps you find your center. This sound paves the way to your happy place.

“There’s no place like om.”²

Background

Meditation, in this paper, is defined and is to be understood as a “Family of contemplative techniques, all of which involve a conscious attempt to focus one's attention in a non-analytical way and to refrain from ruminating, discursive thought. Sometimes considered a spiritual or religious practice” (Thesaurus, n.d.-a). Likewise, mindfulness is an “Awareness of one's own actions and thoughts” (Thesaurus, n.d.-b).

Popular opinion tells us meditation and mindfulness render positive effects. Anybody who meditates regularly or has even meditated once in their lifetime will tell you that it is a positive experience. I have never ever heard anyone say that they have had a negative meditation experience. However, with all the good publicity over meditation, there’s not much empirical evidence to back it up from the psychological community. It’s only been in the last seven years that the community has started publishing papers on such research. Due to the nature of the topic, most data is self-report and measurable only to the extent that self-report

² Self-quote; a witticism I say in my meditation classes.

allows. Therefore, the results for such studies are not always respected as empirically grounded, given the topic's mostly intangible nature.

Literature Review

Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn is the major player in the conversation of mindfulness meditation since its conception in treatment. His research and practice are cited and built upon by others using it in the treatment of physical ailments, and in the field of mental health. While he speaks about the various types of meditation, his roots are more Buddhist in nature (Kabat-Zinn, 2014a&b). He has been pushing for meditation as a form of treatment of stress since the 1980s and continues his research through the establishment of his own centers and meditation recordings he's produced and distributed. Kabat-Zinn has paved the way for meditation and mindfulness as treatment options. As a result, his methods and practice have become more commonplace in hospitals and treatment centers worldwide (Kabat-Zinn, 2014a). He recommends meditation for everyone, but especially supports the medical community's use of it.

The article, "Mindfulness: Theoretical Foundations and Evidence for Its Salutary Effects" by Kirk Warren Brown, Richard M. Ryan, and J. David Creswell, describes a study done in 2007 which builds off the work that Kabat-Zinn began. This article (as well as many of the other studies I found) note that research is still in the early stages. Their investigation provided ample evidence in support of mindfulness and meditation combatting "negative functioning" and promoting "positive outcomes" in many areas, mental health being among them (Brown et al, 2007).

Two years earlier, Camille R. Patterson, Joel B. Bennett, and Wyndy L. Wiitala came to a similar conclusion with their study as well. They performed their experiment in small business

settings, providing a 4-hour training session for 539 employees, and measuring results via survey before and after the training session. They noted the increase in “positive unwinding” methods and a decrease in negative choices in coping with stress; in this case, the tendency towards substance abuse (Patterson et al, 2005).

The rest of the literature I examined came from 2014. Most touted an increase in positive outcomes and a decrease in undesirable effects. Among this literature was a study of college women, who were led through a practice of Mahavakyam Meditation (MM), which is a combination of mantras and visualization (utilizing a collage format). The researchers noticed a decrease in distressing symptoms, as well as an increase in positivity on many levels (Margolin, 2014).

“A Study of Mindfulness and Self-Care: A Path to Self-Compassion for Female Therapists in Training.” also dealt directly with women in college. This article documents the outcome of a 10-week course where female psychotherapists-in-training participated in mindfulness techniques training to combat the effects of burnout and “compassion fatigue.” The mindfulness practice helped them gain a willingness to see things as they are, compassion for themselves and others, and the ability to let go of negative judgments. Partaking in the practice also increased their attentiveness and awareness. “Students noticed decreased suffering in their day-to-day lives and experienced changes in perception of events. Several positive effects were noted, including slowing down and greater connection, relaxation, enjoyment, gratitude, and clarity” (Dorian & Killebrew, 2014).

Two years ago, Fanny Lalot, Sylvain Delplanque, and David Sander performed an experiment to measure positive affect and joy expression (2014). They recognized the lack of empirical evidence on this subject, and their study was an attempt to produce some. Participants

were led through a mindfulness meditation. Researchers recorded participants' faces as they watched video clips meant to elicit response. Both positive affect and joy expression were increased.

Van Dam et. al., in 2014, also expressed a lack of evidence in the published information on this topic. This team focused their attention on studying the effects of meditation on specifically diagnosed maladies such as anxiety and depression, as well as stress. The participants who followed the prescribed meditation technique had marked improvement in their mental health issues which afflicted them. Balancing it out, Van Gordon et. al. studied the effects of MAT (meditation awareness training) on positive well-being and "dispositional well-being" (2014).

I did find one anomalous study, performed by Wahbeh et. al. (2014). While it supports my hypothesis in decreasing negative effects, this particular study saw no change in positive effects.

All of the reviewed literature agrees on many things. First of all, they all agree that this area is interesting and needs more studies and evidence. With the exception of Kabat-Zinn in the 1980s, most of the research is more recent— 2007 being the farthest back. Even the information directly related to my query seems to be published in the last couple of years. All of the sources I have found also agreed that meditation and mindfulness practices are beneficial in decreasing negative psychological effects. With the exception of one source, they all agree that such practices increase positive effects.

The major controversy with this area of interest is the difficulty in measuring outcomes. Most data are collected via interview or survey/questionnaire. Quantifying how a research

subject feels is tough. The variables are difficult to operationalize. The results are somewhat intangible. These might be reasons for why there is so little published in this area.

Besides empirical studies, pop culture literature also gives evidence of the acceptance of the idea of meditation and mindfulness having healing benefits. Among the players in this realm I found a familiar name: Jon Kabat-Zinn. He has published many books, some specifically for combatting mental health issues, like the book *The Mindful Way Through Depression: Freeing Yourself from Chronic Unhappiness*. Others promote positivity, like the books *Mindfulness Meditation for Everyday Life*, *Wherever You Go, Letting Everything Become Your Teacher*, and *There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*. These are just a few of Kabat-Zinn's offerings when it comes to meditation and mindfulness. In addition to Kabat-Zinn's offerings, I also saw many other books offering different viewpoints and methods of the same things.

With so many guides readily available in a mainstream bookstore, I knew I was onto something. There must be something to this idea that meditation and mindfulness can help make people feel better and fight the mental maladies that hold them back. So, I decided to talk to a wide range of participants and uncover their reasons for using meditation and mindfulness practices. Is it just snake oil or is it the mysterious key to opening a door to happiness and mental health wellbeing?

Methodology of Interviews

For these interviews, I composed a list of questions and had them approved by my faculty advisor. Due to the nature of interviews, “review not required” paperwork was approved by the IRB. These questions are:

- 1) How long have you practiced meditation/mindfulness practices? (1 year, 10 years, 20 years, etc.):
- 2) What is the frequency with which you meditate? (once a day, once a week, when I think to do it, etc.):
- 3) Please give a brief description of the type(s) of meditation/mindfulness practices you use (breathing, visualization, martial arts, intoning, etc.):
- 4) After a session of meditation/mindfulness practice, describe any changes in your mood, energy, outlook/perspective, general feelings:
- 5) Has there been a change in your negative moods, anxiety, depression, or stress level since you began your practice?
 - a. If yes, please describe in detail:
- 6) Has there been a change in your positive attributes, such as self-esteem, confidence, happiness, and general sense of well-being since beginning your practice?
 - a. If yes, please describe in detail:
- 7) Is there anything else you would like to share with me in regards to your practice and how it affects/has affected you?:

I gathered participants by making announcements in various groups with whom I participate in various projects, making announcements in classes at Portland State University, and by making an announcement on Facebook. I provided my contact information and asked potential participants to approach me through private message or email in order to maintain anonymity.

I asked the participants to provide an alias by which they would be referred to in this paper, once again to maintain anonymity. Twenty interviews were conducted, the participant sample

consisted of men and women from all over the spectrum. Questions 1-3 of the interviews collected the following demographics. Some individuals had been practicing some sort of mediation or mindfulness practice consistently for over 20 years and others had done it for a short amount of time as a part of a martial arts class a few years ago, and everything in between. The techniques used varied as well, yet all included a method of meditative breathing and a form of focus/mindfulness.

Data from Interviews

Question #4 resulted in the some very interesting answers. This question was “After a session of mediation/mindfulness practice, describe any changes in your mood, energy, outlook/perspective, general feelings.” The answers provided included calmness, reduction in anxiety, relaxed, clarity, capability, balance/centered, stress decrease, positivity, euphoria, energy, peacefulness, openness, and better reaction to negative events. Artemis Jones, who self-reported as suffering from an anxiety disorder, reported “I relax more easily, I feel clearer and more capable.” Barbara claims, “I find that whatever it was I was stressing about that got me to that place feels not as important/overwhelming. It really helps me to be more positive.”

When interviewees were asked “has there been a change in your negative moods, anxiety, depression, or stress level since you began your practice?” (question 5), there was confirmation of decreases across the board in different mental health condition symptoms, including negative moods, anxiety, depression, stress, and even PTSD. Joe said, “Generalized anxiety seems to drop away quickly. As does generalized stress.” Ed shared that “I have PTSD which is job related going back to 1987. Anxiety in certain public situations was a big problem for me. My ‘triggers’ are pretty well known to me by now and can include the sound of a car backfiring,

gunshots, explosions, etc. The results of my ‘Moving Meditation’ practice is that my anxiety has been reduced about 90%. Depression and stress levels are also considerably reduced.” Artemis Jones told me “When I do practice on a regular basis, I feel more powerful, more easily adaptable to stressful situations. I sleep better, which melts away stress. I see colors, where before the world was more of a blur.”

Likewise, the response was overwhelmingly positive when asked “Has there been a change in your positive attributes, such as self-esteem, confidence, happiness, and general sense of well-being since beginning your practice?” (question 6). Barbara said that when she meditates regularly, “I always feel much better able to handle things, which I believe makes me a generally happier person.” Ed feels more inclined and inspired to “share my happiness with others.” Hank McCoy asserted that “I find a blossoming of a simple and profound sense of autonomy, of fearlessness, of tenderness.” Joe feels “a more balanced, more humanized sense of self...a greater sense of optimism.”

When asked if there was anything else they would like to share with me in regards to their practice and how it affects/has affected them (question 7), many responded that their life is not as good without it and that they wish they could do it more often. Some say they don’t know what they would do without it. One interviewee, Barbara, said, “I feel pretty strongly that if I had not found meditation as a practice through my martial arts that I would not be the same person that I am today. My childhood years were tough and I didn’t deal with things very well. I was violent and moody because of things that had happened to me. Through meditation and martial arts those things seemed to diminish over time to where they are not the issues that they once were.” An interviewee, Lee Smith, responded that “if asked if I would ever quit this

practice, I would give an emphatic NO. I believe the reduction of the stress levels in my physical body is too important to ever eliminate this practice.”

With such overwhelming response from my random sample, I think it is safe to say that my hypothesis is true. Meditation and mindfulness practices are successful in combatting negative mindsets, anxiety, and depression. They also help to increase an individual’s happiness, positivity, and overall sense of well-being. This brings to mind the question of, if such practices were given much more weight in the scientific community, would it be a better option than some that are more readily available and supposedly more “empirically grounded”?

The Cost of Not Meditating or Practicing Mindfulness

Today’s medical community seems to be very much of the mindset of “popping a pill” to solve most problems. I’ve noticed this mindset with dealing with mental health issues. Don’t get me wrong, there are some individuals who need medication for their maladies. But, what if that medication dosage could be reduced and, even eliminated in some people’s cases as a result of meditation and mindfulness practices? Rick Nauert, Ph.D. seems to think so, as he says in his article, “Meditation Can Reduce Health Care Costs,” “According to the research, people with consistently high health care costs experienced a 28 percent cumulative decrease in physician fees after an average of five years practicing the stress-reducing Transcendental Meditation technique compared with their baseline” (2011). Of course, one can assume there is or will be backlash against these findings by the pharmaceutical community, and perhaps is one of the reasons for the lack of complete grounding of such techniques as viable treatments in the mental health community. Imagine if you could eliminate taking a pill, or multiple pills, per day, as well as associated side effects, just by simply learning to breathe well.

The Biology of Breathing

Breathing is an essential part of life. We cease to exist without breath. But even with this point of obviousness, a majority of humans do not take full advantage of the breathing capability that our bodies are built for. “Many people don’t really breathe, but merely sip air, just enough to keep them functioning, but not really alive” (Newcastle 2009). By this sipping of air, we aren’t filling our lungs to capacity, nor are we giving our lungs ample time to take in oxygen, metabolize it, and get that oxygen to vital organs.

Pranayama breathing has been shown to positively affect immune function, hypertension, asthma, autonomic nervous system imbalances, and psychological or stress-related disorders (Jerath et al., 2006). Jerath and colleagues add that investigations regarding stress and psychological improvements support evidence that pranayama breathing alters the brain’s information processing, making it an intervention that improves a person’s psychological profile. However, Jerath and colleagues hypothesize that “the voluntary, slow deep breathing functionally resets the autonomic nervous system through stretch-induced inhibitory signals and hyperpolarization (slowing electrical action potentials) currents...which synchronizes neural elements in the heart, lungs, limbic system and cortex.”

By simply getting vitalizing oxygen into the system, particularly the brain, we can reduce the effects of mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, stress, and all the stress-related conditions that result. When meditating or practicing mindfulness on a regular basis, we can find ourselves feeling lighter, more positive, happier, and having an enlightened feeling of overall general well-being.

Conclusion

Jon Kabat-Zinn started a revolution back in the 1980s when he started applying age-old meditation and mindfulness techniques to the medical and mental health worlds. He developed his own techniques and performed empirically-grounded research to support his claims. Many others built upon his work in the medical field. However, it's only in the last seven years that pointed research has been done on their effects on mental health conditions. All research uncovered has pointed overwhelmingly to the favorable conclusion: meditation and mindfulness practices do in fact have a positive effect in combatting negative mindsets and mental health afflictions while promoting positives such as confidence and general well-being.

While there are still doubts in the medical community, as we produce more empirical evidence to prove our case, it is clear that popular culture and society see benefits to incorporating such techniques. Books on the subject, some written by Kabat-Zinn himself, are well-stocked in bookstores and range in symptom-specific compositions from depression and anxiety to everyday applications.

I feel the best proof is within the practitioners themselves. The overwhelming response of reducing negatives and increasing positives, gathered from a randomized sample, speaks volumes. If we can ever get out of the "pop a pill to make it better" mentality, and find our way as a society to a belief in the benefits of meditation and mindfulness practices simply because we've tried it and know first-hand that it works, the better off we will be. It seems though, due to the need of more tangible proof, more studies will have to be performed and more time will have to pass in order to give this idea the grounding and impact that is needed to move us to that level as a society.

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