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The efficacy of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy in recurrent depressed patients with and without a current depressive episode: a randomized controlled trial


Department of Psychiatry, Radboud University Nijmegen Medical Centre, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

Background. The aim of this study is to examine the efficacy of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) in addition to treatment as usual (TAU) for recurrent depressive patients with and without a current depressive episode.

Method. A randomized, controlled trial comparing MBCT + TAU (n=102) with TAU alone (n=103). The study population consisted of patients with three or more previous depressive episodes. Primary outcome measure was post-treatment depressive symptoms according to the Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression. Secondary outcome measures included the Beck Depression Inventory, rumination, worry and mindfulness skills. Group comparisons were carried out with linear mixed modelling, controlling for intra-group correlations. Additional mediation analyses were performed. Comparisons were made between patients with and without a current depressive episode.

Results. Patients in the MBCT + TAU group reported less depressive symptoms, worry and rumination and increased levels of mindfulness skills compared with patients receiving TAU alone. MBCT resulted in a comparable reduction of depressive symptoms for patients with and without a current depressive episode. Additional analyses suggest that the reduction of depressive symptoms was mediated by decreased levels of rumination and worry.

Conclusions. The study findings suggest that MBCT is as effective for patients with recurrent depression who are currently depressed as for patients who are in remission. Directions towards a better understanding of the mechanisms of action of MBCT are given, although future research is needed to support these hypotheses.

Key words: Depression, MBCT, mindfulness, recurrence.
level of experience of the MBCT trainers. Kuyken et al. (2008) showed that MBCT was as effective as maintenance antidepressant medication (m-ADM) in preventing relapse in patients with three or more previous depressive episodes (Kuyken et al. 2008). Patients receiving MBCT reported less depressive symptoms and higher quality of life. This finding of MBCT being equally effective as m-ADM was recently confirmed by Segal et al. (2010) in a trial showing equal reduction in relapse risk for m-ADM and MBCT; however, only in unstable remitters.

In addition to preventing relapse of depression, several preliminary, mostly uncontrolled studies have shown MBCT to be efficacious in reducing depressive symptoms per se (Finucane & Mercer, 2006; Kenny & Williams, 2007; Kingston et al. 2007; Eisendrath et al. 2008; Barnhofer et al. 2009). This research extends the founding inception of MBCT, namely, that the programme was developed with the purpose of preventing remission of depression and considered unsuitable for acute depression. Symptoms such as difficulty with concentration and intensity of negative thinking were hypothesized to preclude the acquisition of attention control skills central to the training (Segal et al. 2002). For this reason, patients with recurrent depression not in remission were indeed excluded from previous studies (Teasdale et al. 2000; Ma & Teasdale, 2004).

The aim of this study was to examine the efficacy of MBCT in a more representative sample of patients with recurrent depression, including those using antidepressant medication or with previous cognitive behavioural therapy or meditation experience. We also wanted to examine whether MBCT was effective for patients with or without a current depressive episode. Finally, we wanted to investigate rumination, worry and mindfulness skills as possible mediators for the reduction of depressive symptoms in the MBCT condition. We expected increased mindfulness skills, such as ‘act with awareness’, would increase insight into the patients’ own maladaptive cognitive, affective and behavioural processes, reducing the likelihood of repeated depressive episodes (Teasdale et al. 1995).

Method

Design

A randomized, controlled design was used comparing MBCT plus TAU with TAU alone. Patients in the TAU condition participated in the MBCT training after a 3-month waiting list period. In order to investigate the stability of the effects of MBCT, patients in both conditions were followed for 1 year after completing MBCT. The results at 1-year follow-up will be presented separately.

As the studies of Teasdale et al. (2000) and Ma & Teasdale (2004) only included patients with a Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression (HAMD; Hamilton, 1960) score of <10, randomization of the current trial was stratified according to a HAMD score <10 or ≥10. Block-randomization was used, with block size of 12 for HAMD <10 and block size of four for HAMD ≥10. A list of random numbers was generated for both groups. Assignment to groups was conducted by an independent researcher.

Participants

The study population consisted of patients with three or more previous depressive episodes according to DSM-IV criteria. Patients using antidepressant medication were required to be on a stable dose for at least 6 weeks and were asked to maintain this dosage for the study period. Exclusion criteria for the study were: (1) one or more previous (hypo)manic episodes according to DSM-IV criteria; (2) current alcohol and/or drug abuse; (3) urgent need for psychiatric treatment, for example, suicidality or psychotic symptoms; (4) problems impeding participating in a group, such as severe borderline personality disorder; (5) problems impeding completing the questionnaires, such as cognitive dysfunctions.

Procedure

Patients were referred by their general practitioners or psychiatrists and psychologists in and around the city of Nijmegen. Alternatively, they were self-referred, informed by local and national advertisements. Patients were then screened by telephone and, if applicable, invited for a research interview including the Mini-International Neuropsychiatric Interview (MINI) (Sheehan et al. 1998; van Vliet et al. 2000), including the section on recurrent depression according to the Structural Clinical Interview for DSM-IV Axis I Disorders (First et al. 1995; Groenestijn et al. 1999). The interviews were used to confirm inclusion and exclusion criteria and were conducted by a psychologist or psychiatrist in training, supervised by an experienced psychiatrist.

For the MBCT condition, questionnaires were administered at the time of the research interview and after the last MBCT session. For the TAU condition, questionnaires were administered at the time of the research interview and before their first MBCT session. After completing MBCT, all patients were reassessed at 3, 6, 9 and 12 months follow-up.

The study was approved by the Medical Ethical Committee of local hospitals in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. After complete description of the study
to the subjects, written informed consent was obtained.

**Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy**

MBCT was delivered according to the guidelines of Segal et al. (2002). Training consisted of eight weekly sessions of 2.5 h and a silent day of 6 h meditation. In addition to the group sessions, participants were instructed to practise 6 days per week for approximately 45 min per day. Compliance was assessed by attendance and weekly homework diaries. To support home practice, patients received CDs with guided meditations and exercises. Group size varied between eight and 14 participants. After completing MBCT, participants were invited to attend monthly 1-h booster sessions and silent days of consecutive MBCT groups.

Three different MBCT instructors participated in the study: (1) a psychiatrist and cognitive behavioural therapist; (2) a clinical psychologist; (3) an occupational therapist. All had received at least 1.5 years of training in MBCT and were experienced in working with patients with a wide range of psychiatric problems and groups. Trainers were also experienced meditators, with meditation practice ranging between 2 and 20+ years.

**Measures**

As a primary outcome measure, HAMD was used. The HAMD is a standardized 17-item interview to measure number and severity of depressive symptoms on a 0–52 score range (Hamilton, 1960; Bech et al. 1961; Bouman et al. 1989). The HAMD has good psychometric properties (Morriss et al. 2008).

In addition, the following questionnaires were administered:

1. Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), a 21-item self-report questionnaire to measure depressive symptoms, score range 0–63 (Beck et al. 1961; Bouman et al. 1985). The BDI has shown good psychometric properties (Beck et al. 1988).
2. Rumination on Sadness Scale (Dutch translation), a 13-item, 5-point scale, self-report questionnaire designed to measure ruminative thought, (imagining) when one feels ‘sad, down or depressed’ (Raes et al. 2003).
3. Penn State Worry Questionnaire, a 16-item, 5-point scale, self-report questionnaire, designed to measure the concept of worry (Meyer et al. 1990; van Rijsoort et al. 1999).
4. Kentucky Inventory of Mindfulness (KIMS) is a 39-item, 5-point scale self-report questionnaire, developed to measure the level of proficiency in different mindfulness skills (Baer et al. 2004, 2006).
5. The World Health Organization Quality of Life, self-report questionnaire, constructed to measure subjective experienced quality of life (de Vries & van Heck, 1996). This version is a 26-item, 5-point scale covering four domains: physical; psychological; social; environment. Only the first three domains are presented.

**Statistical analysis**

All analyses were carried out using the intention to treat sample. As <3% of the data was missing, reported results are based on complete data. Sensitivity analysis based on worse case imputation revealed no difference in direction nor significance for all outcomes.

Post-measurement scores were compared between the two groups, controlling for baseline depression levels. Additional analyses were performed within subgroups with and without a current depressive episode. To account for possible differences between therapy groups, we added a random group effect. All analyses were performed using linear mixed models including an exploratory moderation analyses. A Cohen’s $d$ effect size was calculated based on the complete group ($n = 205$) baseline standard deviation to avoid a contamination of standard deviation due to therapy effects.

Additional information about reliable change for the HAMD scores is provided, calculated and visually presented based on the work of Jacobson & Truax, (1991), using test–retest reliability to correct for measurement errors of the HAMD, again using the complete group baseline standard deviation.

For the mediation analysis, we followed the recommendations of Preachers and Hayes for multiple mediation models (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). In all mediation analyses, HAMD post-measurement scores were controlled for baseline depression by using pre-measurement HAMD scores as a covariate. Residual change scores for all potential mediators were calculated (MacKinnon, 2008). To explore whether the mediators (partly) effected the relation of condition on post-treatment depression levels, the model including the potential mediators was compared with the model without mediators for both univariate and multivariate models. An advantage of a multivariate model over several univariate models is the possibility of determining the relative contribution of each indirect
effect in relation with the other mediators (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Subsequently, 95% bias corrected and accelerated confidence intervals (95% CI) were calculated to explore the contribution of each individual mediator and the group of mediators in total. SPSS macro command sets for indirect mediation were downloaded from http://www.comm.ohio-state.edu/ahayes. SPSS package 17.0 and R 2.9.1 (R Development Core Team, 2009) were used for analyses and graphs.

Results

Study population

Of the 258 patients interviewed, 33 were excluded and six refused to participate. Reasons for exclusion were: (1) not having three or more previous depressive episodes \((n = 19)\); (2) change in medication within 6 weeks before the start of the study \((n = 4)\); (3) previous (hypo)manic episodes \((n = 2)\); (4) current substance abuse \((n = 3)\); (5) acute need of psychiatric treatment \((n = 2)\); (6) problems to participate in a group therapy \((n = 2)\); (7) cognitive impairments \((n = 1)\).

A total number of 219 patients were included and eventually 205 patients were analysed (MBCT \(n = 102\); TAU \(n = 103\)), see Fig. 1 for a detailed description of the patient flow. Within each condition, the groups were divided into subgroups with and without a major depressive episode based on the MINI interview. As a result of incomplete or missing MINI interviews, for 20 patients the diagnosis of current depression was based on the available clinical information. For four patients it was impossible to do so and they were excluded from the study. Another 10 patients were excluded from analysis due to one or more other missing critical values.

There were no baseline differences between the groups with regard to age \([\text{MBCT: mean} = 47.3 \text{ (s.d.} = 11.5) \text{ years}; \text{TAU: mean} = 47.7 \text{ years (s.d.} = 11.1)\] or other sociodemographic or clinical characteristics (see Table 1).

The mean number of depressive episodes for the complete sample was 7.4 \((\text{s.d.} = 7.0\), modal number of episodes = 3\) with no differences between the MBCT and TAU conditions, \(t(195) = -0.61, p = 0.54\). Mean age at onset of the first depressive episode was 23.8 years \((\text{s.d.} = 11.2\), modal age of onset = 20 years\), with a slightly higher age of onset in the MBCT than in the TAU condition \([\text{MBCT, } t(195) = -1.98, p < 0.05]\). When taking the three most severe depressive episodes into account, the mean time between the last episode and the start of the study for the non-depressed patients was 28 months \((\text{s.d.} = 48.0, \text{median} = 8 \text{ months})\).

During MBCT, nine patients (8.8%) dropped out (less than four sessions MBCT), for the following reasons: training elsewhere; terminal disease; care for sick mother; increasing tension (three); social phobia; for practical reasons (two).
Table 1. Baseline characteristics of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) and treatment as usual (TAU) conditions for the total group of participants and the two subgroups without and with a current depressive episode

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Baseline characteristics; n (%)</th>
<th>Total group</th>
<th>No current depression</th>
<th>Currently depressed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MBCT (n = 102)</td>
<td>TAU (n = 103)</td>
<td>MBCT (n = 68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Female</strong></td>
<td>71 (70)</td>
<td>74 (72)</td>
<td>p = 0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Married/Cohabiting</strong></td>
<td>66 (64)</td>
<td>66 (64)</td>
<td>p = 0.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Care for children</strong></td>
<td>43 (42)</td>
<td>36 (35)</td>
<td>p = 0.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employed</strong></td>
<td>52 (51)</td>
<td>51 (50)</td>
<td>p = 0.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tertiary education</strong></td>
<td>67 (66)</td>
<td>55 (53)</td>
<td>p = 0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Antidepressant medication</strong></td>
<td>53 (52)</td>
<td>48 (47)</td>
<td>p = 0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Previous cognitive behavioural therapy</strong></td>
<td>61 (60)</td>
<td>58 (56)</td>
<td>p = 0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recent meditation experience</strong></td>
<td>49 (48)</td>
<td>48 (47)</td>
<td>p = 0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Symptoms at baseline; mean (S.D.)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Depression (HAMD)</strong></td>
<td>9.5 (6.2)</td>
<td>9.2 (5.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Depression (BDI)</strong></td>
<td>14.9 (9.2)</td>
<td>16.2 (9.4)</td>
<td>p = 0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rumination (RSS)</strong></td>
<td>28.0 (9.5)</td>
<td>28.4 (9.6)</td>
<td>p = 0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Worry (PSWQ)</strong></td>
<td>42.6 (12.3)</td>
<td>43.7 (11.5)</td>
<td>p = 0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mindfulness skills (KIMS)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Observe</strong></td>
<td>19.0 (7.5)</td>
<td>18.7 (7.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Describe</strong></td>
<td>18.4 (8.2)</td>
<td>18.3 (7.8)</td>
<td>p = 0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Act with awareness</strong></td>
<td>15.9 (6.1)</td>
<td>16.8 (5.6)</td>
<td>p = 0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Accept without judgement</strong></td>
<td>18.4 (6.2)</td>
<td>18.0 (6.4)</td>
<td>p = 0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quality of Life (WHOQOL-Bref)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Physical</strong></td>
<td>22.0 (5.5)</td>
<td>20.8 (4.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Psychological</strong></td>
<td>18.2 (3.5)</td>
<td>18.2 (3.4)</td>
<td>p = 0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social</strong></td>
<td>9.7 (2.3)</td>
<td>10.3 (2.2)</td>
<td>p = 0.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

HAMD, Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression; BDI, Beck Depression Inventory; RSS, Rumination on Sadness Scale; PSWQ, Penn State Worry Questionnaire; KIMS, Kentucky Inventory of Mindfulness; WHOQOL-Bref, World Health Organization Quality of Life, self-report questionnaire.

* Meditation and/or body focused experience < 6 months ago.

^b, c Independent sample t tests.

d Measured in a subsample: MBCT [n = 89 (non-depressed, n = 59; depressed, n = 30)]; TAU [n = 74 (non-depressed, n = 51; depressed, n = 23)].
A subsample of the MBCT group \((n=94)\) was asked to fill out homework diaries during the training, of whom 77 (82%) patients handed them in. The average number of days patients practised was 30 (S.D. = 10.2; range 0–42 days). A modest correlation was found between formal practice (e.g. sitting meditation) and change of depression level during MBCT, \(r = 0.26, p < 0.05\).

The period between baseline and end of treatment/waitlist assessment was significantly longer in the TAU \([\text{mean} = 83 \text{ days} (\text{S.D.} = 33.9)]\) than in the MBCT \([\text{mean} = 59 \text{ days} (\text{S.D.} = 12.9); t(175) = 6.4, p < 0.01]\) condition.

**Efficacy of MBCT**

**Depressive symptoms**

At the end of the treatment/waiting period, patients in the MBCT condition had significantly less depressive symptoms than those in the TAU condition according to both HAMD \(F(1, 192.0) = 15.9, p < 0.001\) and BDI \(F(1, 44.3) = 13.4, p < 0.01\) and \(F(1, 83.2) = 17.5, p < 0.001\), respectively. Both showed a moderate effect size (see Table 2). Moreover, all mindfulness skills showed significant increased levels: observe \(F(1, 47.4) = 39.5, p < 0.001\); act with awareness \(F(1, 49.8) = 27.7, p < 0.001\); describe...
Table 3. Depressive symptoms, rumination, mindfulness skills and quality of life at post-treatment of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) and treatment as usual (TAU), controlling for baseline levels of symptoms, for both subgroups without and with a current depressive episode respectively

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post-measurement results; mean (s.d.)</th>
<th>No current depression</th>
<th>Currently depressed</th>
<th>Group difference  (95% CI)</th>
<th>Cohen’s d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MBCT (n = 68)</td>
<td>TAU (n = 68)</td>
<td>Group difference</td>
<td>Cohen’s d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression (HAMD)</td>
<td>6.2 (4.7)</td>
<td>9.1 (5.6)</td>
<td>−2.9 (−4.6 to −1.3)</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression (BDI)</td>
<td>8.6 (6.3)</td>
<td>14.0 (8.0)</td>
<td>−5.4 (−8.2 to −2.5)</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rumination (RSS)</td>
<td>21.3 (8.6)</td>
<td>26.4 (10.4)</td>
<td>−5.1 (−7.6 to −2.6)</td>
<td>0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worry (PSWQ)</td>
<td>34.6 (11.3)</td>
<td>41.6 (10.2)</td>
<td>−7.0 (−8.2 to −5.8)</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindfulness skills (KIMS)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observe</td>
<td>22.8 (7.4)</td>
<td>17.8 (7.1)</td>
<td>4.4 (2.3 to 6.5)</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe</td>
<td>20.4 (7.1)</td>
<td>18.2 (7.0)</td>
<td>2.2 (0.0 to 4.4)</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accept without judgement</td>
<td>23.2 (5.4)</td>
<td>16.7 (5.6)</td>
<td>6.5 (3.9 to 9.1)</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Life (WHOQOL-Bref)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>25.0 (4.8)</td>
<td>22.5 (4.7)</td>
<td>2.5 (0.8 to 4.3)</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>20.2 (3.3)</td>
<td>18.9 (3.3)</td>
<td>1.3 (0.1 to 2.5)</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>10.2 (2.2)</td>
<td>10.3 (2.1)</td>
<td>0.1 (−0.5 to 0.9)</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

HAMD, Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression; BDI, Beck Depression Inventory; RSS, Rumination on Sadness Scale; PSWQ, Penn State Worry Questionnaire; KIMS, Kentucky Inventory of Mindfulness; WHOQOL-Bref, World Health Organization Quality of Life, self-report questionnaire.

*a Unadjusted condition means and standard deviations (s.d.).

*b Differences between conditions, corrected for baseline values.

*c Measured in a subsample: MBCT [n = 89 (non-depressed, n = 59; depressed, n = 30)]; TAU [n = 74 (non-depressed, n = 51; depressed, n = 23)].

*d Statistical significant difference (p < 0.05).
[F(1, 49.0) = 6.6, \( p < 0.05 \)]; accept without judgement
[F(1, 192.0) = 22.9, \( p < 0.001 \)]. Except for describe, all
domains showed moderate to large effect sizes (see	Table 2).

Of the quality of life scores, only the psychologi-
cal domain showed a significant increase in the
MBCT condition compared with the TAU condition
[F(1, 153) = 9.2, \( p < 0.01 \)].

Differences between patients with and without a current depressive episode

Split-file analyses for patients with and without a current depressive episode showed overall compar-
able results with the complete sample analysis (see	Table 3). Rumination and the mindfulness subscale ‘describe’ did not differ significantly within the group
without a current depressive episode in contrast with
the group having a current episode. Also, psychologi-
cal improvement of quality of life was only signifi-
cantly different in the depressed group. Cohen’s \( d \)
effect sizes were comparable with the complete sample
effect sizes. The depression-related variables ‘rumi-
nation’ and ‘worry’ showed even higher effect sizes in
the subgroup analyses, possibly due to smaller stan-
dard deviations.

To further investigate whether depressive symp-
toms at baseline influenced the efficacy of MBCT, we
performed an interaction analysis adding an interac-
tion term between baseline depression levels (HAMD)
and condition. We found no significant interaction
for any of the outcome variables, indicating that the
efficacy of MBCT is independent of baseline level of
depression. Using split-file analyses for patients with
and without a current depressive episode, no signifi-
cant interactions were found between baseline
depression levels (HAMD) and any of the outcome
measures. The result for the interaction analysis be-
tween baseline depression levels and end of treatment
levels of depression (HAMD) is graphically presented
in Fig. 2, showing baseline and end of treatment levels
of depression in both conditions. From this figure it
becomes apparent that the reduction of depressive
symptoms as a result of MBCT is independent from
the baseline level of depression.

Clinically significant change

A clinically significant change of the HAMD scores,
the primary outcome measure, is presented in Table 4,
using both the Jacobson–Truax reliable change index
and the absolute cut-off level of HAMD 10 as criteria

Fig. 2. Interaction plot for pre- and post-measurement depression levels [Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression (HAMD) scores]
of Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) and treatment as usual (TAU) condition. The short vertical lines
depicted on the x-axis represent the distribution of pre-measurement depression scores (HAMD; range 0–25). Note that
independent of the pre-measurement level of depression, the post-measurement depression score difference between the MBCT
and TAU condition is constant (for example ‘a’ = ‘b’).
If improvement is defined by a HAMD score <10 and having a reliable positive change in depression scores, Table 4 illustrates that, in the MBCT condition, patients more frequently improved than in the TAU condition (15 vs. 8). It also demonstrates that more patients in the TAU condition deteriorate than in the MBCT condition (5 vs. 18). Overall, the MBCT condition significantly differs from the TAU condition in terms of individual change scores \( \chi^2(3) = 9.69, p < 0.05 \).

Mediation analysis
Rumination, worry and the four separate mindfulness skills were expected to be mediators between the MBCT training and post-measurement levels of depression (HAMD). Predicted mediators were first analysed using a univariate model and, if shown to be a contributing factor, were entered into a multivariate model.

The main analyses revealed that all the suggested mediators were related to condition (MBCT versus TAU).
crease of depressive symptoms, worry and rumination

**Discussion**

This study shows that, for patients with three or more previous depressive episodes, MBCT results in a decrease of depressive symptoms, worry and rumination and improvement in mindfulness skills. Most importantly, we found no differences between patients with and without a current depressive episode in terms of reduction of depressive symptoms. The amount of formal practice seems to have some relation with decrease in depressive symptoms. The results suggest that post-measurement levels of depressive symptoms were mediated by a decrease in worry and rumination.

This study presents the first large-scale, randomized, controlled study showing MBCT to be efficacious in reducing depressive symptoms for patients with recurrent depression suffering from a current depressive episode. These results are in line with previous studies including one randomized, controlled [Barnhofer et al. 2009 (n=28)], one controlled but not randomized study [Kingston et al. 2007 (n=19)] and three uncontrolled studies with a range of 13 to 79 participants (Finucane & Mercer, 2006; Kenny & Williams, 2007; Eisendrath et al. 2008). These studies showed that patients with current depressive symptoms might also benefit from MBCT. Note that the effect sizes found in our study were smaller than in the study by, for example, Barnhofer et al. (2009). One explanation for the reduced effect sizes study might be the inclusion of patients with recent meditation experience, since this was shown to be a moderating variable.

The fact that recent meditation experience was shown to moderate the level of depressive symptoms supports the idea that the meditation component plays a key role in the effects of MBCT but this has yet to be proven (Williams et al. 2010).

Additional analyses and figures, especially Fig. 3, illustrate that not only more patients improved, but also fewer patients deteriorated in the MBCT condition compared with TAU alone. This is congruent with the prophylactic results of MBCT for depression shown in previous studies (e.g. Ma & Teasdale, 2004; Kuyken et al. 2008).

Our finding that patients without a current depressive episode also showed reduced levels of depressive symptoms is encouraging, considering the clinical relevance of residual symptoms in the prediction of relapse and recurrence of depression. Kennedy et al. (2004) showed that subsyndrome levels of depression are common and persistent after severe episodes of depression. Residual depressive symptoms have been repeatedly shown as a predictor of depressive relapse (e.g. Faykel et al. 1995; Rush et al. 2006; Hardeveld et al. 2010). This may contribute to the efficacy of MBCT preventing relapse.

The exploratory mediation analysis lends valuable insights towards a better understanding of the working mechanism of MBCT. Congruent with our
hypotheses, it seems that the efficacy of MBCT compared with TAU in reducing post-measurement levels of depression is mediated by a decrease in worry, rumination and an increase in the mindfulness skill ‘accept without judgement’. Our results are in line with the findings of Kuyken et al. (2010), who showed that 1-year follow-up levels of depression were mediated by mindfulness skills and self-compassion. Additionally, the relationship between cognitive reactivity and levels of depression was moderated by change in self-compassion during MBCT, suggesting that mindfulness training changes the way one relates towards vulnerability for depression. In addition, we found a negative relationship between rumination and mindfulness skill acceptance, which might implicate that acceptance decreases the space for ruminative thoughts as suggested by the designers of MBCT (Teasdale et al. 1995). Based on our results, further questions can be generated, such as the relationship in time between mindfulness skill ‘accept without judgement’, worry and rumination. However, these results must be interpreted with care. As a result of the cross-sectional nature of the findings, no firm conclusions can be made in terms of causality (Kraemer et al. 2002; Kazdin, 2007). For that purpose, future studies should use designs with repeated assessments, for example, a midpoint assessment at session 4.

Although this study provides several important findings, there are a number of limitations to be considered. The design of this study was a pragmatic, randomized, controlled trial. There might be a negative effect as a result of randomization in the TAU condition instead of MBCT, resulting in higher post-measurement symptom levels in the TAU condition. Based on the results of this trial, we do not know how MBCT compares with alternative active treatment conditions for recurrent depression, such as cognitive behavioural therapy to prevent relapse (Bockting et al. 2005). Also, the influence of peer support cannot be ruled out, since the TAU condition was not group based. Furthermore, the results are limited to direct post-measurement results, although it is also important to investigate whether currently depressed patients also benefit in the long term. As most of the patients were self-referred, the results of the study may have been influenced by selection bias. Participants of this study might have been better informed and more motivated compared with other patients receiving general mental health care. On the other hand, inclusion was not restricted to patients without antidepressant medication, previous cognitive behaviour therapy and/or meditation experience. In this regard, our study population was more representative of routine clinical practice than some of the previous studies (Teasdale et al. 2000; Ma & Teasdale, 2004).

Conclusions

The greatest merit of this study is that it shows that MBCT is also efficacious in recurrent depressive patients with a current depressive episode. The study also gives some directions toward a better understanding of the mechanisms of action of MBCT. However, the exploratory nature of this justifies further investigation.

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Declaration of Interest

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