Meditation - Worth a Try as a Mind-Body Complementary Medicine?

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Abstract

Complementary/alternative medicine (CAM) is getting increasingly popular, with many practices existing within the ambit of that term. Meditation is one of the oldest and most commonly adopted CAM methods, which has been gaining a lot of recognition and practice all over the world. Meditation and alternative medicine can be considered as viable options for relieving any toxic implications of pharmaceutical medication. Meditation is not a cure-all. However, with growing evidence, it is believed that it may do good for those who practice it regularly. Therefore, in recent years, research on meditation is steadily growing and moving towards the scientific validation as a ‘worth to try’ mind-body complementary medicine.

Introduction

In 1995, E Ernst described the CAM as “diagnosis, treatment and/or prevention which complements mainstream medicine by contributing to a common whole, satisfying a demand not met by orthodoxy, or diversifying the conceptual frameworks of medicine” [1]. Therefore, from the view of the CAM users, it is a group of theories, practices, and products with the healing effects of medicine; but its effectiveness is neither established using scientific methods [2-6] nor from the theory and practice of biomedicine [3,6,7]. The terms - alternative medicine (AM), complementary medicine (CM), complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), integrated medicine or integrative medicine (IM), holistic medicine, and natural medicine are the synonymous terms of the same phenomenon that are used interchangeably in most contexts [8-10]. Since there is no proper scientific explanation and evidence, sometimes, traditional practices become “alternative,” based on a belief that alternative medicine, along with functional medical treatment, could improve the effectiveness of the treatments. Therefore, complementary medicine is also known as integrative medicine (IM) [7,11,12]. A well-known example, acupuncture (the body can be pierced with needles to influence the flow of supernatural energy), might be believed to increase the effectiveness or “complement” science-based medicine when used at the same time [13].

Ayurveda, acupuncture, aromatherapy, Chinese medicine, chiropractic, herbology, homeopathy, massage therapy, meditation, naturopathy, reflexology, reiki are the most common types of CAM methods, though the list is quite long. A previous report listed the percentage of people from the USA who practices various most common CAM therapies - prayer (45%), herbalism (19%), breathing meditation (12%), meditation (12%), acupuncture (12%), yoga (5-6%), bodywork (5%), diet-based therapy (4%), progressive relaxation (3%), mega-vitamin therapy (3%), and visualization (guided imagery) (2%) [14,15]. Although the report shows that 8% of the people practice meditation as a CAM therapy, this number has dramatically increased in the USA and the rest of the world [16]. This is not only suggested by the clinicians, but people started noticing its beneficial effects from others who are already practicing it. Therefore, the popularity of meditation as a CAM practice is growing tremendously [16].

Meditation as CAM

Meditation is one of the most known mind-body complementary medicine which is being practiced by mankind from the time immemorial in various religious traditions, often as part of the path towards enlightenment and self-realization. There are many types of meditation, for example, Vipassana meditation [17], Sahaja yoga
meditation [18], Kundalini yoga meditation [19], Transcendental meditation (TM) [20], and Heartfulness (HFN) meditation [21], etc. Four basic elements are generally associated with most of the meditative practices: a quiet place, (with few to no distractions); a comfortable or a specific posture (sitting or in other positions); attention towards a specially chosen word/set of words/an object/ the sensations of the breath; and an open attitude (non-resistance to any distractions that come and go naturally without judging them). This helps to train the attention and awareness to achieve a mentally clear and emotionally calm and stable state [22-24]. The process of meditation may result in enhanced physical, emotional well-being, and overall health. One should keep this in mind that meditation is not a substitute for regular medical treatment. However, it may be a useful addition to other treatments.

These days, meditation is commonly used for relaxation and stress reduction. Some of the well-known emotional benefits associated with meditation include - building skills to manage stress and develop a new perspective on stressful situations, increasing self-awareness, to focus on the present, reducing negative emotions, increasing imagination and creativity, increasing patience and tolerance, etc. Regular and long-term meditation practice with a teacher (or) a guide would translate the psychological well-being [25] benefits into physical well-being as well. These include - reducing high blood pressure [26], irritable bowel syndrome [27], ulcerative colitis [28], anxiety [29], acute respiratory infection [30], cancer [31], chronic pain [32,33], depression [18], heart disease, insomnia [34], smoking cessation [35,36], tension headaches, and other conditions. Besides this, meditation is also aimed at increasing peace, perception, self-concept, and well-being [37-39]. Hundreds of research studies on meditation were conducted since the 1950s to study the scientific validation of meditation as a CAM practice. However, many of the early studies were inaccurate, thus yielded unreliable results [40].

Research on meditation

The concept of meditation, and its effects, is a growing subfield of neurological research [41,42]. Data from the research studies showed a shred of moderate evidence that meditation reduces depression and pain, anxiety, but not more effective than active treatments (drugs, exercise, other behavioral therapies) [37]. However, in the last few years, research studies have shown that meditation does produce measurable changes in the ‘brain’ [43]. However, there is a debate as to what good are a few brain changes, if the psychological effects are not simultaneously being illustrated. Luckily, there is some positive evidence that meditation helps to improve concentrations, attention, relieve our subjective levels of anxiety and depression, and overall psychological well-being [44]. These include - preserving the aging brain, reduced usage of antidepressants, volume changes in critical areas of the brain, improved concentrations and attention, help in coping with addiction, and short meditation breaks have been found to be helpful for kids in school too [45].

Limitations

There are certain potential adverse effects that have been reported due to meditation [46] and may, in some cases, they could be the result of “improper use of meditation” [47]. In this regard, the US government-run national center for complementary and integrative health issued an official statement - “Meditation is considered to be safe for healthy people. There have been rare reports that meditation could cause or worsen symptoms in people who have certain psychiatric problems, but this question has not been fully researched. People with physical limitations may not be able to participate in certain meditative practices involving physical movement. Individuals with existing mental or physical health conditions should speak with their health care providers prior to starting a meditative practice and make their meditation instructor aware of their condition” [48].

Discussion

The world has come to a stage where it does recognize the beneficial impact of meditation on human health. However, there is also a strong acceptance of the fact that more research needs to be done to understand in detail about its full potential. Therefore, advanced analytical techniques in the field of neuroscience [49] and other biomedical and clinical disciplines could help to study the effect of meditation on an individual’s psychological and physiological changes [42], which will help the current research to move forward into more fruitful path [50].

References

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