

Information on meditation and mindfulness



This evidence based information sheet aims to provide clearly sourced and reliable information to help you make informed choices about the services that we offer. You may tell us how useful you have found this using the feedback forms provided. If you'd like more information on how to access the range of services we provide, please contact the helpline at the end of this information sheet.

Penny Brohn Cancer Care Opinion

We support this therapy and include it as part of the Bristol Approach <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	We support this therapy, but do not offer it as part of the Bristol Approach <input type="checkbox"/>	We do not support this therapy <input type="checkbox"/>
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In brief

By focussing your attention, meditation and mindfulness practices aim to help you create a peaceful, quiet state of mind. For people with cancer, it is offered to improve quality of life and to help cope with the symptoms of cancer and its treatments such as fatigue, nausea, anxiety, depression and stress. People who have tried meditation and mindfulness report benefits such as greater positivity, gaining control, finding different ways of coping and personal growth. Only a small number of research studies have been carried out. These studies show that meditation and Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) are potentially beneficial and there is some evidence that MBSR positively affects immune and hormonal function. Whilst more high quality research is needed to confirm these positive findings, Penny Brohn Cancer Care supports meditation and mindfulness practices to alleviate some of the symptoms of cancer and its treatments.

Practitioner Perspective

"The gentle introduction of meditation into our lives can enable us to access a quiet stillness deep within us. Gradually we may notice that we are more settled in ourselves; that we feel less controlled by our racing thoughts and more accepting of our fluctuating feelings. Here at Penny Brohn Cancer Care, it has long been recognised that meditation is a powerful aspect of emotional, mental, physical and spiritual healing. We teach simple and effective ways to meditate and support people to integrate these techniques into their lives."

More information: What is meditation and mindfulness?

Meditation and mindfulness are techniques where the attention is focused on a point of reference, such as the breath or an object, in order to achieve a state of peace and inner calm. Meditation is offered both as a spiritual practice and as a health practice to maintain good health and to help a wide range of illnesses.

As a spiritual practice, meditation is used to gain understanding for self improvement, and ultimately to link with the "divine" in a state of altered/heightened consciousness. Some people consider prayer to be a form of meditation because of similarities between the two. Some traditions and religions that use and teach meditation include Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Hinduism, Aikido, Lamrim, Qi Gong, Tai Chi, Islam, Yoga, Zazen and Zen Buddhism. Meditation has been practiced for thousands of years across the world.

As a health practice, the West has taken an interest in meditation for its potential to maintain health and to help healing. Popular and scientific interest in the 1960s and 1970s looked at how meditation could help relieve stress, reduce anxiety, lower blood pressure and generally improve health by stimulating what Herbert Benson, one of the leading researchers, termed the "relaxation response"¹. His work and research is ongoing and has helped to shape many of today's therapeutic meditative practices.

Meditation is commonly offered along with other self-help practices such as imagery and relaxation. An example is Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn and which includes yoga, imagery and group work. MBSR is often recommended through the NHS to treat certain types of depression.

What happens in a meditation and mindfulness session?

The most common type of meditation and mindfulness sessions are group sessions, though you may also find one to one sessions on offer. In either case, for those new to the practice, sessions usually last for an hour. If you wish to take the practice further, there are many centres that offer longer sessions, and retreats.

A session usually starts with verbal instructions, followed by silence for practice to take place. You can practice whilst seated, lying down or even whilst moving. Some traditions adopt special seated positions such as the lotus position or sitting cross-legged, but when seated the most important thing is to be in a position that can be kept comfortably. It is recommended that meditation is practiced regularly at home for it to be of most benefit.

Practitioners may be aligned to a faith (eg Buddhism), or a particular therapeutic approach (eg mindfulness based stress reduction). Others may follow a more general approach. Here are some examples of meditation techniques and practices:

Mindfulness meditation is a practice of bringing awareness to the ongoing experience of here and now, often by following the breath. When the attention wanders, the practitioner brings their attention back to the point of focus. It is often practiced in Buddhist traditions.

Concentrative meditation focuses with complete concentration on an external object, gently bringing the attention back to the object whenever it wanders.

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) was developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn in the 1970s. The programme is based on the principles of mindfulness meditation, using

specific techniques such as awareness of sensations, sitting meditation, body scan, and hatha yoga stretches. The aim is to help people cope with stress, pain, and illness by using moment-to-moment awareness. It is usually taught as a course over six to eight weeks, with home study to follow.

Moving forms of meditation, such as Tai Chi, Qi Gong, Yoga and Aikido. These involve moving the body with mindful awareness. Walking meditation (Kinhin) is practiced in the Zen Buddhist tradition and has been integrated into modern approaches such as MBSR.

Chanting involves repetition of a phrase, or mantra, to focus the mind. It is often used in Buddhist and Hindu traditions, and in modern non-denominational practices.

Metta bhavna is a meditation of loving kindness. Thoughts of love and compassion to all beings are encouraged to relieve the mind of negative thoughts such as hatred, anger, jealousy, and so on.

What are the providers' claims?

In a healthcare context, practitioners offer meditation as a way to reconnect with a sense of self, to gain insight into thoughts and feelings, to alleviate physical discomfort, cope with stress, promote relaxation and find inner calm and peace. It is recommended for anxiety, asthma, stress, chronic pain, drug and alcohol addiction, epilepsy, heart disease and hypertension. It is also believed to improve general health and wellbeing and is practiced by many, especially in a religious context, for spiritual and personal growth.

For people with cancer, meditation is not offered as a cure, but as a way to help cope with the symptoms of cancer and its treatments and to generate a better quality of life. Meditation is thought to help people to live in the moment rather than worrying about the future. Some practitioners believe it is linked to the "relaxation response", a physiological state which is thought to support healing.

What do people who have tried meditation and mindfulness say about it?

Research studies known as qualitative studies ask people about their experiences. They can tell us what having a therapy was like for the people involved in the study, but can't tell us if a therapy is likely to work for everyone (this is dealt with in the section "What's the evidence?").

People with cancer who have practiced meditation describe a number of benefits. In one fair quality study people reported that it helped them gain control, be more positive, deal with pain in different ways other than relying on drugs, and a theme of "doing battle" and aiming to beat cancer emerged. All six people in the study felt better in some way from meditation. Another good quality study of group meditation also found that people felt they gained better self control and developed coping strategies, as well becoming more open to change. They valued the shared experience and support from others, and felt that their relationship with themselves and others improved through personal growth. Meditation seemed to support their existing spirituality, or help them to get in touch with this within themselves. One small study found mindfulness helped women with any sexual difficulties they experienced following gynaecological cancer, and many of them wished they had learnt it earlier in life.

Are there any legal issues?

Practitioners do not need a licence to teach meditation and mindfulness techniques in the UK. Some traditions and schools of meditation have their own training and accreditation schemes.

How much does it cost?

The cost of a session can vary widely according to factors such as time, group size and tradition. Some practitioners, especially those following a spiritual practice, may ask for a donation rather than a set price. Others will charge an hourly rate, or offer courses at a fixed price. A group session in a spiritual tradition, eg Buddhist, can cost as little as £6 per 1 ½ hour session, whilst a one-to-one session may cost £25.

What's the evidence?

A high quality review of mindfulness research showed that there is limited evidence to suggest meditation can increase positive coping and optimism and reduce the severity and duration of chemotherapy nausea. Another review of MBSR concluded that it has potential as a self-administered technique to improve mood, sleep quality and reduce stress. As there was very little good quality research to draw from, more research needs to be done.

This is a summary of our research findings. A full list of references used to write this section is available upon request.

Is meditation and mindfulness safe?

Little research has investigated the safety of meditation. It is generally considered that its benefits outweigh any negative effects². Those with cancer should consult their doctor and the therapist/teacher before commencing a movement-based meditation such as yoga or Tai Chi.

Whilst some studies indicate that meditation has the potential to make pre-existing depression and anxiety^{3,4} worse some of the studies above show that it helps these conditions. Other concerns relate to people with mental health conditions^{3,4} though this comes from a poorly described study. There are no known interactions between drug therapies and meditation.

Resources used

A full list of references used to write this sheet, including the research literature, is available upon request. Please call the helpline.

1. Benson H, Klipper MZ. The relaxation response. Harper Torch;1975. Revised 2000.
2. American cancer society [Webpage]. Meditation. Accessed 28/8/07. www.cancer.org/docroot/ETO/content/ETO_5_3X_Meditation.asp
3. The desktop guide to complementary and alternative medicine. Second Edition. 2006. Ernst E, Pittler M H, Wider B (Eds). Mosby, Elsevier.
4. Natural Standard Bottom Line Monograph. Meditation. [Webpage] www.naturalstandard.com/monographs/monoframeset.asp?monograph=/monographs/alternativemodalities/patient-meditation.asp%3Fprintversion%3Dtrue

Other sources of information

Other organisations who offer information on complementary therapies:

- Foundation for Integrated Health. Web: <http://www.fih.org.uk>
- NHS National Library for Health. Web: <http://www.library.nhs.uk/cam>

Organisations that offer support and information for people with cancer:

- Cancer Research UK. Tel: 0207 009 8820, web: www.cancerresearchuk.org
- NHS Direct. Tel: 08 45 46 47, web: www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk
- Cancerbackup. Tel: 0808 800 1234, web: www.cancerbackup.org.uk

- Macmillan CancerLine. Tel: 0808 808 2020, web: www.macmillan.org.uk

Statement

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If you have any questions please contact us

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