

Mindfulness in Medicine: Modified Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) Program

among Future Doctors

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Abstract

Medical trainees are at particular risk for stress-related illness, including mental health problems such as suicidal ideation, substance abuse, and mood disorders. A vast literature on mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), consisting of mindfulness education and structured meditative practices, has consistently demonstrated that MBSR and related mindfulness-based interventions improve mental and physical health, as well as one's overall sense of well-being. Moreover, theorists and researchers have begun to suggest further that mindfulness plays a particular role in social cognition, or social-emotional learning. Medical schools have long been interested in ways to improve the "soft skills" related to interpersonal connectedness that are necessary to be an effective physician, and mindfulness-based programs have gained particular traction in medical school settings. The goal of the present study was to investigate the impact of an 8-week MBSR course on student burnout *and* social cognition (as measured by theory of mind and emotional intelligence). Premedical and medical student participants were randomly assigned to receive either (1) an 8-week course of mindfulness, (2) an 8-week general stress reduction course without specific mindfulness instruction, or (3) no treatment but rather to a waitlist group of participants who received stress reduction materials after study completion. The present study supported the published literature on the efficacy of MBSR on self-reported stress among trainees in the healthcare profession. Participants in the mindfulness expressed significantly less student burnout when compared to the active and inactive control group participants. In contrast, the mindfulness program did not produce significantly higher levels of mindfulness or emotional intelligence among its participants when compared to the control participants. Differential results on a computerized theory of mind task suggest that the mindfulness course may have influenced first-order social-emotional perspective taking, but made no impact on higher order social-

emotional perspective taking. Lingering conceptual questions about mindfulness as a psychological construct and the lack of empirical evidence about the role of mindfulness on broader social cognitive functions like theory of mind and emotional intelligence will be discussed.