

MBSR & MBCT: Benefits and Risks

Mindfulness practice is currently available in a myriad of contexts: Apps that are literally at our fingertips, online and in-person, self-paced and teacher-led courses and workshops. It seems that every day new research is supporting the benefits of this simple and ancient practice. Given how widespread mindfulness has become, it's especially important to know that mindfulness practice has associated risks alongside the benefits. As you consider taking up mindfulness practice or extending your engagement with mindfulness or meditation practices through Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) or Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), knowing yourself and the factors that might impact you will be supportive for the most beneficial experience.

→ Benefits

The benefits and potential of mindfulness-based programs are well documented. As two of the most researched mindfulness programs, MBSR and MBCT are known for their rigor, depth, and adherence to both scientific inquiry and pedagogical integrity.

MBSR may have a significant positive impact on a number of physical and psychological wellness factors, including anxiety and depressive symptoms, stress, quality of life, and physical functioning. MBCT may also have a significant positive impact on reducing depressive symptoms and preventing future depressive episodes. None of these positive impacts are guaranteed.

→ Risks

Participation in MBSR and MBCT involves a risk of physical and/or mental injury. This includes without limitation muscle strain, bodily pain, increased anxiety and mental distress. Participants in MBSR and MBCT are responsible for assessing these risks, understanding them, and assuming them knowingly and willingly.

Participants are also responsible for determining whether they are physically and mentally capable of participating in MBSR and MBCT and asking any questions they have about the risks of participating in MBSR and MBCT.

Ongoing Contact and Support

Throughout the Mindfulness-Based program and teacher training process, participants and trainees are encouraged to let their teacher know if they have any questions or concerns about their mindfulness practice. The teacher makes themselves available to meet and explore the participant or trainee's experience, providing recommendations for additional support including referrals. If there are concerns, the teacher may also reach out to check in with a participant. The focus is always on the participants' safety and best interests.

Brown University is committed to excellence, rigor and integrity in its research, teaching and mindfulness-based programs. Mindfulness practice is flexible, and there is no singular "right way" to engage with practice. As research continues, our commitment is to implement the most skillful methods for learning and practice in service to growth, health and well-being. Our focus is always on the participant's safety and best interests.

Research studies on benefits

Links to articles for your reference can be found here:

- De Vibe M, Bjorndal A, Fattah S, Dyrda GM, Halland E, Tanner-Smith EE. Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) for improving health, quality of life and social functioning in adults: a systematic review and meta-analysis.
- Anheyer D, Haller H, Barth J, Lauche R, Dobos G, Cramer H. Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction for Treating Low Back Pain: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis. *Ann Intern Med.* 2017; 166 (11):799-807.
- Lee EKP, Yeung NCY, Xu Z, Zhang D, Yu CP, Wong SYS. Effect and Acceptability of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program on Patients With Elevated Blood Pressure or Hypertension: A Meta-Analysis of Randomized Controlled Trials. *Hypertension.* 2020;76(6):1992-2001.
- Kuyken, W, Warren FC, Taylor, RS, Whalley, B, Crane C, Bondolfi G, et.al.: Efficacy of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy in Prevention of Depressive Relapse: An Individual Patient Data Meta-analysis. From Randomized Trials. *JAMA Psychiatry.* 2016 June;18:73(6);565-574.

Research studies on risks

As the field has grown, possible risks of engaging with mindfulness-based programs (MBPs) and mindfulness and meditation practices has been given little attention in the scientific literature up to recently. Britton and colleagues at Brown University have taken a lead on efforts to define and measure meditation-related adverse effects (MRAE) (Britton, WR, Lindahl, JR, Cooper, DJ, Canby, NK, Palitsky R. Defining and measuring meditation-related adverse effects in mindfulness-based programs. *Clinical Psychological Sciences.* 2021 May 18;9(6): 1185-1204). As the field expands and grows, integrity demands we attend to and better understand the scope and limits of these practices.

Support for Participants

Brown University is committed to excellence, rigor and integrity in its research, teaching and mindfulness-based programs. To that end there are several processes in place that support participants and trainees in their engagement with both formal and informal mindfulness practices.

Before the Program Begins: Orientation

During the program's Orientation, both potential benefits and risks are reviewed. In addition, a questionnaire is completed by all participants with background details, including prior experience with mindfulness, meditation or other contemplative practices. Following the orientation and throughout the program, the teacher is available to meet if a participant has any concerns about the appropriateness of the program. The teacher will be able to recommend resources and support that might be helpful.

Possible risks shared with participants during the Orientation include the risk of physical injury during the mindful movement elements. Participants should consult with their health care provider prior to participating in MBSR and MBCT and are responsible for adapting any of the suggested movements and Yoga postures. The ongoing invitation is to listen deeply to the body during the movement practices and to respond wisely.

Possible risks of mental injury are reviewed, including without limitation experiencing emotions more strongly, anxiety, and a sense of overwhelm; or possibly a blunting or distancing from emotions. Participants who have a history of trauma, abuse, or who have a diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder may find some or all of the practices challenging and should consult with their healthcare provider. Participants are responsible for assessing these risks and deciding if participating in the program is appropriate at the time.