

### **Meditation as a Treatment for Sleep Disturbances**

A healthy adult human requires between 7 to 9 hours of sleep every day (Hirshkowitz et al. 2015). As many as 20% of adults suffer from some form of insomnia, which is defined as “a persistent difficulty falling or staying asleep” (Ong et al. 2014). Poor sleep is associated with elevated levels of fatigue, depression, reduced quality of life, and if left untreated, can lead to chronic insomnia (Black et al. 2015). In this paper, I will argue that meditation is a viable treatment for sleep disturbances in adults. For the purpose of this paper, the term ‘meditation’ refers to the variant referred to as ‘mindfulness meditation’ which is a stress reduction technique where the meditator practices “focused, non-judgemental awareness and attention on the present moment experience, as a means of self-regulation, to promote mind-body calmness and relaxation” (Ong et al. 2014). The main reasons that support this claim are: 1) meditation has proven to be effective in combating sleep disturbances, 2) meditation does not have significant contraindications that pharmacotherapy treatments have and 3) meditation is an inexpensive method when compared to alternative sleep disturbance treatments.

Meditation has been proven to facilitate relaxation, decrease worry and rumination, and lower anxiety, making it an effective treatment for insomnia (Black et al. 2015). When compared with cognitive behavioural therapy for insomnia, which has been proven to significantly improve the symptoms of insomnia, a meditation based treatment was shown to be equally effective in a randomized controlled trial (Ong et al. 2014). When compared with sleep hygiene education,

which is a treatment for insomnia that teaches patients about sleep, and focuses on changing poor sleep habits and establishing bedtime routines, a meditation based treatment was shown to be more effective in a randomized clinical trial (Black et al. 2015). Both sleep and meditation are associated with reduced heart rate, blood pressure, respiratory rate and an overall decrease in basal metabolic levels, which is why meditation is believed to lead to sleep initiation (Nagendra et al. 2012).

Pharmacotherapy is commonly used for treating sleep disturbances, especially for the more severe conditions such as chronic insomnia. Unfortunately, drugs tend to have contraindications that have the potential to create additional problems for the user. One problem with using drugs to combat sleep disturbances is their tendency to cause dependency syndrome. Long term use of some drugs can create additional health hazards for the user, as some toxins can accumulate over time in organs, leading to significant health risks. Another problem is that pharmacotherapy treatments can have side-effects such as daytime sleepiness, acute memory impairment and impaired balance (Ong et al. 2014). Additionally, healthy sleep is a complex process, consisting of various cycles of different types of sleep called REM and Non-REM. A drug that causes a loss of consciousness does not guarantee these important cycles. All of these negative aspects of pharmacotherapy are absent in meditation therapies.

My last argument for the use of meditation as a viable treatment for sleep disturbances, comes from its low monetary cost and convenience of use, when compared to alternative therapies. Cognitive behavioral therapy requires an expensive and long process with a highly trained professional. This is because it depends on being highly personalized to each individual's unique and complex personal history. On the other hand, meditation is relatively simple to learn through reading books, watching videos or using inexpensive software applications. Most of the

work in learning to meditate consists in practicing simple mental exercises with no need for help from an expert. Once the initial investment in learning the basic meditation techniques is made, there is no other monetary cost involved. This is much cheaper than using a drug that must be continually purchased in order to acquire the needed dose. Lastly, meditation does not add the inconvenience of maintaining a strict sleep schedule and bedtime routine that the sleep hygiene treatment requires. It is flexible to be applied whenever needed, which is more compatible with the modern world and its erratic schedules.

Sleep disturbances can cause significant negative effects on a person's overall health. Identifying effective ways to combat sleep disturbances are a vital part of a good strategy to maintain optimal health. Randomized clinical trials have shown that meditation is an effective treatment for sleep disturbances. Additional benefits of using meditation for sleep therapy are its low health risks when compared with pharmacotherapy, and its low cost and ease of use when compared with cognitive behavioural therapy. Meditation should be considered a viable treatment for sleep disturbances.

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## References

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