



Relation of Mindfulness Practices with Women's Mental and Physical Health Conditions: Implications in Counseling

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Abstract

Women confront various situations where they have to face many physical changes and psychological upheavals that make them vulnerable to mental as well as physical illness. Within the past few decades, researchers developed an interest in investigating mindfulness as a kind of clinical intervention. Nowadays, mindfulness practices are brought into mental health treatment, which is free from medication. The present paper is a review of the studies conducted in the area to understand how mindfulness-based programs such as mindfulness meditation and mindfulness yoga are efficacious for women to deal with various physical and psychological symptoms during specific conditions that can affect their mental and physical health. The article begins with a discussion of mental health, mindfulness and various mindfulness programs brought into mental health treatment. After that, five areas of women-related physical conditions are discussed in different sections, which show the effectiveness of mindfulness practices. On the basis of relevant studies, it can be concluded that mindfulness-based programs can be used as an effective clinical intervention by mental health practitioners in their counseling program to deal with various diseases in general and women-related diseases and health conditions in particular. The review ends with a discussion on the counseling implications of mindfulness-based programs.

INTRODUCTION

According to the report of the National Mental Health Survey 2015-2016, the dominance of females is 3.0% in current and 5.7% in lifetime over males (current – 2.4%; lifetime – 4.8%) for depressive disorders and for neurotic and stress-related disorder. According to an article published in New Indian Express, government psychiatrists say that women are prone to depression and anxiety two times higher than men, which affects 25% of women in the total population. The government took many steps and ran an awareness campaign to erase the stigma of mental health, but women still do not approach psychiatrists for treatment. According to doctors, the causes of depression and anxiety in women is their inherent nature, which is combined with hormonal changes at different phases of life (New Indian Express, 2020).

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From the viewpoint of positive psychology or of holism, mental health may consist an individual's skill to enjoy life and to make a balance between life activities and efforts to achieve psychological resilience (Snyder *et al.*, 2011). The WHO states that the well-being of an individual is involved in the realization of their potential, productive work, dealing with normal stresses of life, and role in society. Cultural distinctions, subjective evaluations, and competing professional principles all affect how one interprets "mental health". Mental health is the successful operation of the mental processes that enable the capacity to adjust to changes, produce fruitful endeavors, result in contented interpersonal relationships, and cope with setbacks. The term mental illness denotes collectively to all diagnosable mental disorders—health conditions characterized by variations in thinking, mood, or behavior related to distress or impaired functioning (WHO, 2014).

Women's physical health considers medication that emphasizes the treatment and diagnosis of physical conditions that affect women's physical and mental health. Women in India are vulnerable to confronting numerous health issues due to geographical conditions, cultural factors and socioeconomic conditions (National Health Portal of India, 2017). Some physical conditions are related to women only that cannot be understood by men, such as breast cancer, pregnancy, parenting stress in mothers, mother-child relationship, menopause and fibromyalgia. According to an article published by Cytecare Cancer Hospitals, breast cancer is the most common type of cancer in women affecting 14% of Indian women. It is studied that an Indian woman is diagnosed with breast cancer every 4 minutes. Breast cancer is increasing in urban as well as in rural areas. A report on Breast Cancer published in 2018 that new registered cases of breast cancer is 1,62,468 and 87,090 deaths are recorded due to breast cancer (Cytecare Cancer Hospitals). Fibromyalgia commonly rises in the middle age of a woman, but it can also affect men at any age. The prevalence of fibromyalgia is 2% to 4% of the total population (National Health Portal of India, 2018).

Mindfulness is the psychological process of intentionally paying attention to experiences happening

in the current moment in a non-judgmental way, which one can acquire through the exercise of meditation and through other training (Kabat-Zinn, 2013; Creswell, 2017). Mindfulness is a manner of paying attention that arose in Eastern meditation practices. It has been interpreted as "bringing one's complete attention to the present experience on a moment-to-moment basis" (Marlatt & Kristeller, 1999) and as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally". The capability to bring one's attention in this manner can be developed through the practice of meditation, which is outlined as the wilful self-regulation of attention from moment to moment. Mindfulness is basically came from *sati* which is a core component of Buddhist traditions and founded on Zen, *Vipassanā*, and Tibetan meditation techniques (Nisbett, 2017). Thích Nhất Hạnh and Kabat-Zinn have given their contribution to make mindfulness popular in the modern Western context (Hurrington & Dunne, 2015).

Mindfulness-based Programs

Western researchers and doctors have included mindfulness practice into mental health treatment programmes, which typically teaches these skills apart from the religious and cultural practices of their origin.

An eight-week programme called mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) can help people manage their pain, anxiety, despair, and stress. Jon Kabat-Zinn created this programme at the University of Massachusetts Medical Centre in the 1970s. MBSR combines body awareness, thinking, feeling, and action with mindfulness meditation, yoga, and careful observation of behavioral patterns (APA, 2019).

A psychological therapy tool called mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) was developed to help patients with major depressive disorder (MDD) avoid relapsing into depression. It combines mindfulness meditation with conventional cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) techniques (Piet and Hougaard, 2011).

Mindfulness-based pain management (MBPM) is a kind of mindfulness-based intervention (MBI)

that provides particular practises to help people with illnesses and chronic pain. Because MBPM has adapted the fundamental ideas and methods of MBSR and MBCT, it places greater emphasis on the practice of "loving-kindness." This intervention was created by Vidyamala Burch and is offered through Breathworks' programmes (Cusens et al., 2010).

Developed in the late 1980s, acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) is a type of clinical behaviour analysis (CBA) used in psychotherapy. Comprehensive distancing was the initial term for this strategy. To improve psychological flexibility, it combines commitment and behavior-change techniques with acceptance and mindfulness techniques (Murdock, 2009).

Marsha M. Linehan (1993) established dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT), a psychosocial treatment for people with borderline personality disorder, and one of its "core" practices is mindfulness. Linehan elucidates that DBT is dialectic in that it employs "the reconciliation of opposites in a continual process of synthesis."

Based on the ideas of cognitive-behavioral therapy, mode deactivation therapy (MDT) is a novel approach to treatment that incorporates mindfulness practices, dialectical behaviour therapy, and acceptance and commitment therapy. Mode Deactivation Therapy was created as an effective treatment for teenagers with complicated trauma-related psychiatric issues and behavioural behaviours, according to a publication by Jack A. Apsche and Joan Swart (2014).

Rationale of the Study

There are so many therapies and techniques are being used in counselling sessions for treating emotional and behavioural problems. But now a day's mindfulness practices are grabbing attention of mental health practitioners and counsellors to use it as a method of treatment in counselling sessions for treating various psychological and physical problems. There are lot of literatures available that shows the usefulness of mindfulness practices in treating depression, anxiety and other psychological disorders. The rationale for reviewing the relationship between mindfulness practices and

women's mental and physical health conditions lies in addressing the unique health challenges faced by women and the potential of mindfulness as a therapeutic tool. This review will not only contribute to the academic literature but also offer practical insights for healthcare practitioners and guide future research in this important area.

METHOD

Literature Search and Study Selection

41 publications were found in the first step of searching the literature using keywords and screening it based on the abstract and title. Using date ranges from 2010 to 2020 and relevant keywords like mindfulness, mindfulness-based interventions, and cancer, menopause, fibromyalgia, pregnancy, and mental and physical health conditions, 30 literatures were found in the second step of the process. The third step was the selection criteria-based inclusion of empirical literatures and dissertations, and the exclusion of book chapters and literature reviews. The majority of the literature was included from Google Scholar, Research Gate, Springer, and Pub Med, although the database was not the primary concern. In the end, 15 literatures were included for the review in this work.

Narrative Literature Review Method

This review employs a qualitative methodology to examine the association between women's mental and physical health conditions and mindfulness activities. An integrative synthesis is formed by the application of the narrative and descriptive literature review approach. In order to identify and characterise previously published research, prevent duplications, and pinpoint areas that still require investigation, narrative reviews concentrate on these areas (Ferrari, 2015). It is convenient to address the current research because the narrative review's goal is to describe the research results rather than validate them. Additionally, it does not require selecting the primary studies based on a pre-established set of criteria.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) Program Helps in Dealing with Psychological Effects of Cancer

The diagnosis of cancer is extremely stressful, painful and fearful experience for most people because of its life-threatening effects and the terrible side effects of treatment. According to the National Cancer Institute (2007), 178,480 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in 2007 and 40,460 women will pass away from the disease. Various psychological and physical repercussions are associated with cancer diagnosis, treatment, and survival. The experience of suffering with cancer can be too distressing for some patients to develop a mental illness such as anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder (Ott et al., 2006). Mindfulness practices can be fruitful for patients with cancer from diagnosis to survival.

There are majority of evidences exist to demonstrate the importance of one of the mindfulness practices which is Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program to deal with psychological effects of cancer. An MBSR program may be beneficial in enhancement of mindful attention and reducing contemplation in women with cancer. MBSR program is effective in reducing mood disturbance and stress symptoms in female patients having wide variety of cancer diagnoses, stages of illness, and ages. MBSR was concerned with improved quality of life and alleviated stress symptoms, was the first to report changes in cancer-related cytokine production which is related to program participation. The MBSR came forth as an optimistic intervention to enhance the quality of sleep in women with breast cancer who frequently experience sleep disturbance due to stress. MBSR program is efficacious for mental adjustment to cancer, stress, state anxiety and health locus of control in women with breast cancer and noticed considerable decrement in pre- to post-MBSR stress and state anxiety levels. Thirty women with breast cancer were investigated on state anxiety, differences in coping tendencies, and mental adjustment to cancer to explore the

effectiveness of MBSR program, result showed significantly decreased level of anxiety (Campbell et al., 2012)

Mindfulness-based Yoga Decreases the Pregnancy-specific Anxiety

Motherhood is a great gift of God. However, women are vulnerable to experience a variety of physical and emotional symptoms such as stress and fatigue during pregnancy, due to a constant bodily changes in order to provide care for the growing fetus, hormonal alterations (mood swings), and anxiety regarding labor and fetal outcomes, are potentially worsen the stress response (Bribiescas, 2013). Mothers are advised to take rest frequently, do walk, eat healthy, get plenty of sleep, and not to engage in heavy work. Stress during pregnancy can have overall negative impact on the health of the mother and her infant from the early stage of pregnancy (Duncan & Bardacke, 2010).

Mindfulness and yoga based practices for prenatal, childbirth, parenting are emerging as a promising approach (Duncan & Bardacke, 2010). Research exhibits that including anxiety and back pain, yoga and meditation can effectively alleviate psychological and physical distress and can be a convenient intervention during pregnancy. Muzik et al., (2012) conducted a study which was the first to show that Mindfulness Yoga may be an efficacious treatment substitute or enhancement to pharmacotherapy for pregnant women who are at high risk for psychopathology. Findings advocate that Mindfulness Yoga was doable, accepted and fruitful. Symptoms of depression were remarkably decreased, while mindfulness and maternal-foetal attachment impressively improved. An 8 week study conducted on a mindfulness-based intervention named, "Mindful Motherhood Intervention," directed to reduce stress and finding suggests that mothers who were engaged in mindfulness training during pregnancy showed impressive reduction in anxiety and negative affect as compared to the mothers who were not engaged in the mindfulness training. Guardino (2013) and his associates found that mothers who received mindfulness intervention during pregnancy showed a significantly appreciable reduction over time in pregnancy-specific

anxiety and pregnancy-related anxiety from pre- to post-intervention as compared to control group. Mindful-yoga intervention is effective in reducing stress, anxiety, and pain as well as improving mindfulness and sleep during pregnancy. Practicing mindfulness yoga during pregnancy clearly shows the significant reduction of stress, as a result it is also reducing adverse birth outcomes. Participation of pregnant women in the Mindfulness-Based Prenatal Yoga program shows the reduced level of stress and a great improvement in their mindfulness during their pregnancy (Simonian, 2015).

Mindfulness Practices Reduces Parenting Stress and Improving Mother-child Relationship

An emotional and secure bond between mother and child is important for a child's emotional, cognitive and social development as well as for mother's satisfaction of being a good mother. A healthy mother-child relationship plays a major role in the development of the society's culture. But maintaining this relationship is very demanding and challenging in terms of child's need, family's responsibility and self-care of mother. When mothers found herself incapable of fulfilling these demands and cope with these challenges then it produces parenting stress in mothers.

There are many literatures available as the evidence for showing the effectiveness of mindfulness-based practices for parenting stress in mothers as well as to improve the quality of mother-child relationship. In a pilot study Hwang (2015) and his associates demonstrated the impact of mindfulness training provided to the mothers of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and problem behaviours for enhancing the quality of their domestic and social life. Mindfulness may be helpful in reducing parenting stress and improves parent-child relationship among mothers of children with ASD. A Mindful parenting model developed to suggests that the improved quality of parent-child relationships can be seen when parents bring a moment-to-moment awareness in their parenting that includes listening with full attention when talking to their children, bringing emotional awareness and non-judgmental acceptance in their par-

enting interactions, and practicing self-regulation and compassion in their parenting relationships. Another study done by Siu (2016) and his associates also found the significant and positive effect of mindfulness on mother-child relationship in terms of parental involvement, attachment and confidence and a negative effect on relational frustration and discipline practice. A narrative review done by Rayan and Ahmad (2017) suggest that parenting stress and psychological distress can be managed through the use of mindfulness based interventions (MBIs) in parents of children with disabilities. Another research also showed the effectiveness of MBSR that reduces parental stress and mental health problems in parents of children with developmental delays (DD) and improves behaviour challenges among these children (Neece, 2013).

Mindfulness-based Interventions Mitigate Menopausal Symptoms

At the age of 49 to 52, there is a specific time comes in women's life when menstrual period stops permanently and they become unable to bear children, this particular time known as menopause (Takahashi and Johnson, 2015). Medical professionals define menopause as occurs when a woman has no menstrual bleeding for a year. Women who are going through menopause experience some psychological symptoms, such as anxiety, memory loss, difficulty concentrating, depression, irritability, mood fluctuations, and decreased interest in sexual activities (Hoffman, 2012).

Among midlife women, mindfulness may mitigate menopausal symptoms. Higher mindfulness and lower stress has been found associated with lower menopausal symptom (Sood *et al.*, 2019). Meditation in particular, a mindfulness-based strategy, may be helpful for postmenopausal insomnia. It is found in a study that Postmenopausal women having insomnia are less mindful as compared to women without insomnia. Mindfulness meditation training also contributed in the improvement of quality of life, attention levels and sleep quality, and reduced vasomotor symptoms in postmenopausal women with sleep disorder such as insomnia (Garcia *et al.*, 2018).

Mindfulness Practices Moderates the Physical and Psychological Effects of Fibromyalgia

Fibromyalgia (FM) is a medical condition in which women suffer with chronic pain and often feel amplified pain response to pressure. Some physical and psychological symptoms are identified such as tiredness to the extent that affect normal activities, sleep related problems and troubles with memory (Clauw, 2014).

A randomised clinical trial shows the impact of mindfulness meditation that decreases the depressive symptoms in patients with fibromyalgia. In a study, Pleman (2019) and his colleagues discovered a correlation between higher mindfulness and improved psychological health, a higher quality of life, and decreased pain interference in fibromyalgia patients. Mindfulness moderates the effectiveness of fibromyalgia's impact on anxiety. Park (2020) and his colleagues also found in their study that higher mindfulness is related with better sleep quality in women having fibromyalgia, but pain interference, depression, and anxiety mediate the relationship of mindfulness and sleep quality. A study explored the effect of 8-week mindfulness meditation program on Sense of Coherence in fibromyalgia patients, result shows significantly increased level of Sense of Coherence in patients after MBSR participation. In an experimental trial Amutio (2018) and his associates found a significant reduction of state anxiety, depression and anger, and sleep-related disorders such as sleep impairment, subjective insomnia, sleepiness and sleep quality in individuals with fibromyalgia by using mindfulness-based intervention known as *Flow Meditation (Meditación-Fluir)*. Adler-Neal and Zeidan (2017) reported in his review paper that MBSR program trains individuals to react more efficaciously to illness, pain, and stress through the use of meditation practices and yoga that focuses on the breath, walking meditation, eating meditation and reduces depression and state anxiety and improves individual's ability to control their anger.

Implication for Counselling

Mindfulness-based stress reduction program is beneficial for enhancement of mindful attention and reducing contemplation in women with cancer.

MBIs and MBSR enhances the quality of domestic and social life, reduces parenting stress and improves parent-child relationship among mothers of children with ASD. Higher mindfulness is associated with lower menopausal symptoms and postmenopausal insomnia, improvement in sleep quality and quality of life, attention levels and reduces vasomotor symptoms in postmenopausal women with sleep disorder such as insomnia. Higher mindfulness is related to the lower pain interference, lower impact of fibromyalgia, better psychological health and quality in life. Mindfulness moderates the fibromyalgia's impact on anxiety.

CONCLUSION

Mindfulness practices such as breathing exercise, mindfulness yoga and relaxation techniques are beneficial for women having physical diseases such as cancer and fibromyalgia, and other physical health conditions like pregnancy and menopause, as well as mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, stress and sleep related problems. It would be beneficial for women if mindfulness practices are considered as a treatment technique by mental health practitioners.

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