

## Importance of Mindfulness-Based Interventions for Enhancing Women's Well-Being

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### ABSTRACT

The presence of well-being is more important than the absence of illness. Well-being has usually been associated with the quality of life of a person. To achieve a good quality of life one needs to be healthy both physically and mentally. Today the term wellbeing can be extended to areas of emotional, physical, social, workplace, and societal well-being. Over the years the well-being of citizens has gained importance and each country has developed its laws to look after the wellbeing of the citizens. To have complete contentment the individual would seek to have a balance in all areas. Women's well-being has improved over decades but still has a long way to go. With increased workloads, stress, and other external factors the health and well-being of a woman are greatly compromised. For women, psychological wellbeing is as important an aspect as physical wellbeing and has been gaining a lot more attention over the last decade. Women due to family and external commitments have an innate nature of putting their well-being at the bottom of their priority list. Mindfulness is a technique used to become aware of thoughts, sensations, and emotions and understand that they are impermanent. This understanding is considered to be the key to relief from suffering. Women have benefited in a plethora of areas with Mindfulness-based interventions (MBI's). Educating women on the benefits of mindfulness and equipping them with necessary access to mindfulness training will result in better physical and mental health thus resulting in improvement in their overall well-being.

**Keywords:** *Mindfulness-Based Intervention, Women's Well-Being, Benefits of Mindfulness.*

Well-being has usually been associated with the quality of life of a person. The presence of well-being is more important than the absence of illness. According to the American Psychological Association (APA) Well-being is 'a state of happiness and contentment, with low levels of distress, overall good physical and mental health and outlook, or good quality of life.' (APA Dictionary of Psychology). The holistic definition of well-being considering various fields that acknowledge health enhancement, covers three core areas of well-being which includes psychological, physical and social (Finn, 1992). Some authors look at different aspects of life such physical, psychological and social (Dodge et al., 2012). Today the term well-being can be extended to areas of

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emotional, physical, social, workplace and societal. One needs to be healthy both physical and mentally to live a good quality of life. Over the years the well-being of citizens has gained importance and each country has developed its own laws to look after the well-being of the citizens. In order to have complete contentment the individual would seek to have a balance in all areas.

### ***Women's Well-being and its Importance***

Women's well-being has a number of implications. With Gender inequality still being prevalent in most nations the well-being of women across generations is being affected. Restraints in making choices for themselves, women's autonomy and decision making adds to reduced levels of well-being. Education which is a predictor to well-being is also not made freely accessible to women (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2007). While looking at the well-being of a women it is imperative that one understands the underlying social, cultural, environmental, epidemiological, and economic aspects of health (Marmot, Friel, Bell, Houweling, & Taylor, 2008).

There are various organizations that work towards the upliftment of women and improvement of their well-being. Some organizations like The International Council on Women's Health Issues (ICOWHI) work at promoting women's well-being by working towards the human rights of women and girls, eradicating hunger and poverty among women, promoting primary education among women, empowering women and helping in improving their mental health (Davidson et al, 2011). For countries to look at human development it is imperative to assess the health and well-being of their female citizens.

For women psychological well-being is as important an aspect as physical well-being and has been gaining a lot more attention over the last decade. Psychological well-being includes both- feeling good and effective functioning. Psychological well-being is closely related to physical health as psychological deterrents could lead to physical ailments like headaches, fatigue, back aches, gastritis, lower immunity etc. Psychological well-being has different aspects to make up the term: life evaluation which refers to people's ideas of the quality and goodness of life, happiness and overall satisfaction in life, hedonic well-being refers to feelings and moods during the day, and eudemonic well-being discusses evaluations of the meaning and purpose of life (Kahneman, Diener, Schwarz, 2003). The focus in research over the years has been on dysfunction of humans and not on their functionality and well-being which is as important an aspect to living (Huppert,2009).

Women tend to neglect their health and well-being due to the lack of time as well as not making their health a priority when compared to the other members of the family. Women lead busy lives and taking care of themselves is a low priority. This in true results in various psychical and psychological health issues like susceptibility to various cancers, poor gynaecological health, PCOD, pregnancy complications, early menopause, depression, anxiety, PTSD amongst others (Lipscombe, 2018). Thus, easy yet effective strategies need to be developed in order to help women increase their sense of well-being which in turn would effect various aspects of their life positively.

### ***Mindfulness***

The principles of mindfulness have been developed from a Buddhist meditative technique called Vipassana. "It is the English translation of the Pali word Sati" (Gunaratana, 2011). In vipassana observation of thoughts, sensations, and emotions act as the foundation of the practice. Thoughts, sensations and emotions are believed to be impermanent and

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understanding this is considered to be the key to relief from suffering (Marlatt, Bowen, Chawla, Witkiewitz, 2008). A Vipassana course lasts for 11 to 21 days. Participants are engaged in meditation for a minimum of 10 to 11 hours a day where the participants are directed to decondition the mind from holding on to thoughts, but recognizing thoughts as thoughts and letting them go (Goenka, 1997). Participants are also taught to attend to stimuli mindfully where previously they would have attended to hardly one per cent of the stimuli perceived (Gunaratana, 2011; Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

Continued practise of mindfulness helps practitioners become more aware of thoughts, emotions, and sensations. Increase in awareness of thoughts, sensations and emotions make practitioners view his or her universe in a new light (Gunaratana, 2011). Attention is brought to bodily sensations and such sensations are made to pass non-judgmentally and objectively. This results in mere observation without reaction to the same. "Knowing what you are doing while you are doing it is the essence of Mindfulness practice" (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Continued practice trains the practitioner to get in touch with reality. The practice does not result in isolation of one's feelings but rather to attend to such feelings whether good or bad and not hold on but to let them pass (Gunaratana, 2011).

There are various steps involved in mindfulness meditation, familiarity with mindful breathing being the first. Practitioners are directed to be aware of their inhalation and expiration of breath. This cycle of breath is observed as air going into their nose and coming out of it. The practitioners are then taught the art of concentration by concentrating on the breath. Concentration does not result in alteration of airflow into the system but only results in awareness of natural breath going in and out of the system. Awareness is next brought to the body. Using the body scan meditation technique, the practitioner is aware of their bodily sensations at that moment hence making them stay in the present. This helps in the release of any form of bodily tension. Walking meditative practice helps practitioners become aware of their movement from one space to another. Such exercises act as an aid in developing the levels of mindfulness (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1992). Living mindfully helps reduce stress and live more peacefully (Sathiyaseelan A & Sathiyaseelan B, 2014).

### ***Mindfulness-based interventions (MBI's)***

Mindfulness has been used in various levels of therapy and has proven to be beneficial in various areas. From the broader aspects of practicing mindfulness in order to develop and enhance a more functional body and mind, mindfulness is integrated into various treatment plans to target specific problem areas. With more research going into the area of mindfulness more professionals have come to realize the multitude of benefits that mindfulness brings in the process of healing. The basic idea breaks down to thoughts not making the person but acting as passing clouds. Treating a thought/sensation as something of passing and not judging it would relieve the person from acting on it. A non-judgemental attitude would break the chain of appraisal and non-appraisal would help in not branding a thought/sensation as bad or good to be avoided or held onto, thus bringing a sense of equilibrium to the practitioner. This learning develops a level of awareness and detachment in the practitioner where there is a separation from thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations which can arise. These are viewed objectively.

With mindfulness becoming more popular in the therapeutic field, a number of MBI's have developed. MBI's are mainly developed to train on how to be mindful and in turn incorporate mindful techniques in everyday activities for increasing functionality. Some of the most prominent being mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), mindfulness based

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cognitive behavior therapy (MBCT), dialectic behavior therapy (DBT), acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) and mindfulness-based relapse prevention (MBRP) (Chiesa & Malinowski, 2011).

MBSR was developed in the 1970's by Jon Kabat Zinn where Kabat- Zinn used a combination of mindfulness meditation, body awareness, and awareness of sensations, thoughts and emotions to bring a level of calmness through stress relief (Kabat- Zinn, 2003). This form of therapy was found to be beneficial to populations across ages and cultures. It has seen benefits in alleviating pain in cancer patients as well as reducing symptoms in other chronic diseases, reduce effects of heart diseases, reduce anxiety and depression (Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004) and improved the mental health and well-being of the practitioner (Fjorback, Arendt, Ornbol, Fink, & Walach, 2011). It also has an effect on moral reasoning and ethical decision making (Shapiro, Jazaieri, & Goldin, 2012).

MBCT is a combination of cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) and mindfulness meditation. It was developed by Zindel Segal, Mark Williams, and John Teasdale. Much like the other MBI's MBCT is an eight-week group intervention which has proven beneficial for various mental health issues including, depression including major depressive disorder (van der Velden et.al., 2015) and depression relapse prevention (Rycroft-Malone et.al.,2014) bipolar disorder (Williams, 2008), obsessive compulsive disorder (Leeuwerik et.al, 2020).

DBT uses mindfulness skills and techniques to inculcate in clients the art of living in the moment, development of healthy ways to cope with stress, ways to regulate emotions and improve relationships. At its inception it was used on people suffering from borderline personality disorder. It developed in the late 1980s by Dr. Marsha Linehan when they found CBT not showing notable benefits to treat borderline personality. DBT was later used to treat various other disorders as well. It is used to help individuals with emotional regulation or self-destructing behavior. It has shown benefits in people with eating disorders and substance abuse disorders (May, Richardi & Barth, 2016).

ACT uses mindfulness techniques which helps individuals direct their lives and behaviour in ways consistent with personal values while developing psychological flexibility (Freeman, Arthur, 2010) Meta analytic reviews on ACT shows that ACT is superior to controlled conditions but there is no evidence that it may work better than other established forms of treatment (Powers, Vörding, & Emmelkamp, 2009). Other research shows that ACT helps in improving the quality of life, reduce stress and regulate mood among individuals suffering from cancer (Feros, LaneCiarrochi, & Blackledge, 2013). Pilot studies show that ACT can prove beneficial in persons suffering from social anxiety disorder as well (Dalrymple & Herbert, 2007). ACT also helps individuals suffering from post-traumatic disorder (Orsillo, Batten, 2005), psychological depression (Zettle, 2015), and chronic pain (Wicksell, Olsson, & Hayes, 2010) amongst others.

Mindfulness-based relapse prevention (MBRP) developed by Bowen, Chawla, Marlatt at the Addictive Behavioural Research Center, combines three different therapies, Mindfulness-based stress reduction by Kabat-Zinn, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy by Segal, Williams and Teasdale and the relapse protocol by Daley and Marlatt. This form of therapy has been researched extensively over the last decade and has seen to show benefits higher than other forms of treatment. (Bowen, Chawla & Marlatt, 2011). MBRP has helped in relapse prevention in various forms of addiction including substances, alcohol etc. (Marlatt, Bowen, Chawla, & Witkiewitz, 2008; Vadivale, & Sathiyaseelan, 2019)

### *Role of MBI's in Women*

Women play various roles over their life span. Each milestone that a woman crosses comes with its challenges that may hinder her well-being. Extensive research has gone in to check the benefits of mindfulness on various aspects that effect the health and well-being of women.

Adolescents girls go through a lot of emotions during puberty. Research on adolescent girls showed that MBI's such as MBSR has a significant influence on depressed mood control, anxiety control, and positive affect control. Mindfulness helps adolescent girls avoid confronting negative thoughts and emotions and view mental events positively (Khoshkerdar, Raeisi, 2020). Other randomized control researches show mindfulness can help adolescent girls suffering from chronic pain by inculcating better coping skills among the population (Chandi et.al, 2016). It is also seen to reduce stress and increase adolescent well being (Erbe & Lohrmann, 2015). Mindfulness helps reduce parent -child conflict and drug use among college women especially with those who have low self-control Tarantino, Lamis, Ballard, Masuda, & Dvorak, 2015).

When it comes to child bearing, women's well-being has an effect on the levels of fertility in the woman (Qasim, Ul Haq, Hussain, Roshan, 2019). From the stage of conception to after the foetus is born a woman faces a multitude of challenges which leads to deterioration of physical and psychological health and well-being. Women see various mental health struggles while trying to conceive, after conception through the prenatal stage as well as at post partum stage. Studies show that mindfulness-based interventions (MBI's) could help women in improving their fertility quality of life (**Jing Li**, Hong Luo & Ling Long, 2018). Mindfulness leads to more satisfying romantic relationships including better connection with partner, individual well-being, emotion skilfulness, improved stress response and sexual satisfaction in women (Kozlowski, 2012). Perceived stress and state anxiety was seen to reduce in pregnant women who were practicing mindfulness (**Guardino**, Schetter, Bower, Lu & Smalley, 2013). Depression during pregnancy known as prenatal depression is seen to have adverse effects on the overall well-being of the mother as well as newborns having lower gestational age and birthweight (Field, Diego & Hernandez- Reif, 2010). Apart from these conditions the foetus has slower growth rate (Diego, Field, Hernandez-Reif, Schanberg & Gonzalez-Quintero, 2009). These symptoms occur due to high cortisol levels in prenatal women. Women are benefited from mindfulness-based interventions during the perinatal period. Mindfulness based interventions helps in reducing stress, anxiety and depression among perinatal women. Research on mindfulness and pregnant women using randomized control studies as well as non-randomized control studies showed the population benefiting by reduction in anxiety, depression and perceived stress post mindfulness interventions (Dhillon, Sparkes & Duarte, 2017). Meta analysis studies showed that perinatal women benefited by connecting with others in the group, staying in the present, regulating negative responses during challenging situations and increased acceptance (Taylor, Cavanagh, & Strauss, 2016). Similar studies also show that 4% of women suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder after giving birth. This in turn negatively affects the new born. Health care systems are now trying to focus on giving women a positive birthing experience to increase well-being of the mother and the infant (Ayers & Sawyer, 2019). PTSD also has a strain on the relationships of the mothers post childbirth which could act adversely to their well-being (Garthus-Niegel, Horsch, Handtke, von Soest, Ayers, Weidner, & Eberhard-Gran, 2018). Increased levels of stress leads to the reduced reproductive capabilities in women that contribute to a significant deficiency in the well-being of women (Dejong, 2007). Studies

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also show a positive association between a woman's well-being and various domains of early child development (Qasim, Ul Haq, Hussain, Roshan, 2019).

Working women have their own share of challenges. More women are joining the workforce and with this the difficulties that arise with work and home life balance. This is especially predominant among working mothers (Koekemoer & Olckers, 2019). Well-being of employees is critical to organizations' health as it increases productivity and reduces turnover. Self-employed women are seen to have lower levels of work-life balance which is a predictor to well-being among working women (Nordenmark, Vinberg & Strandh, 2012). Women entrepreneurs or mumpreneurs as they are called have a multiplier effect. This effect results in a chain of positive events that increases the outcome of positive well-being (Lepeley, Kuschel, Beutell, Pouw, & Eijdenberg, 2019). Mindfulness helps act as an emotional aid to women who have experienced effects due to glass ceiling at work (Soumya & Sathiyaseelan, 2021). Mindfulness results in better performance in competitive spots as well.

Women going through menopause suffer from stress and other emotional regularities. Studies on midlife women showed that higher levels of mindfulness and reduced stress levels resulted in lower menopausal symptoms. Mindfulness is seen to help midlife women with menopausal symptoms (Sood, Kuhle, Kapoor, Thielen, Frohmader, Mara & Faubion, 2018). Among older women multiple roles taken up could be enriching or a strain. This depends on many factors such as culture, personality etc. In case there is a strain in the life of older women there would be a strain in their well-being. Hence approaches which acknowledge and help with role conflict and enrichment could help better the well-being of older women (Kulik, 2014).

Apart from this mindfulness helps women suffering from different forms of addiction. MBI's have proven to be beneficial for women suffering from substance use disorders (SUD's). Mindful awareness in body-oriented therapy focuses on introspective training and is associated with better health outcomes for women suffering from (SUD's) (Price et al., 2018). Feasibility studies show potential for Mindfulness based interventions (MBI) to help women with gambling disorders (Van der Tempel, et al., 2019). It increases self-compassion in women and in turn reduce a plethora of other problems associated with it (Woods, & Proeve, 2014). MIB's also help women with eating disorders (Kristeller, Baer, & Quillian-Wolever, 2006)

Mindfulness based interventions help women who are suffering from debilitating diseases like cancer as well. Mindfulness based stress reduction shows positive effects among women with breast cancer by reducing stress and state anxiety levels significantly as well as increasing mental; mental adjustment to cancer and health locus of control (Tacón, Caldera, & Ronaghan, 2004). Other systematic reviews proved that among women suffering from cancer mindfulness-based interventions helps with sexual difficulties, physiological arousal and immune function or subjective benefits across all interventions. Such studies concluded that particular mindfulness interventions may help in acute treatment and palliative care (Shennan, Payne, & Fenlon, 2011).

Mindfulness helps in physical well-being of women. Randomized control studies show mindfulness-based weight reduction programs help healthier choices and reduction in binge eating thus reducing the BMI of women (Tapper, Shaw, Ilesley, Hill, Bond, Moore, 2009). Mindful eating interventions showed adolescent Latino women benefitted more from such

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interventions when compared to usual care (Daly, Pace, Berg, Menon, Szalacha, 2016). Mindfulness helps with other health related issues in women such as migraines and pain tolerance (Erwin Wells, 2019).

Mindfulness shows benefits at every stage of a woman's life, both physically as well as psychologically. Though the benefits of mindfulness on women's physical health is not researched upon as much as their psychological health, the benefits in both areas are undeniable.

### CONCLUSION

Women's well-being has long been researched on and for more reasons than one has proved to be important. Happier and healthier women make happier and healthier families. Women tend to neglect their health due to the mountain of workload and responsibilities they have on hand. More women are seeing negative effects on their mental and physical health at younger ages. These issues cumulate and result in debilitating health concerns that lead to premature death. Mindfulness helps in enhancing physical and psychological health by changing the way practitioners view thoughts, sensations, and emotions. Given Mindfulness enhances various areas in women, considering mindfulness training at an early age in women could help them cope with various emotional and cognitive disturbances that could arise over their lifetime. It would also lead to heightened levels of self-love and compassion which would resonant to love for fellow human beings and love for the world on the whole. Women must hence be educated on the benefits of mindfulness and women could be exposed to mindfulness techniques at the earlier stages of life to reap the most benefit from the practice.

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