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Older Adults' Engagement in Mindfulness Practices

Neha Shivhare¹, David Kaufman²

¹City University of Seattle

²Simon Fraser University

ABSTRACT

There is substantial evidence to suggest that mindfulness practices positively affect older adults' physical, emotional, and cognitive wellbeing. However, there is still little information available about the interest and inclination among older adults for performing mindfulness-related exercises. We conducted a survey study aimed at exploring the prevalence of older adults engaged in such activities. Data were collected from 174 older adults (Males: 48; Females:126) who responded using a self-constructed survey, and analyzed using SPSS. Results indicate that almost two-thirds of older adult respondents engage in at least one mindfulness practice and almost a third engage in more than one, with meditation, deep breathing, and yoga being the most prevalent.

*Correspondence to Author:

David Kaufman

Simon Fraser University

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Introduction

There is substantial evidence to suggest that mindfulness practices and exercises positively affect older adults' physical, emotional, and cognitive wellbeing. Research has shown that older adults experience calmness, inner joy, reduced anxiety and depression levels as a result of performing mindfulness practices [1,2,3,4,5]. However, despite these strong positive findings, there is still not much known about the level of engagement of older adults in these practices. Therefore, the present study addresses this issue by exploring the prevalence of older adults performing these practices.

Benefits of mindfulness practices

A meta-analysis involving 42 studies found that yoga asanas based heterogeneous interventions reduced evening cortisol, waking cortisol, ambulatory systolic blood pressure, resting heart rate, high-frequency heart rate variability, fasting blood glucose, cholesterol, and low-density lipoprotein, and improved regulation of the sympathetic nervous system and hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal system in various populations [6].

In another study, the Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Approach for Seniors (MBCAS) was found effective in inducing a positive and accepting approach towards life and aging-related challenges in reasonably healthy older adults [7]. In their retrospective analysis based study, Young and Baime (2010) [8] also found that eight weeks of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction training helpful in alleviating stress and promoting vitality among 141 adults aged 65 years and older.

Physiological

Alexander, Langer, Newman, Chandler, & Davies conducted a study (1989) [9] on 73 older adults living in 8 elderly homes (mean age = 81 years) to explore if specific mental techniques (Transcendental Meditation TM and Mindfulness MF techniques) increase longevity and reduce age-related decline. They found that TM was more effective in improving cognitive flexibility;

word fluency; mental health; systolic blood pressure; and ratings of behavioral flexibility, aging, etc.

Another study [10] conducted on 50 older adults (mean age 77.2 \pm 1.3 years) to explore the effect of five months of Taiji and Qigong practice discovered a significant improvement in the antibody response to influenza vaccine.

A meta-analysis involving 42 studies found that yoga asanas based heterogeneous interventions reduced evening cortisol, waking cortisol, ambulatory systolic blood pressure, resting heart rate, high-frequency heart rate variability, fasting blood glucose, cholesterol, and low-density lipoprotein, and improved regulation of the sympathetic nervous system and hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal system in various populations [6].

Mind/body techniques such as social support, cognitive behavioral therapy, meditation, placebo effect, imagery visualization, spiritual energy healing, music therapy, hypnosis, yoga, tai chi, qigong have been found effective for musculoskeletal diseases and related disorders in studies published after 1990 [11].

Even in low-income groups of African-American older adults, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) techniques were found to reduce hypertension [12]. MBSR techniques have also proved beneficial in alleviating psychological distress, anxiety, and depression in older males and females by providing them proper stress management skills [8].

Cognitive and Emotional Benefits

Mindfulness-based memory training including Kundalini Yoga and yogic meditation (60-min sessions over 12 weeks) has been found to produce structural and neurochemical plasticity in older adults (age \geq 55 years) with mild cognitive impairment [13].

O'Donnell (2017) [14] found MBSR and relaxation-based interventions (given and evaluated over eight weeks, six months, and one year) better than the Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) in reducing the psychological

and physiological chronic stress, depression and isolation among 28 older caregivers of relatives with neurocognitive disorder.

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Approach for Seniors (MBCAS) was found effective in inducing a positive and accepting approach towards life and aging-related challenges in reasonably healthy older adults [7]. In their retrospective analysis based study Young and Baime (2010) [8] also found eight weeks of MBSR training helpful in alleviating stress and promoting vitality among 141 older adults (>65 years).

Rawtaer, Mahendran, Yu, Feng and Kua (2015) [15] found single and combination intervention phases employing Tai Chi exercise, Art Therapy, Mindfulness Awareness Practice and Music Reminiscence Therapy significant in reducing Subsyndromal depression (SSD) and subsyndromal anxiety (SSA) scores in their study involving 101 older adults (Mean age 71 years, SD 5.95).

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) based interventions have been found helpful in alleviating depression and anxiety in older adults [16], symptom severity of depression, complicated grief, post-traumatic stress, and working memory in elderly bereaved people with long-term bereavement-related distress [17], emotional well-being and mindfulness [18].

Results

Almost three-quarters (72.4%) of the 174 survey respondents were females and more than two-thirds were Caucasian (67.9%). More than half (57.5%) had attended college or university. Two-thirds owned their own home and more than half (56.4%) lived alone. Almost half (46.6%) had annual incomes of more than \$30,000. About half (49.3%) had immigrated to Canada but nearly all had lived there for more than 20 years. Almost all (91.4%) were retired with more than three-quarters (77.6%) not working at all.

Almost two-thirds (62.6%) of older adult respondents engaged in at least one mindfulness practice, while almost one-third

(30.5%) engaged in more than one practice. The two most popular practices were meditation (30.3%) and deep breathing (30.5%), followed by Yoga (20.7%).

Discussion

Through this quantitative study, we found that a large number of older adults are interested in pursuing mindfulness practices, and perform them either frequently or daily or sometimes. The types of mindfulness exercises performed include breathing meditation, taichi, qigong, walking, reading, reflection, mantra recitation, and gardening. Though, the Transcendental Meditation and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction techniques have been reported in research literature frequently, in our research those were not reported by any of the participants.

Related research evidence shows that mindfulness practices are beneficial for enhancing the quality of life experiences of older adults in terms of their physiological, psychological, and emotional dimensions. In line with such findings, the present research reflects the popularity of the general mindfulness practices among older adults and brings out the need to provide awareness about TM and MBSR based interventions for older adults. It is noteworthy that with the growing number of baby boomers and the pandemic scenario, the need for designing, developing, and conducting TM, MBSR, and general mindfulness exercises has increased many folds. As reflected from our analysis, most of the older adults who participated in this study were already familiar with general mindfulness techniques and practicing them few times a month to daily, therefore efforts need to be made for creating systematized and organized mindfulness programs including MBSR and TM based techniques for the overall wellbeing of the older adults.

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