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Manage Stress with Mindful Breathing

by Shirley Archer, JD, MA

Mindful breathing [MB] may reduce negative reactions to repetitive thoughts more effectively than practices such as progressive muscle relaxation [PMR] or loving-kindness meditation [LKM], according to a study published in the journal *Behavior Research and Therapy* (2010; doi10.1016/j.brat.2010.06.006). The study was an effort to understand why mindfulness-based interventions are helpful in reducing feelings of stress and increasing positive feelings of well-being.

Researchers from Simmons College in Boston and Duke Integrative Medicine in Durham, North Carolina, decided to test whether MB has a unique effect on "decentering"—the ability to view thoughts as "events" in the mind rather than necessarily being reflections of reality or an accurate self-view—by comparing this technique with two other stress management approaches, PMR and LKM. For people with a history of depression, decentering is a useful technique that can help them stop focusing on repetitive negative thoughts that are unproductive and that can lead to a depression relapse.

Investigators recruited 190 students at a women's college and randomly assigned them to one of three groups for a 15-minute stress management exercise: MB, PMR or LKM. Before and after their session, participants completed questionnaires. All participants reported on measures of decentering, frequency of repetitive thoughts during the exercise and degree of negative reaction to those thoughts.

Data analysis showed that participants in the MB group experienced more decentering than subjects in the PMR and LKM groups. In addition, MB group members showed a weaker association between frequency of repetitive thoughts and a negative reaction toward those thoughts, in contrast to PMR and LKM group participants.

Study authors believe that these findings suggest that mindful breathing may assist in reducing reactivity to repetitive thoughts. Greg Feldman, PhD, assistant professor of psychology at Simmons College and the lead study author, said, "Practicing mindfulness meditation may allow people to become aware of negative thoughts passing through their minds without necessarily becoming distressed by them. As such, this particular approach to stress management may help people gain perspective on the repetitive worry, self-criticism and rumination "