

# Mindfulness reduces anxiety and depression in cancer patients

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When being diagnosed with cancer, people will naturally worry about their future, their family and about dying. Actually, no less than 35-40% of cancer patients suffer from significant anxiety and depression symptoms. An interdisciplinary research project carried out between Aarhus University, Business and Social Sciences and Aarhus University Hospital and the Danish Cancer Society now shows that mindfulness can help cancer those patients suffering from anxiety and depression.

During his PhD programme, Jacob Piet, psychologist and PhD student at Aarhus University, Business and Social Sciences, Department of Psychology and [Behavioural Sciences](#), has studied the effects of mindfulness-based [psychological therapy](#). In collaboration with Bobby Zachariae, Professor at Aarhus University and Aarhus University Hospital, and Hanne Würtzen from the Danish Cancer Society, he has, in particular, studied the effect in [cancer patients](#) with symptoms of [anxiety](#) and [depression](#).

## **Mindfulness focuses on the present**

Mindfulness-based psychological therapy is rooted in Buddhist meditation techniques and includes the programmes mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT). Training and exercises in mindfulness teach the cancer patients to be more conscious of life as it happens instead of worrying about the past and the future. This may be thoughts about their past behaviour having contributed to their disease and fear of what will happen to them

in future, including worries about death.

Mindfulness is a special way of being attentive. Mindfulness teaches you not to judge and evaluate yourself, your thoughts, feelings and physical sensations.

"Mindfulness is believed to help by improving attention control and gaining greater acceptance. The resulting effect is less negative thoughts and worries and therefore reduced anxiety and depression," explains Jacob Piet.

### **Groundbreaking results**

The research is based on a meta analysis of 22 studies of mindfulness-based therapy and involves more than 1,400 cancer patients. Jacob Piet and his colleagues' summary of the study findings shows that mindfulness has a documented effect as an effective and inexpensive therapy method for cancer patients with anxiety and [depression symptoms](#). The positive effect was not only seen immediately after therapy, but was maintained for at least six months following the therapy.

"The meta analysis is important as this is the kind of analysis doctors and health boards will typically study," says Jacob Piet.

The findings have been published in the most prestigious international journal within clinical psychology research, Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology.

### **Depression affects course of cancer**

The prevalence of depression is significant in cancer patients. Actually, no less than 35-40% of cancer patients suffer serious anxiety and

depression symptoms. In the first year after having been diagnosed with cancer, almost 50% of patients meet the criteria for severe depression. They suffer from very low mood and an aversion to activity, and, in addition to being the disorder associated with the greatest loss of quality of life, depression is also associated with a high risk of suicide.

It has also been documented that depression in cancer patients results in prolonged hospitalisation and increased mortality. The depression simply predicts the progression of the course of cancer. This clearly demonstrates the great benefits associated with identifying methods - such as mindfulness-based psychological therapy - which help cancer patients suffering from anxiety and depression.

FACTS about mindfulness:

- Mindfulness-based psychological therapy includes the programmes mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT)
- The therapy takes place in groups with eight weekly sessions.
- As a key element of the programme, the participants are asked to practise the mindfulness techniques as their daily homework.
- Mindfulness-based therapy has proved effective in handling stress, [anxiety and depression](#) symptoms as well as in preventing relapse in persons with recurrent depression. In recent years, a number of researchers have specifically studied the effect of the method on psychological problems among cancer patients.

Provided by Aarhus University

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