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# Mindfulness helps against anxiety and depression

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Mindfulness is the great buzz word in women's magazines and self-development books. New research shows that mindfulness actually works, provided that it's done correctly?.

Young adults with social phobia and anxiety, people with recurrent depression and cancer patients all benefit significantly from following an eight-week programme with mindfulness.

This is the conclusion of three Danish studies, which have been published in major clinical psychology journals and which have now been gathered in a PhD thesis.

The studies reveal that:

- Patients with social anxiety disorder benefit as much from a mindfulness programme as patients who receive regular cognitive treatment
- The risk of relapse in people with recurrent major depressive disorder is significantly lower
- Cancer patients reduced their anxiety and depressive symptoms.

“It’s pretty amazing that an intensive eight-week programme of daily mindfulness exercises can improve people’s lives. But it’s also a demanding programme, and it’s important that the individual patient is motivated,” says psychologist Jacob Piet of Aarhus University’s Department of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences, the author of the new thesis.

## **Mindfulness is more sophisticated than women’s magazines suggest**

In recent years mindfulness has become the big craze in Danish shallow culture. Here you’ll find coaches, self-development books and self-promoting success women who in glossy magazines tell of how they achieved self-control and success because they practice mindfulness and are able to be attentive and live in the present.

This ‘pop’ version of mindfulness, however, has little to do with the systematic practice of mindfulness that Piet and his colleagues have studied.

“Many misunderstand mindfulness as a notion or a clever idea that can be applied directly, but unfortunately things aren’t as simple as that,” says Piet. “Rather, mindfulness is a skill – a way of controlling your attention – that can be improved over time with continuous daily training.”

## **Relaxation is as helpful as confronting your fears**

The thesis is based on three scientific articles published in the *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, *Clinical Psychology Review* and the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*.

The articles examine, independently of one another, the effect of mindfulness on different patient groups.

The first study was originally designed by Esben Hougaard, a professor in clinical psychology at Aarhus University, who also supervised Piet's PhD project. Here, a group of young people with social anxiety was divided into two random groups. One group received regular cognitive behavioural therapy in which the participants were taught to overcome their anxiety by confronting it. The other group was treated with mindfulness-based cognitive therapy.

"Here they found that the mindfulness method was as effective as the traditional therapy," says Piet.

This indicates that mindfulness is a serious alternative to confrontational therapy in which patients for instance overcome their fear of spiders by having them walk on their hands.

### **Mindfulness could be as effective as medicine**

The second study, also involving Professor Hougaard, was a meta-study of six randomised clinical trials of 593 people who had been affected by one or more depressive episodes.

A patient who has suffered from a single depressive episode has a 60-percent chance of relapse. With two depressive episodes, the risk of relapse increases to 70 percent, and with three episodes, the risk goes up to 90 percent.

However, systematic mindfulness training can significantly reduce this risk of relapse. For those hit by one depressive episode, the risk of relapse is reduced by 34 percent, and with three episodes, the risk is reduced by 43 percent.

Piet says that the findings are so strong and solid that the British health authorities now recommend using mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for the prevention of relapse in recurrent depression.

"Currently, most patients with at least three depressive episodes are recommended antidepressant medication, which they may end up taking for the rest of their lives. These studies suggest that mindfulness-based cognitive therapy can be as effective in preventing new depressive episodes," he says, adding that the Danish health authorities also recommend this method, but that they're not calling much attention to it.

### **Cancer patients can also benefit**

ScienceNordic has reported on the findings from [the third article](#) [8], which studied the effect of mindfulness on cancer patients, who often become anxious and depressed – even after the cancer treatment is actually completed.

Piet's thesis 'Mindfulness-based therapy for social phobia, recurrent depression, and psychological symptoms in cancer patients and survivors' has been published in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*:

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[Read the Danish version of this article at videnskab.dk](#) [9]

 [Mindfulness involves bringing one's complete attention to the present experience on a moment-to-moment basis. When you are being mindful, you're conscious of the flow of thoughts, impressions, feelings and impulses in the present moment with a friendly and accommodating approach. \(Photo: Colourbox\)](#) [10]

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[The Effect of Mindfulness-Based Therapy on Symptoms of Anxiety and Depression in Adult Cancer Patients and Survivors: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, doi: 10.1037/a0028329](#) [15]

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Dann Vinther

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