

Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction: Research Review

What is Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)?

MBSR is an eight-week experiential program in which participants learn about stress biology and psychology, practice mindful meditation and movement, and learn how to bring the quality of awareness cultivated in mindfulness practice into day-to-day life. MBSR meets once weekly for 2.5 hours. Each week's class introduces a new mindfulness practice that participants practice at home for 45-minutes daily.

MBSR was first developed in 1979 at the University of Massachusetts hospital system to assist patients with chronic pain who had exhausted other treatment options. The program was so successful that it was expanded to address stress from any cause and became the cornerstone of the UMass Stress Reduction Clinic. Today more than 40,000 people have completed an MBSR class.

What is stress?

The term stress comes from engineering, where it is used to describe force bearing on a structure: a pillar holding up a roof withstands stress. Doctors borrowed the term in the early 1900's when they discovered that the body's natural response to danger can lead to illness when chronically engaged.¹² Our stress response borrows resources from normal function: cell repair, sleep, and digestion can wait if you are about to be eaten by a lion. Modern stress tends to be psychological, but our bodies don't know the difference. We activate the same fight or flight system for social stressors, and imagined and remembered stress, as we do to defend against lions and tigers.

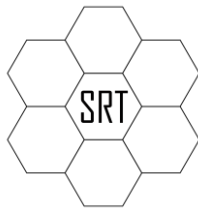
Chronic stress and stress resiliency

Stress itself is not a problem. Chronic stress is. When we get stuck in high gear, poor sleep quality, difficulty focusing, and irritability are among the first symptoms.³ Over time, areas of the brain responsible for executive function and emotional regulation shrink in size and density, and the body becomes more prone to inflammation and dysregulated immune function.⁴ Chronic stress increases the risk of serious illnesses including diabetes⁵, cardiovascular disease⁶, autoimmune disorders⁷, and depression and anxiety⁸. Fortunately, this process can be reversed.⁹ An extensive and growing body of research has demonstrated the physical and psychological benefits of mindfulness practice in reducing chronic stress and building stress resiliency.

MBSR: using awareness to build stress resiliency

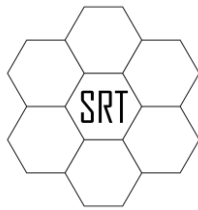
MBSR is the most studied mindfulness program in the world, consistently demonstrating positive impacts on attention¹⁰, cognition, emotion, behavior, and physical wellness.¹¹ MBSR has been found to increase gray matter density in areas of the brain associated with learning, memory, concentration, emotion regulation, and empathy.¹² It has also been shown to increase sustained feelings of tranquility, happiness, appreciation, and joy.¹³ A recent study showed that MBSR participants had a greater sense of purpose in life.¹⁴

MBSR has been shown to support physical wellness in areas ranging from sleep quality¹⁵ to immune system function¹⁶, cardiovascular health¹⁷, diabetes¹⁸, migraines¹⁹, hot flashes²⁰, IBS²¹, and psoriasis.^{22,23,24,25} MBSR is also effective in treating a number of behavioral health conditions including anxiety²⁶ and depression²⁷ and is prescribed for depression by the UK's National Health Service.²⁸



Notes

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