

Implementation of Mindfulness to Benefit Older Adults

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Background and Purpose

Mindfulness is defined as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (Park et al., 2013).

Mindfulness can be a practice or a state of being and

- allows one to appraise a situation with an open mind, non-judgmentally, in order to consider alternative ways of viewing that experience (Rona et al., 2013)
- allows an individual to detach from a situation enough to appraise it more clearly and determine what resources may be available to cope with it instead of reacting impulsively
- creates emotional stability and well-being over time

Mindfulness may be a tool to help older adults accept the things which cannot be changed due to aging and may help improve stress management and well-being in older adults (Pierson et al., 2019).

Purpose

The purpose of this review is to identify benefits of mindfulness in older adults as a potential tool in physical therapy practice to help older adults adjust to the changes and challenges inherent in aging.

Methods

This scoping review examined the impact of mindfulness interventions for older adults using outcomes addressing –

- Sleep
- Cognition
- Well-being
- Stress
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Cardiovascular disease

The review sought to discover if mindfulness interventions were effective in helping older adults manage these conditions and concerns.

Databases were searched with the following inclusion criteria

- Keywords: Older adults, Mindfulness
- English articles
- Published 2011 onwards

Description

This review studied mindfulness interventions as a potential tool for older adults to cope with the stressors and co-morbidities associated with aging.

1. Mindfulness interventions on sleep (Black et al., 2015; Gallegos et al., 2018).
 - Improvements in insomnia after six two-hour sessions on mindfulness.
 - Small but significant improvement in sleep quality with an eight-week mindfulness program
2. Mindfulness on affect and well-being in older adults (Elliot et al., 2019; Mathur et al., 2016; Pierson et al., 2019)
 - Associated with lower levels of depression and stress, and improved positive affect
 - Improved the severity of depression and quality of life in older adults
3. Mindfulness and older adults with cardiovascular disease (Creswell et al., 2012; Vara-Barcia et al., 2019)
 - Reduced inflammatory markers after an eight-week mindfulness program
 - Less reactive diastolic blood pressure changes in those with higher levels of mindfulness
4. Mindfulness and cognition (Berk et al., 2017)
 - Improved cognitive measures with a mindfulness intervention
 - Improved processing speed

Results/Outcomes

Mindfulness has been studied extensively in younger individuals but there is less research specific to older adults.

The limited findings suggest that mindfulness may improve sleep in older adults due to its impact on decreasing the influence of the sympathetic nervous system (Gallegos et al., 2018).

Mindfulness also may help by improving mood, well-being, and quality of life, as well as decreasing severity of depression in older adults (Elliot et al., 2019; Mathur et al., 2016; Pierson et al., 2019).

However, much of the research in this area is correlational in nature.

The findings on mindfulness and cardiovascular disease in older adults demonstrated a trend towards decreased inflammatory levels but no definitive significant changes were seen with the interventions (Creswell et al., 2012).

The research on mindfulness and cognition is also less definitive with limitations due to poor methodology and small sample sizes.

However, a review of the research in this area did show improvements in cognitive measures and processing speed in older adults with mindfulness training (Berk et al., 2018).

Conclusion

A mindfulness practice may attenuate some of the challenges that older adults face as they age.

Research supports that mindfulness may

- Improve sleep (Neuendorf et al., 2015)
- Decrease levels of inflammatory biomarkers (Creswell et al., 2012)
- Lower diastolic blood pressure (Vara-Barcia et al., 2019)
- Build resilience and buffer stress (de Frias & Whyne, 2015)

Higher levels of mindfulness are associated with

- Lower levels of depression
- Less stress
- Greater positive affect (Elliot et al., 2019)

Barriers to a mindfulness practice- time and difficulty with compliance

Advantages for mindfulness for older adults

- May minimize the use of psychopharmacology for sleep and mood disorders in this population (Parra et al., 2019)
- Potential to aid in cognition
- May improve cardiovascular responses
- May improve well-being

Future Research : need further studies with improved methodology and larger sample sizes

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