

# Meditation on prescription: charity urges new remedy for depression

'Mindfulness' courses should be available on NHS, says Mental Health Foundation

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Sarah Boseley, health editor  
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Meditation techniques should be made widely available to combat depression, say experts. Photograph: Keren Su/Corbis

Meditation techniques should be widely available on prescription, say experts today, pointing to evidence that emptying the mind is more likely to help people out of the cycle of recurrent depression than pills. Meditation may for some evoke images of Buddhist chanting and the Beatles bedecked with flowers in their period of devotion to the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, but today a [mental health](#) charity is launching a campaign to make "mindfulness" courses based on meditation available widely on the [NHS](#).

The results in people with depression are impressive and could save the NHS substantial sums of money, according to the [Mental Health Foundation](#).

Antidepressants give people hit by the "black dog" a chemical lift out of their despair. It can get them over the crisis, but there is a risk that depression will come back as it was before they started the pills. Cognitive behaviour therapy is the most widely prescribed and available counselling treatment.

It encourages a depressed person to look at their feelings and behaviour and work out the causes and coping strategies. It works, but is usually used for treatment rather than prevention.

"Mindfulness" is described in the Mental Health Foundation report published today as "a way of paying attention to the present moment by using meditation, yoga and breathing techniques". Instead of worrying at their problems, people are taught to try to empty their minds, focusing on their breathing or parts of their body or yoga movements and noting, but not exploring, the thoughts that drift into the mind, which "creates space for us to make more considered decisions about how to respond to the events in our lives", says the report.

In 2004, the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (Nice) recommended mindfulness-based cognitive therapy courses for people who had had depression at least three times. In two clinical trials mindfulness training halved the rate of relapse for people with recurrent depression - in the first trial, 10 years ago, from 66% to 37% and in the second, in 2004, from 78% to 36%. But in spite of the Nice endorsement, only one in five [GPs](#) has access to a course on which he or she can enrol patients, even though 72% of GPs think it would be a good idea.

Depression affects one in 10 people and costs the economy £7.5bn annually, the foundation says. The number of prescriptions for antidepressants has doubled in a decade, reaching nearly 36m in 2008. Yet three-quarters of GPs say they have prescribed drugs for patients they think would have benefited from something else.

"Mindfulness-based therapy could be helping to prevent thousands of people from relapsing into depression every year," said Dr Andrew McCulloch, chief executive of the Mental Health Foundation. "This would have huge knock-on benefits both socially and economically, making it a sensible treatment to be making available, even at a time when money is short within the NHS."

Dr Jonty Heaversedge, a south London GP and one of the BBC's Street Doctors, said he had himself sought out a Buddhist centre to learn to meditate to manage his own stress, but felt uncomfortable to be recommending it to his patients in case they thought he was promoting religion.

He sees patients who regularly go on antidepressants every winter, he says. Not only would mindfulness training help them, he believes, but also the rest of us, who are under stress, working too hard, troubled in our relationships and running to stand still in every part of our lives.

