

## Mindfulness as the Key to Well-Being: A Review of Literature

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aims to examine the view of the practice of mindfulness as a important factor for wellbeing. **Methods:** An extensive systematic electronic review (Google Scholar, EBSO, JSTOR, ProQuest Science, Science Direct and Research Gate, NCBI, PsycINFO) using key words 'Mindfulness', 'Hinduism' 'Buddhism' and 'Well-being'. **Results:** 150 published studies from 1984 to 2014 were obtained out of which 20 are reviewed. **Conclusion:** Mindfulness has been recommended in several scripture and religious texts as a key aspect for well-being of self. This conclusion can be validated using the various programs studied in current research that provide empirical evidence to support the statements found in the early literature. There is a need to develop a standardized training procedure for mindfulness and test it across various age groups.

**Keywords:** *Mindfulness; Buddhism; Well-Being; Mindfulness-oriented therapy; Mindfulness-based stress reduction*

The interest in Mindfulness has been steadily increasing among researchers, especially in the western context over the years. The reports related to mindfulness per year had increased from 80 in the 1990s to over 600 in 2006(Warren et al., 2007). Though mindfulness has been extensively researched by western scholars; its origin can be traced back to Asia, especially in the Indian Subcontinent (Rex, 2010) as an essential tool or way of living for healthier life and well-being. It has become a part of many psychotherapeutic techniques. It used it to treat a wide range of symptoms related to psychopathology and is gaining more importance with every passing year. The paper reviews the various scriptures that entail mindfulness as an important factor of well-being and the various empirical studies or empirically tested mindfulness-based programs that link mindfulness and well-being.

### *Mindfulness*

Langer and Moldoveanu (2000) conceptualized mindfulness as a state of the increased or heightened state of awareness of the things that surround an individual. It is fundamentally a

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Received: July 14, 2018; Revision Received: July 20, 2018; Accepted: August 5, 2018

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process that draws distinctions and novel stimuli. The number or type of stimuli does not matter; as long as it is novel. This distinction, in turn, leads to a number of things like more awareness, enhanced sensitivity, and openness to new information (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000)

While Langer's concept is rooted in Social psychology, Kabat-Zinn has conceptualized mindfulness such that its rooted deeply in Buddhist Philosophy (Pineau, Glass, & Kaufman, 2014). He proposed that Mindfulness means "Paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally". This is, according to him, provides an increased attentiveness, clearness and acceptance of our current moment (Kabat-Zinn, 2014).

### *Well-being*

Well-being can be looked at from two perspectives, the first being objective and the other being subjective in nature. Objective Well-being is attained through obtaining material things from food, water to a car or dress etc. Subjective Well-being, on the other hand, is a more psychological phenomenon that is experienced by individuals (Frey, Stutzer, Tella, & Macculloch, 2002).

It is logical to presume that psychological Well-being will be affected more by mindfulness when compared to objective well-being. Hence Psychological or Subjective Well-being will be the focus of the review paper and any further references to well-being will be that of psychological well-being.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A literature review was done on articles that were primarily obtained from a search in online databases such as Google Scholar, EBSCO, JSTOR, ProQuest Science, Science Direct and Research Gate, NCBI, PsycINFO. The keywords used were 'India', 'Mindfulness', 'Hinduism' 'Buddhism' and 'Well-being'. The duration of the published articles was selected ranges from 1984 to 2016. Almost 150 articles related to the keywords were found, out of which 20 will be reviewed here. The review of literature focuses on Mindfulness as an important factor in psychological well-being. It explores the various programs that are based on mindfulness and their effectiveness in improving well-being.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### *Buddhism*

An important characteristic of Buddhist literature is the breaking down of experiences into its constituents or 'dharma's'. Olendzki (2013) reports that Buddhism identifies how an experience, although seems continuous and free-flowing, is essentially a rapid succession of separate sensory stimuli that are provided coherence and meaning by higher cognitive functioning. The Abhidhamma system in Buddhism is written in pali; it talks about how various mental factors that are both innate and can be trained contribute towards an

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experience. Both wholesome and unwholesome experiences are constructed, out of which Mindfulness seems to be an advanced level of the wholesome constitution (Olendzki, 2013). Dibert (2009) in his thesis, spoke of Theravada, a branch of Buddhism, and how it emphasizes on developing a reflective mind and letting go of the delusion of the world. Being in touch with reality and looking at things as they are without attaching a value to it. This does not imply an uninterested stance, but rather a realistic understanding of how the world is functioning (Dibert, 2009).

### *Hinduism*

Velayudhan and Benedict (2013) described that in the Bhagavad Gita, the Holy Scripture of Hinduism, Lord Krishna preaches Arjun, a prince in dilemma, that the worldly pain and pleasure are temporary in nature. He says that these momentary experiences of flesh must be allowed to pass and not dwell upon. The attachment to these feelings may create pain or pleasure and thus hamper the person from attaining psychological Well-being (Velayudhan & Benedict, 2013). This as has already been discussed, is the central concept of being Mindfulness.

### *Empirical Studies*

Mindfulness has been incorporated and used as a part of therapy with increasing commonality. It is being used to treat a wide range of symptomology from stress, anxiety, and depression to pain tolerance and somatic symptoms. Some of the studies that tested the effectiveness and validity of the programs based on mindfulness are discussed below.

One pilot did show results similar to the recommendations in the scriptures, i.e., Participants who were provided mindfulness training showed increased levels of pain tolerance and psychological well-being. However, it was not found to be related to their acquisition of mindfulness skills (Kingston, Chadwick, Meron, & Skinner, 2007). This could be because the method of assessing mindfulness, the Kentucky Inventory of Mindfulness was not a suitable questionnaire to assess as it was developed for the borderline personality disorder. However, when Nykli et al (2008) conducted a research to study the mediating effects of mindfulness, the results were contradictory. Compared to the control group, the intervention showed a significantly lesser amount of stress and increased positive affect as well. This study indicates that the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program can be a useful mediator in facilitating mindfulness and increasing psychological well-being (Nyklíček & Kuijpers, 2008). Similar results that Mindfulness was positively influencing the psychological well-being of people were found by Carmody and Baer (2008). They studied the various facets of mindfulness and its improvements in home practices as well (Carmody & Baer, 2008).

In one study, the impact of mindfulness was measured through various models in a 4 study approach. The results indicated that mindfulness resulted in lower levels of perceived stress and stressors. Additionally, the greater mindfulness was a significant predictor of better adaptive coping strategies and as a result of that shared a temporal relationship with well-

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being (Weinstein, Brown, & Ryan, 2009). This relationship could not be replicated when mindfulness training was provided to adolescents in a controlled study. The control and intervention groups did not show a significant difference in the levels of mindfulness, psychological well-being, and resilience (Huppert & Johnson, 2010). The results could be explained as a result of the lesser duration and rigor of the training program provided to the adolescents than that which is usually administered to adults. Biologically, it could be as a result of the fact that the brain of an adolescent may not be completely developed enough to understand and perform effectively the tasks related to mindfulness.

Another program Meditation Based Awareness Training (MBAT) was developed based on mindfulness. A pilot based on it showed significant levels of impact upon perceived psychological well-being and stress when compared to the control group (Shonin, Gordon, Sundin, & Horgan, 2011). Further, change in mindfulness levels was found to precede changes in perceived stress and Well-being in one study in 2012. The study also concluded that mindfulness could be a mediator of changes in Well-being (Baer, Carmody, & Hunsinger, 2012). This is consistent with the findings of the study by Weinstein et al in 2009.

Baer et al (2012) performed a cross-sectional study to understand the relationship of mindfulness, self-compassion, meditation experience and psychological well-being. The findings suggested that mindfulness and self-compassion have significant effects on meditation experience and well-being (Baer, Lykins, & Peters, 2012). Khoury et al (2013) conducted a meta-analysis on the effectiveness of Mindfulness-Based Therapy. The study results indicated that the effect size of mindfulness was similar to that of cognitive behavior therapy. It was concluded to have a positive impact while used to treat anxiety, depression, and stress (Khoury et al., 2013).

Senders et. al (2014) conducted a study on patients with multiple sclerosis. The results of the study indicated that higher amount of mindfulness was found to result in higher subjective well-being in the patients. However, most patients came from a single center and convenience sampling method was used. This could have led to a decrease in the validity of the results of the study (Senders, Bourdette, Hanes, Yadav, & Shinto, 2014). These results were replicated by Bennett(2015). MBSR program when administered to sixth form students, whose psychological well-being and consequently academic performance had improved significantly. The sample size was however only 23 and a large-scale study needs to be performed with a similar aim (Bennett & Dorjee, 2015). A randomized control trial on breast cancer patients also had similar findings. 6 months post a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program that lasted for 8 weeks, the participants showed a significantly low level of distress and even somatic symptoms. This impact was however not seen after 12 months (Wurtzen et al., 2015). We can thus conclude that MBSR training along with following up session would be effective in improving the well-being as well as somatic symptoms.

Harris et al gave educators interventions based on yoga and mindfulness to reduce help manage stress and improve well-being. The efficacy of the program- Community Approach

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to Learning Mindfully was tested. The findings showed that the effect size was between 0.52 and 0.80. The educators had better levels of well-being and stress management (Harris, Jennings, Katz, Abenavoli, & Greenberg, 2016). This result indicates that mindfulness-based programs can be used to improve the well-being and stress management of people. The learn to breathe program, another mindfulness-based intervention was administered to a group of first-year students in college to help them better cope and improve emotional well-being by Dvorakova et al. The findings were the study showed that there was a positive impact on the students' life satisfaction and reduction in their levels of anxiety and depression as well (Dvorakova et al., 2017).

### CONCLUSION

From an analysis of existing literature, the review concludes that Mindfulness seems to be an old tradition that has been recommended by old religious scriptures as an important tool in achieving psychological well-being. In recent times a large number of techniques based on mindfulness has been developed as a part of therapy. Most of the correlational studies and regression analyses seem to indicate mindfulness has a significant impact on a wide range of problems including stress, anxiety, depression, pain tolerance and somatic symptoms and as a result of all this upon well-being. Studies that were experimental in nature with a control group and a group with interventions generally converged towards the same result. The most common form of intervention is the MBSR. It seems to have a good effect size a large number of empirical studies to validate it as well. A minor proportion of the literature obtained results that were contradictory. The cause of this could be a difference in the procedure of providing the mindfulness training or the sample population. It recommended in future, that a standardized procedure to administer Mindfulness needs to be developed and its effectiveness tested cross-sectionally through the population as well.

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[https://doi.org/10.1016/S1876-2018\(11\)60123-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1876-2018(11)60123-8)

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### **Acknowledgements**

The authors profoundly appreciate all the people who have successfully contributed in ensuring this paper is in place. Their contributions are acknowledged however their names cannot be able to be mentioned.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors colorfully declare this paper to bear not conflict of interests

**How to cite this article:** Vasudevan, S & Reddy, J. K (2018). Mindfulness as the Key to Well-Being: A Review of Literature. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 6(3), 186-192. DIP:18.01.040/20180603, DOI:10.25215/0603.040