

Sitting with distress: mechanisms of mindfulness-based interventions in the treatment of substance use disorders

Katie Witkiewitz¹

¹*Department of Psychology and Center on Alcohol, Substance use, and Addictions, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, USA*

Presenter's email: katiew@unm.edu

Introduction and Aims: Mindfulness-based interventions to increase awareness of triggers and automatic reactions in the service of reducing heavy drinking, reactive behaviours, behavioural addictions and drug use, as well as the risk of harmful substance use following treatment. This invited address will include a description of mindfulness-based relapse prevention, the purported mechanism of mindfulness-based interventions, and a review of outcomes from four randomised clinical trials of mindfulness-based relapse prevention.

Methods: Participants in four separate clinical trials of mindfulness-based relapse prevention for substance use disorder (N=643) who received mindfulness-based relapse prevention and completed follow-up assessments for up to 12 months after treatment. Primary outcomes included drug use and heavy drinking.

Key Findings: Across four randomised clinical trials mindfulness-based relapse prevention has been shown to be more effective than community treatment as usual and relapse prevention in reducing harmful drug use and heavy drinking. Mindfulness-based relapse prevention has also been readily adapted for rolling groups and individual treatment in an outpatient alcohol clinic, a residential treatment facility for individuals with substance use disorder, and for individuals with chronic pain and opioid use disorder will also be discussed.

Discussions and Conclusions: For individuals seeking treatment for substance use disorders, mindfulness-based relapse prevention is an effective approach for reducing drug use and heavy drinking. The mechanisms that support change in mindfulness-based relapse prevention, including acceptance, craving and decoupling automatic reactions to substance use, as well as future directions for research and practice will be considered.

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