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An outpatient program in behavioral medicine for chronic pain patients based on the practice of mindfulness meditation: Theoretical considerations and preliminary results

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Abstract

The practice of mindfulness meditation was used in a 10-week Stress Reduction and Relaxation Program to train chronic pain patients in self-regulation. The meditation facilitates an attentional stance towards proprioception known as detached observation. This appears to cause an "uncoupling" of the sensory dimension of the pain experience from the affective evaluative alarm reaction and reduce the experience of suffering via cognitive reappraisal. Data are presented on 51 chronic pain patients who had not improved with traditional medical care. The dominant pain categories were low back, neck and shoulder, and headache. Facial pain, angina pectoris, noncoronary chest

pain, and GI pain were also represented. At 10 weeks, 65% of the patients showed a reduction of $\approx 33\%$ in the mean total Pain Rating Index (Melzack) and 50% showed a reduction of $\approx 50\%$. Similar decreases were recorded on other pain indices and in the number of medical symptoms reported. Large and significant reductions in mood disturbance and psychiatric symptomatology accompanied these changes and were relatively stable on follow-up. These improvements were independent of the pain category. We conclude that this form of meditation can be used as the basis for an effective behavioral program in self-regulation for chronic pain patients. Key features of the program structure, and the limitations of the present uncontrolled study are discussed.



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