

A Study on the Anxiety Level of Meditation Practitioners and Non Practitioners

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Abstract

Anxiety is a feeling of fear, dread and uneasiness, which can be a normal reaction to stress. The effect of meditation in reducing anxiety of the practitioners have been reported.

Methods: This study was carried out using a questionnaire among 50 people attending breath awareness based meditation class at a meditation/yoga centre in Kozhikode District of Kerala State, India (experimental group) and 50 people who were not doing meditation (control group) in Kozhikode. The questionnaire contained the measure of anxiety considering a period of past one month, details on whether the respondents had done meditation before joining the present meditation class, months of meditation practice in the present meditation class, and whether the control group respondents were having any psychological problem. The sum of scores of the anxiety items was worked out as the anxiety score of the respondents. The data was analysed as proportion, anxiety score and by statistical test.

Results: 60 to 100 % of meditation practitioners have not at all experienced six out of the seven anxiety items under the study in the past one month. However, 40 to 50% of non-meditators experienced four out of the seven anxiety items for more than 15 days in the past one month. The results on comparatively higher anxiety score of non-meditators than meditators, and 70 % of non-meditators coming under the severe anxiety category when compared to none of the meditators in this category indicate the effect of meditation in reducing the anxiety level of the respondents. Statistically significant results establish the influence of meditation done before joining the present meditation class as well as higher period of practice in the present class in reducing the anxiety level of the respondents. In the case of people who have not done meditation, existence of psychological problem has resulted in more anxiety, compared to those who did not have the problem.

Conclusion: The study has revealed the influence of meditation in helping the practitioners to reduce their level of anxiety, when compared to non-meditators. Creating awareness on scientifically proven beneficial effects of relaxation techniques like meditation, yoga, art of living, exercise etc. among more number of people can be expected to motivate them to practice these techniques in order to achieve better wellbeing in life.

Keywords: Anxiety; Meditators; Non-Meditators

Introduction

Anxiety is a feeling of fear, dread and uneasiness when a person is faced with a difficult problem, before taking a test, before making an important decision etc. Anxiety can be a normal reaction to stress.

Five to twelve minutes of daily mindfulness meditation was found to be associated with decreased stress and anxiety, and increased mindfulness [1]. Meditation reportedly led to a statistically significant difference in anxiety between the meditating and control groups [2]. A study suggests that mindfulness-based therapy is a promising intervention for treating anxiety and mood problems in clinical populations [3]. The influence of meditation in reducing the stress level of the practitioners has been established [4]. It has been reported that people are able to achieve better psychological well-being through meditation for a period of three months, when compared to before practicing meditation [5]. The results of a study indicate the usefulness of yoga practice (which includes meditation also) to reduce the anxiety of people during the pandemic period, which may otherwise lead to psycho-somatic disorders [6]. It has been reported that mindfulness meditation may have a beneficial effect on anxiety symptoms in anxiety disorder, and may also improve stress reactivity [7]. Scientists compared patients who took an intensive eight-week mindfulness meditation program to patients who took the widely-prescribed and well-studied anxiety drug Lexapro. They found that both interventions worked equally well in reducing debilitating anxiety

symptoms [8].

Materials and Methods

This study was carried out using a questionnaire among 50 people attending breath awareness based meditation class at a meditation/yoga centre in Kozhikode District of Kerala State, India (experimental group) and 50 people who were not doing meditation (control group) in Kozhikode. The questionnaire contained the measure of anxiety [9] considering a period of past one month, details on whether the respondents had done meditation before joining the present meditation class, months of meditation practice in the present meditation class, and whether the control group respondents were having any psychological problem. The sum of scores of the anxiety items was worked out as the anxiety score of the respondents. A higher score indicates more anxiety. Categorisation of the anxiety level of meditators and non-meditators as mild, moderate and severe anxiety was done based on the cut off points of anxiety score for these levels as shown in the measure of anxiety used in the study. The data was analysed as proportion, anxiety score and by statistical test.

Results

Table 1 gives the responses of the meditation practitioners (experimental group) to the anxiety items.

Sl. No.	Anxiety item	Respondents (%) reporting not at all experiencing it in the past one month	Respondents (%) reporting experiencing it for less than 15 days in the past one month
1	Feeling nervous, anxious or on edge	80	20
2	Not being able to stop or control worrying	80	20
3	Worrying too much about different things	60	40
4	Trouble relaxing	40	60
5	Being so restless that it was hard to sit still	90	10
6	Becoming easily annoyed or irritable	90	10
7	Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen	100	Nil

Table 1: Responses of the meditation practitioners to the anxiety items.

Table 2 shows the responses to the anxiety items of people who are not meditating (control group).

Sl. No.	Anxiety item	Respondents (%) reporting not at all experiencing it in the past one month	Respondents (%) reporting experiencing it for more than 15 days in the past one month
1	Feeling nervous, anxious or on edge	10	40
2	Not being able to stop or control worrying	10	10
3	Worrying too much about different things	Nil	50
4	Trouble relaxing	Nil	40
5	Being so restless that it was hard to sit still	10	Nil
6	Becoming easily annoyed or irritable	10	50
7	Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen	90	Nil

Table 2: Responses of non-meditating people (control group) to the anxiety items.

Table 3 shows the mean anxiety score of meditators and non-meditators.

Group	Mean anxiety score*
Meditators	30.7
Non-meditators	52.1

Table 3: Mean total anxiety score of meditators and non-meditators.

*as % of the maximum possible score under the study.

Table 4 gives shows the categorisation of anxiety level of meditators and non-meditators based on the cut off points of anxiety score for mild, moderate and severe anxiety (as per the anxiety scale used in the study).

Anxiety level*	Respondents (%)	
	Meditators	Non-meditators
Severe	Nil	70
Moderate	100	30
Mild	Nil	Nil

Table 4: Categorisation of anxiety level of meditators and non-meditators.

*based on scores of 5, 10 and 15 as the cut off points for mild, moderate and severe anxiety as per the anxiety scale used.

The statistical significance of the difference in mean anxiety score of respondents who did meditation before joining the present meditation class and those who have not done it earlier is shown in Table 5.

Mean anxiety score	
Respondents who did meditation before joining the present meditation class	Respondents who did not do meditation before joining the present meditation class
7.5	10.3
t stat = - 8.2; Significant p< 0.01	

Table 5: Statistical significance of anxiety score based on doing meditation before joining the present meditation class.

Table 6 shows the statistical significance of the difference in mean anxiety score of respondents based on months of meditation practice in the present meditation class.

Mean anxiety score	
Months of meditation in the present class	
5 to 6	10 to 12
10	8.3
t stat = 3.3 ; Significant p< 0.01	

Table 6: Statistical significance of anxiety score based on months of meditation in the present class.

The mean anxiety score of non-meditators reporting psychological problem (15.1) was found to be more than those who had no psychological problem (score of 12.5), even though there was no statistically significant difference in their scores.

Discussion

The results shown in Table 1 indicate that meditation practitioners in the range of 60 to 100 % have not at all experienced six out of the seven anxiety items under the study in the past one month. However, the results presented in Table 2 show that non-meditating people in the range of 40 to 50% have experienced four out of seven anxiety items for more than 15 days in the past one month. They include - feeling nervous, anxious or on edge, worrying too much about different things, having trouble in relaxing, and becoming easily annoyed or irritable. These findings help to establish the effect of meditation in reducing the anxiety of the practitioners, as compared to non-practitioners.

The mean anxiety score of non-meditators expressed as a % of the maximum possible score in the study is comparatively more than that of the meditators (Table 3), indicating higher level of anxiety for those who are not practicing meditation. Categorisation of the anxiety level of meditators and non-meditators in Table 4 shows that 70 % of people who are not meditating come under the severe anxiety category, while none of the meditators are there in this category. Further, all the meditators have moderate anxiety only, when compared to only 30 % of non-meditators having moderate anxiety (Table 4). These results also confirm the effect of meditation in reducing anxiety for the practitioners.

Statistical significance exists between the anxiety score of meditators who report doing meditation before joining the present meditation class, and those who have not done it before, with comparatively lower score (indicating less anxiety) for the former category of meditators (Table 5). Similarly, statistical significance is observed between the comparatively higher anxiety score of respondents who have done meditation for a period of 5 to 6 months only in the present class, and those who have done it for 10 to 12 months (who have a lower anxiety score). This indicates that comparatively less anxiety is experienced by people having more period of meditation practice in the class.

The mean anxiety score of non-meditators reporting psychological problem was higher, when compared to those who had no psychological problem. This implies that existence of psychological problem has resulted in more anxiety for people who have not done meditation. This is where research based beneficial effects of meditation and other relaxation techniques assume importance to motivate more people to practice them for reducing their stress levels. However, sufficient awareness on scientifically proven beneficial effects of such practices is lacking in our society. In this context, Government agencies, social organisations, residents' associations etc. should take initiative to popularise the relevance of such techniques among more

number of people, especially children who are mostly prone to mental stress due to their high study load, more exposure to internet etc.

Conclusion

This study has revealed that 60 to 100 % of meditation practitioners have not at all experienced six out of the seven anxiety items under the study in the past one month. However, 40 to 50% of non-meditators experienced for more than 15 days in the past one month the four anxiety items, namely, feeling nervous, anxious or on edge, worrying too much about different things, having trouble in relaxing, and becoming easily annoyed or irritable. The mean anxiety score of non-meditators is comparatively more than that of the meditators, indicating higher level of anxiety for those who are not practicing meditation. There are 70 % non-meditators under the severe anxiety category, while none of the meditators come under this category. These findings establish the effect of meditation practice in reducing the anxiety level of the respondents. Statistical significance exists between the comparatively lower anxiety score (which indicates less anxiety) of meditators who have done meditation before joining the present meditation class and the higher score (indicating more anxiety) of those who have not done it before. Similarly, statistical significance is observed between the anxiety score of respondents who have done meditation for a period of 5 to 6 months in the present class (having comparatively higher score/more anxiety) and lower score/less anxiety got by people who have done it for 10 to 12 months. These results indicate the influence of meditation done before joining the present meditation class as well as a higher period of practice in the present class in reducing anxiety of the respondents. In the case of people who have not done meditation, existence of psychological problem has resulted in more anxiety, compared to those who did not have the problem.

Suitable measures should be undertaken to create awareness on scientifically proven beneficial effects of relaxation techniques like meditation, yoga, art of living, exercise etc. among more number of people in order to motivate them to practice the techniques and achieve better wellbeing in life.

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