

Should Clinicians Replace Medication With an Ancient Spiritual Practice?

By David Sheon | January 22, 2014

Researchers from Johns Hopkins University sifted through over 18,000 studies on a potential treatment for pain, anxiety and depression, narrowing their meta-analysis to 47 scientifically rigorous clinical trials. The results, published in the journal *JAMA Internal Medicine*, revealed what many have experienced over thousands of years: while it's not a cure-all, this treatment can help alleviate pain, anxiety and depression. The treatment? Meditation.

Meditation began as an ancient spiritual practice but is now also utilized outside of traditional settings to promote health and well-being. The study findings incorporate the effects of mindfulness meditation on over 3,500 participants who were selected to take part in either a meditation regimen or a different therapy, such as exercise. Overall, researchers found that the effect of meditation on participants was moderate and on par with that of prescription medications.

While this is a promising result on the benefits of meditation, the researchers identified a number of limitations. The study did not find any evidence of meditation affecting other health concerns such as positive mood, attention, substance use, eating habits, sleep and weight. Also, meditation did not provide any long-term therapy as compared to medication. “The benefits did attenuate over time — with the effectiveness of meditation decreasing by half, three to six months after the training classes ended,” said study leader Dr. Madhav Goyal, an assistant professor of medicine at Hopkins. “We don’t know why this occurred, but it could have been that they were practicing meditation less often.”

Still, Dr. Goyal said he is encouraged by the study’s results, specifically because of the short training periods for the participants. There may be greater potential for individuals with more instruction or experience in meditation. “Compared to other skills that we train in, the amount of training received by the participants in the trials was relatively brief,” he said. “Yet, we are seeing a small but consistent benefit for symptoms of anxiety, depression and pain. So you wonder whether we might see larger effects with more training, practice and skill.”



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While the new study suggests that in some cases, meditation may be used in addition to or in lieu of prescription drugs to treat pain, anxiety and depression, it is important for patients to consult their doctors before altering any course of treatment.

At RealWorldHealthCare.org, we have been interested in meditation's potentially positive impact on health. Last April, we posted about a recent study in which meditation halved the risk of death, heart attack and stroke in African American men.

Meditation may have economic benefits as well. According to a July 2013 *Huffington Post* blog, Aetna's employee health care costs went down by 7 percent in 2012 after the company implemented a wellness program, which CEO Mark Bertolini attributes to reducing stress through meditation and yoga. In recognition of its positive health impact, some insurance companies provide benefits for meditation instruction. For example, CareFirst's Options Discount Program offers up to 30% off fees for participating meditation instructors. In 2010, Americans spent more than \$11 billion on antidepressants, according to the American Psychological Association.

The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine of the NIH offers an introduction to meditation, its uses and guidance for those who wish to practice meditating. The National Meditation Specialist Certification Board, an organization that seeks to promote meditation as a specialized field in health care, keeps a directory of meditation specialists, and there are many other such directories available online or through participating insurance providers.

In a *Psychology Today* article guiding those interested in mindfulness meditation, Dr. Karen Kissel Wegela emphasizes that sick or healthy, meditation can help people cope. "The sitting practice of mindfulness meditation gives us exactly this opportunity to become more present with ourselves just as we are," she says. "This, in turn, shows us glimpses of our inherent wisdom and teaches us how to stop perpetuating the unnecessary suffering that results from trying to escape the discomfort, and even pain, we inevitably experience as a consequence of simply being alive."

Have you ever meditated? Have you or someone you know ever meditated to treat depression, pain or anxiety? Did you find it effective?

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