

The Surging Trend of Meditation in Mental health in Present Scenario: A Review

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ABSTRACT

Pandemics are not new to this world but it would be safe to say that this Covid-19 pandemic has affected everyone's life on this planet. Apart from the physical illness, it has also impacted the mental well-being of many and in fact, there is a sudden increase in the cases of depression, anxiety, substance use, post-traumatic stress, suicidal ideation, and suicide as many as 3-fold times compared to what it was before the pandemic. Ironically, mental health related issues are not given that much attention and that in turn worsens the overall situation. In *Patanjali's Ashtang Yoga*, meditation is usually linked with *Dhyaan*, although it has many components and meditation is also a part of them. Although meditation is a traditional practice followed for ages, and over the last 30yrs, it has become increasingly popular in the health care segment. Positive changes in mental health has been noticed during the systematic reviews of evidence-based practices like Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy in the form of significant improvement in insomnia, anxiety, depression, and pain scores once included in daily routine. Also, significant functional and structural changes in the brain of people practicing meditation have been demonstrated in various researches. During the current pandemic, adding this practice in lifestyle and as complementary to the mainstream treatment for mental illness can potentially reduce the financial burden on the health care sector and the patient along with visible positive results.

Key Words *Meditation, Covid-19, Mindfulness, Dhyaan*

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INTRODUCTION

The global pandemic has had a major effect on everyone's lives of all age groups. The economic recession, unemployment, domestic violence, loss of dear ones, social distancing, isolation, substance abuse harms mental health of the people and create new barriers for the people who are already suffering with mental illness. According to WHO, the pandemic has caused

disruption of many kinds of critical mental health services around the world just when they needed it the most. Also, spending just 2% of the national health budget is not sufficient for the increased demand for mental health services.

As a large number of physicians and patients are choosing the alternatives to standard medication-oriented treatment, meditation, the traditional practice can step into filling the gap as the

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clinical use of meditation has grown tremendously. It is the first mind-body therapy to be embraced by mainstream health care providers and incorporated into evidence-based therapeutic programs. Its possible benefits include improving the condition of depression, anxiety, motivating abstinence from drugs of abuse, subsiding the self-injurious behaviours of personality disordered patients, improving hypertension, insomnia, managing the stress of chronic illness, and promoting cardiovascular health.

National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, USA, states that “the meditation techniques should include four elements-

- a quiet location with minimal distractions,
- a comfortable posture,
- a focus of attention and
- an open attitude

It not only brings calmness and relaxation in people but also improves their psychological balance & helps cope with illness and thereby enhancing overall health”¹. It incorporates a family of complex practices which encompass various forms of meditation. Among these, Mindfulness meditation is one of the important types, which includes both mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT)².

During mindfulness meditation, the person is intensely aware of and involved in the present moment, without interpretation and judgment. Practicing mindfulness meditation can help to

target the issues of stress, anxiety, depression which signifies that its focus may vary from practice to practice. Various evidence-based studies have proved that MBSR improves mental health and MBCT prevents depressive relapse³.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

Source of data

The data has been gathered from different journals, ayurvedic and modern textbooks, authentic websites, magazines articles, newspaper and works.

Concepts of meditation in ancient literature

As per Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, Dhayana is mentioned as the seventh limb of Ashtang Yoga.

It can be correlated with mediation and is an ongoing process of its previous stage of Dharana. According to him, Dhyana is the process of mind, where it is fixed on something leading to "a course of uniform modification of knowledge"⁴.

The stage of Dhyana can be achieved after attaining Dharana. So it can be stated that Dharana is a state of mind, and Dhyana it's process.

Dhyana differs from Dharana as in the former, the meditator becomes effortlessly engaged with the focus whereas the latter requires focusing with effort. Dharana is confining the mental processes within a defined, limited area, while Dhyana signifies the undisturbed connection between the mind and the object chosen for meditation^{5,6}.

As stated in the Gheranda Samhita, it is generally observed that a thought wave arises in the mind,

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which remains for a short interval before subsiding and being followed by another thought wave. Dhyana can be defined as a continuous thought towards a single object of concentration. The subject focuses on the same object without any interruption for a prolonged period which gives ultimate bliss⁷.

There are two types of dhyana

1. Saguna Dhyana – According to Atharvaveda, concentrating over an idol or symbol is sagunadhyana.

2. Nirguna Dhyana- According to Shandilyopnishad, Dhyana by controlling over soul (Atma) is nirguna dhyana.

During the process of Dhyana, the mind blends so well with the object of thought, that there is no interruption or distraction in the flow of thought even for a moment which evokes self-awareness and liberation (moksha)⁸.

The practice of dhyana is supposed to precede Samadhi, which is the ultimate purpose of Ashtang Yoga.

Research on meditation

The central nervous system which is made up of grey and white matter, declines with natural aging^{9,10}. The structural decrease in the volume and weight of the human brain began from our mid-twenties and leads progressively to functional impairments. This leads to an increased risk of mental illness and neurodegenerative disease. Numerous studies have begun over time to study the impact of meditation on the white and gray matter of the brain. There has been some recent attention

toward meditation and its ability to increase grey matter volume in the brain as its atrophy is usually accompanied by a variety of neurodegenerative diseases¹¹.

Various evidence-based studies have been undertaken to investigate the neural mechanism involved in the mindfulness meditation with the neuroimaging techniques like EEG^{12,13} and functional MRI¹⁴⁻¹⁷.

Recently, several cross-sectional anatomical MRI studies have illustrated that experienced meditators display different gray matter morphometry in multiple brain regions when compared to non-meditating individuals¹⁸⁻²³.

Previous researches indicate that over time mindfulness meditation may lead to an increase in the regional brain gray matter density¹⁸ in the hippocampus and other frontal regions of the brain which aid learning, cognition, and memory resulting in better retention of facts and more mindful behavior¹⁹. As well as increase in the anterior insula and cortical thickness in regions related to somatosensory, auditory, visual and interoceptive processing which benefit cognitive function, attention and self-awareness²⁰.

An interventional study conducted on mindful meditation, correlated stress reduction with the structural changes in the amygdala, which is responsible for stress, fear and anxiety. After 8 weeks of intervention, perceived stress was rated on the perceived stress scale (PSS) and MR Images. There was a significant decrease in stress levels according to PSS which also correlated

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positively with decreased grey matter density of the amygdala²⁴.

The areas showing increased gray matter density after mindful meditation, also include the areas of synthesis and release of the neurotransmitters i.e. norepinephrine and serotonin¹⁸. A different study correlated positively that the mindfulness-based intervention increases the psychological wellbeing of the individuals. The subjects experienced improved mood, sleep, appetite, and well-being after the intervention which are the primary functions of neurotransmitters²⁵.

Practicing Meditation not only calms down the sympathetic nervous system²⁶ which is responsible for fight or flight response but also activates the parasympathetic nervous system that allows us to relax in various stressful conditions.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As the world is witnessing the third wave of Covid-19 it's important to understand that while the first & second waves brought physical & financial crises and these crises together lead to a mental health crisis which has now become evident in countries across the world and Governments are worried about the extent to which the Covid-19 has adversely affected the people. No wonder that mental health and suicide prevention have become a top priority.

Practice like meditation is helpful and effective for the people at large & can be adapted for children, adults, teens, and people with intellectual disabilities²⁷ and have enough

evidence to support that if practiced regularly, its benefits can be felt after a relatively short span of practice.

Meditation in itself has the potential to complement treatment and in fact, it's a relatively low-cost yet effective method of giving support to people with mental health issues²⁸. Meditation techniques are simple to learn and easy to practice even by online methods²⁹ and can benefit the people working in the health care sector, the patients, and the general population including those with pre-existing mental illness³⁰.

A careful study of the past reveals that in 1918, almost one-third of the world's population was infected due to influenza also called Spanish flu which perhaps was one of the most deadly pandemics with three waves. As the current Covid-19 pandemic has also entered its third wave & it has adversely affected mental health deeply, a lot of research and evidence are available to prove that meditation can help to cope up with pain, depression, anxiety, and stress^{31,32} and this could be an area requiring further research which could prove to be fruitful. Ready to spare a few minutes in the morning or evening and shift your focus from the noise outside to the silence within. Your investment in meditation might fetch you the peace you always wanted.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author reports no conflicts of interest.

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