'Headspace' app could benefit people with asthma

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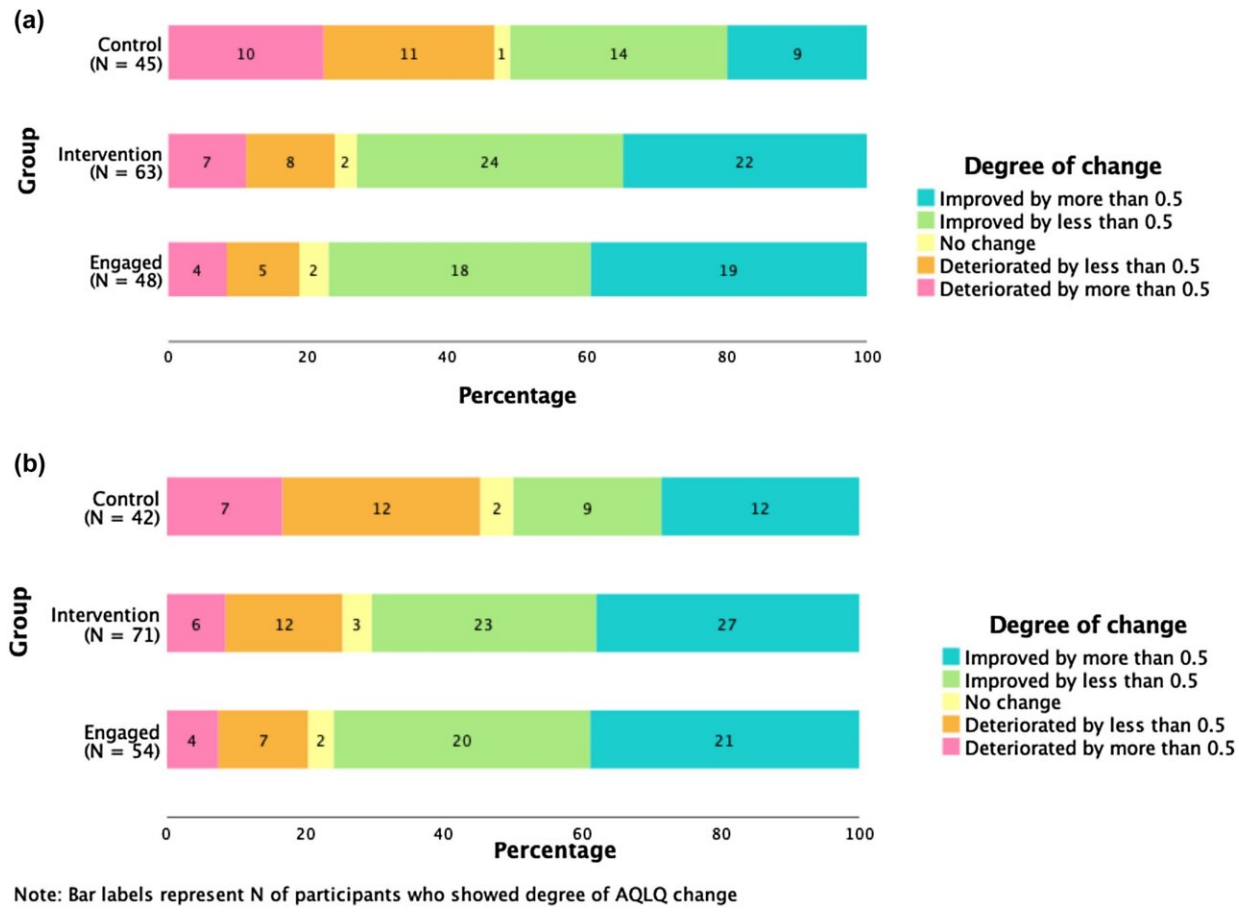

(a) Proportion of participants who demonstrated a change in primary endpoint at 6 weeks, relevant to minimum clinically important difference (MCID). (b) Proportion of participants who demonstrated a change in primary endpoint at 3 months, relevant to minimum clinically important difference (MCID). Credit: DOI: 10.1007/s10865-021-00249-3

People with asthma given access to a popular mindfulness app improved symptoms and quality of life after just three months, researchers behind new psychological research say.

The feasibility study, from a team at the University of Bath's Centre for Mindfulness and Compassion, sought to test the effectiveness of Headspace in helping people cope with asthma. Typically, the app is used to treat low mood, depression and anxiety.

Around 8 million people have asthma in England and Wales. Asthma symptoms vary substantially from person to person, both in terms of their physiological effects (for example, worse lung function and breathlessness) and also psychological effects including mental health. For some people, asthma can be quite manageable and not interfere with their day-to-day life, whilst others can have severe asthma which needs to be managed with specialist care.

Mindfulness is a technique, related to meditation, which emphasizes a non-judgemental acceptance of experiences: emphasizing 'what is' instead of 'what could be." The researchers hypothesize that it may be that mindfulness helps people with asthma to accurately assess their own symptoms, to accept them and to manage them appropriately. Secondly, the symptoms of any chronic health condition—like asthma—can impact your mood and mental health over time, and mindfulness has been shown to help depression and anxiety.

This initial exploratory study, which is published in the *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, and funded by the NIHR School of Primary Care Research, recruited 158 adults with asthma from GP practices in the UK. Half of the people in the study were given free access to Headspace, whilst the other half were allowed access once the study period had finished. The study looked at how many people completed the study, how often people used the app, and whether there were changes in

quality of life. The team also interviewed people to find out what they liked and disliked.

Lead author, Dr. Ben Ainsworth from the Department of Psychology at Bath explained: "Clearly, digital medicine is an increasingly important part of our UK healthcare system, so it's important to understand the health conditions where digital interventions can help. This is one of the first studies to look at whether digital mindfulness interventions, such as "Headspace," can offer promise for the 12% of the UK population that have asthma.

"Although these findings need to be confirmed with a large-scale randomized controlled trial, our study does suggest that some people may find it really useful (whilst others may not). It's important to recognize that mindfulness is not something to use instead of medication; rather, it could be an effective adjunct therapy for people who are looking for something more to help."

More information: Ben Ainsworth et al, A feasibility trial of a digital mindfulness-based intervention to improve asthma-related quality of life for primary care patients with asthma, *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* (2021). DOI: 10.1007/s10865-021-00249-3

Provided by University of Bath