To tame depression, try Buddhism on prescription

A new study suggests meditation is better than medication, says ***Danny Penman***

Imagine you could cure depression with a therapy that was more effective and long-lasting than expensive drugs, and which did not have any side effects. These are the claims being made for a form of Buddhist meditation.

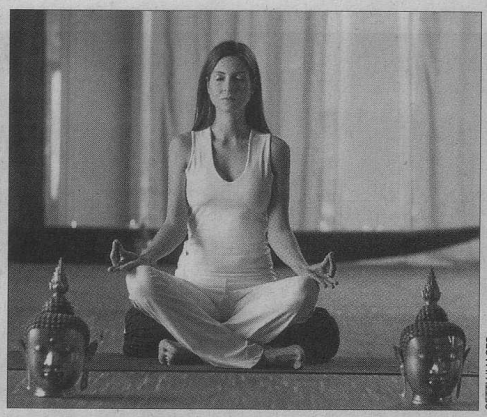
Last week, psychologists from the University of Exeter published a study into "mindfulness-based cognitive therapy" (MBCT), finding it to be better than drugs or counselling for depression. Four months after starting, three quarters of the patients felt well enough to stop taking antidepressants.

MBCT marries Eastern meditation with Western cognitive therapy. Patients are taught the simple technique over eight sessions and then practise it at home for 30 minutes a day. Professor Willem Kuyken, whose team at the Mood Disorders Centre of the University of Exeter carried out the research, says: "Antidepressants are widely used by people who suffer from depression and that's because they tend to work. While they're very effective in helping reduce the symptoms of depression, when people come off them they are particularly vulnerable to relapse. For many people, MBCT seems to prevent that relapse. It could be an alternative to long-term antidepressant medication."

MBCT was developed in the mid-Nineties by psychologists at the universities of Oxford, Cambridge and Toronto to help stabilise patients' moods during and after use of antidepressants. About half of patients relapse into depression – even if they continue taking the medication. One common reason for a relapse is when a normal period of sadness turns into obsessive brooding.

"Brooding is a key feature of depression," says Mark Williams, professor of clinical psychology at the University of Oxford and leader of the team that developed MBCT. "In mentally healthy people, sad thoughts pass quite quickly but in people who suffer from depression they don't. MBCT tackles brooding and teaches people to be more compassionate to themselves and others."

The MBCT technique is simple, and revolves around "mindfulness meditation". In this, you sit with your eyes closed and focus on your breathing. (See box for details). Concentrating on the rhythm of the breath helps produce a feeling of detachment. The idea is that you come to realise that thoughts come and go of their own accord, and that your conscious self is distinct from your thoughts. This realisation is encouraged by gentle question-and-answer sessions modelled on those in cognitive therapy.



GETTY IMAGES

Flight path: meditation can help prevent the 'downward spiral' of thoughts that often brings a relapse into depression

> *It could be an alternative to long-term drug treatment*

In the University of Exeter study, funded by the Medical Research Council, 47 per cent of patients with long-term depression suffered a relapse; the figure was 60 per cent among those taking medication alone. Other studies, including two published in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, had comparable outcomes. As a result, the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence has recommended MBCT since 2004. But NHS availability is still patchy. Many sufferers seek private treatment, with courses at Buddhist centres costing around £120.

"One of the key features of depression is that it hijacks your attention," says Prof Williams. "We all tend to bring to the forefront of our minds the thoughts and feelings that reflect our current mood. If you are sad, depressed or anxious, then you tend to remember the bad things that have happened to you and not the good. This drives you into a downward spiral that leads from sadness into a deeper depression. MBCT prevents and breaks that spiral."

A typical meditation

1. Sit upright in a straight-backed chair, with your spine about an inch from the back of the chair, and your feet flat on the floor.

2. Close your eyes. Use your mind to watch your breath as it flows in and out. Observe your sensations without judgment. Do not try to alter your breathing.

3. After a while your mind will wander. Gently bring your attention back to your breath. The act of realising that your mind has wandered – and bringing your attention back – is the key thing.

4. Your mind will eventually become calm.

5. Repeat every day for 20-30 minutes.

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FINGER ON T

The most vulnera the lowest priorit

Life is not fair, I conclude I sat and listened to Joa "It started after my mu left," she explained. "I was jus scared he'd start doing it to m sister, that I let him keep doin to me." For three years, Joan father sexually abused her. Eventually she told a teacher reported it to the police. Joan and her younger sister were taken into care. Late one nigh before her father was due in court, he drove to a deserted park, ran a hose pipe from th exhaust through a window ar killed himself.

She's had no further conta with her mother, and six mon ago her sister was killed in a r accident. Joanna is now alon the world at the age of 14, ha already had to endure more horrors than most people experience in a lifetime.

She blames herself for her mother leaving, her father's suicide and her sister's death she wasn't responsible for an them. She now lives in a child home. In the past year she ha been in five separate institutio because her behaviour is so disruptive. She has aggressive outbursts and is impulsive and chaotic. To anaesthetise hers to the realities of her life, she started drinking heavily. Then month, while drunk in a park l at night, she was raped.

At such an age, she doesn't have the words to articulate h she is feeling, so instead she communicates her despair by cutting herself. This time, she so deep she severed a tendon her arm and had to be admitte to hospital. After speaking to her, I spent the next six hours trying to get her the help she so desperately needs.

As she has no family, social services are acting *in loco parentis*. They informed me – when I eventually got through to them after hours of trying – that they were too busy to come and take her home. It is telling that there are no adults involved enough in Joanna's care to take responsibility for her, when what she needs more than anything is a parental figure to show her the affection and