Episode 1: Mindfulness and Weight Loss

Michelle Hastie Thompson

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Mindfulness and Weight Loss.

Why mindfulness? Because, there is an influx of literature discussing the role of stress and cortisol in the weight loss process, yet, it’s less common to learn about the solution to stress. I have found no better solution to stress than mindfulness, and so, I went on a quest to find evidence of the role of mindfulness and weight.

So why are stress and weight related? Well Daubenmier et al. (2011) found that stress can impact our weight around the midline through repeated activation of the HPA axis which results in larger secretion of cortisol. This is not in our favor being that cortisol binds to fat cells that activate an enzyme resulting in greater fat cells.

Enter mindfulness. Mantzios and Wilson (2015) described mindfulness meditation as observing your experiences without adding any meaning to them. In their study, they used 3 sample groups. One used mindfulness meditation, one added the self-compassion meditation and the third group was the control group. The control group was the only group that gained weight. The other two groups did in fact release their weight.

Unfortunately, when they did their follow up a year later most people gained their weight back. However, this does not indicate a failed method. When the participants were interviewed as to whether or not they would continue using the meditation practice, almost all reported that they wouldn’t. When asked why, the most common response was that because they lost the weight, they didn’t see a need to continue.

I bring up this study because it shows a flaw in our thinking. We need to be willing to make permanent changes of thoughts, behaviors and patterns in our lives if we expect the results
to remain permanent. While most people find it painful to continue dieting, hopefully, mindfulness only adds to an individual’s life, making it a positive permanent change.

Speaking of permanence, Daubemier et al. (2016) did a meta-analysis of multiple weight loss studies and found that half the weight loss from these studies were regained after 4 years. They also found that 1 in 4 Americans admit to overeating or choosing unhealthy foods for stress management. Yet, stress management is rarely a core component of most weight loss programs.

In another study by Daubenmier et al. (2011) they found that most weight loss programs are focused on diet and exercise instead of psychological stress, when it should be the primary focus. In addition, most weight loss programs get stuck in the goal of weight loss, as opposed to fat loss, specifically around the midsection. Since mindfulness is shown to be effective in reducing stress, it is safe to assume that it would be a better use of our time in terms of weight loss interventions.

Mindfulness has been shown to reduce binge eating, enhance psychological well-being, and decrease eating disorder symptoms (Daubenmier et al., 2011). And in Daubenmier’s (2011) study, the participants that reported the greater the improvements in mindfulness, larger reductions in abdominal fat.

It is no secret that finding long term solutions to weight maintenance is lacking. The benefit of mindfulness for weight loss is that it’s been shown to create behavioral change (Fulwiler et al., 2016). How does it do this? Fulwiler et al. (2016) was able to show that after a 3-day intensive, mindfulness training actually reversed the effects of stress on the amygdala. Meaning, after just 3 days, actual changes happened in the brain. How many diets can you say do
that? Another study was done in 2010 using a mindfulness program called MEAL (mindfulness eating and living) and all the participants lost weight (Dalen et al., 2010).

Similarly, a study used a method called EMPOWER (Enhancing Mindfulness for the Prevention of Weight Regain) which combines group mindfulness-based psychoeducational sessions with individualized telephonic coaching (Caldwell, Baime, & Wolever, 2012). All participants were asked to spend about 30 minutes a day practicing the mindfulness meditation skills learned in class. An interesting finding in this study is that the groups of participants that were led by an instructor who had their own meditation practice had better results than the groups led by instructors that did not. My reason for bringing this to the forefront is because many weight loss experts are not truly practicing what they preach. For example, if a professional asks you to count your calories, and they have never battled weight, there is a good chance they do not count calories to manage their weight. Then it becomes a matter of what the person is truly an expert in. True they may have vast amounts of knowledge in nutrition and exercise, but are they really weight loss experts?

And of course we cannot talk about mindfulness without discussing the practice of yoga. Bernstein et al., (2013) found that studies on yoga and weight loss are seriously lacking. What’s interesting is that 40% of yoga students are, in fact, overweight. What they did find, however, is that individuals that practice yoga 1-2 times per week for at least 2 years have lower levels of inflammation. Inflammation has a direct correlation to weight, and so, we can at least say it’s helpful, even if this study cannot conclude that it directly influences weight loss.

Ultimately the mindfulness-weight loss connection needs more research. What we do know is that a major component of weight gain is stress and therefore managing stress is a
crucial piece of weight loss. We also know that the only way to create permanent weight loss is to choose methods that we are willing to continue, as opposed to the normal strategy of abandoning such strategies as soon as weight loss is achieved. My curiosity always lies in the question of consistency. What can we say is consistent across groups of people that struggle with weight and groups of people that do not? What are the differences there that are always true? But, more on this next time.
References


