

Mindfulness found to improve mental health of students

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Mental health amongst university students could be improved by introducing mindfulness training. These are the findings from the first UK study, published in *Education Research International*, to measure the efficacy of mindfulness based cognitive therapy (MBCT) on students.

Recent evidence suggests that [university students](#) are more likely to

develop [mental health problems](#) when compared with the general population. The University of Bristol-led study aimed to establish whether mindfulness could be effective at improving mental health and wellbeing in medical students who are considered more at risk of developing a stress-related illness.

Researchers recruited 57 medical students, who had been referred to a mindfulness group either by their GP or student advisor, to take part in an eight-week mindfulness programme.

Students were required to attend the training for two hours each week and commit to 30-minute daily home practice in between sessions. The training, which took place between Autumn 2011 and Spring 2015, taught participants how the mind works, how stress impacts one's life, an awareness of stress triggers and signs of stress symptoms, coping techniques, meditation practice, and the importance of self-care.

At the end of each programme students completed a survey that included a free text response. The researchers also conducted six qualitative interviews lasting between 60 and 90 minutes.

The students reported mindfulness training went further than learning a set of tools for coping with emotional difficulty. Students described improved empathy and communication skills when with patients through their newly learnt ability to notice their own thoughts and feelings. Students reported an improved ability to manage their workload better as well as a new ability to notice automatic judgmental thinking (such as not being good enough) without identifying with these thoughts. Students described how mindfulness had helped enhance their relationship to learning by using the mindfulness practices to refresh and regain concentration during long days of study as well as using the mindfulness practices to steady themselves during stressful situations in clinic or during exams.

The researchers concluded that more research is needed but these initial findings suggest that mindfulness training had helped students at Bristol reduce anxiety, excessive worry, negative thought patterns and improve resiliency to stress as well as improve emotional wellbeing and professional development.

Dr. Alice Malpass, Research Fellow in the Bristol Medical School: Population Health Sciences (PHS) and co-author, said: "At Bristol, we are continuing to increase efforts to find solutions to improve [mental health](#) among the student population. Our aim is to find effective new ways of supporting students who may be suffering from stress and anxiety.

"This study has shown how mindfulness can help students who might be struggling, in particular [medical students](#), find new ways of relating to the difficulties that arise in their clinical work, studying and wellbeing.

"We have developed a theoretical model of the medical [student](#) 'stress signature', mapping how mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) can break the cycle of specific vulnerability through the development of new coping strategies."

In Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the USA, mindfulness training is part of the medical curriculum but has yet to be implemented in the UK. Policy recommendations from the General Medical Council (GMC), the body responsible for improving medical education in the UK, recommend the use of mindfulness [training](#) to increase wellbeing and resilience to stress.

The researchers suggest a UK wide survey should be carried out to find out how other medical schools in the UK are implementing GMC [mindfulness training](#) guidelines and how this compares to what medical schools are delivering in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the USA.

More information: 'Medical Students' Experience of Mindfulness Training in the UK: Well-Being, Coping Reserve, and Professional Development' by Alice Malpass, Kate Binnie, and Lauren Robson in *Education Research International*

Provided by University of Bristol

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