

Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy and Suicidal Behaviour

Professor J M G Williams

In previous work, we have developed a new psychological treatment (mindfulness-based cognitive therapy - MBCT) that has been shown in two randomised controlled trials to reduce risk of recurrence in major depression. MBCT is now included in the UK Government's *National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE)* Guidelines for prevention of recurrence for patients who have suffered three or more previous episodes. This talk will examine whether the same approach can be adapted for the treatment of those at risk of suicide.

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) combines Jon Kabat Zinn's Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction program with techniques from Cognitive Therapy and is offered, in an eight week 'class' format, to patients who have recovered from their depression or suicidal crisis. It aims to teach participants how to become aware of early warning signs of relapse, and to reduce tendencies to avoid these early signs. It includes breathing meditation and yoga practice to help participants become more aware of moment-to-moment changes in the mind and the body. It also includes basic education about depression, and exercises from cognitive therapy that emphasise the links between thinking and feeling.

Can it help suicidal people? Cognitive models of suicidal behaviour assume that both environmentally and biologically-mediated risk variables for suicide affect individuals through a final common pathway involving (a) a high sensitivity to cues in the environment signalling loss, rejection and defeat; (b) a sense of entrapment (that there is no escape - 'arrested flight'); (c) the escalation of these processes in some patients due to their *differential cognitive reactivity* to negative mood. Escalation of feelings of entrapment is particularly problematic when it is associated with decreased problem solving ability. The paper will present research findings that explore cognitive reactivity and preliminary findings from a trial to see whether MBCT changes the key variables involved in keeping people vulnerable to future crises (see also: www.mbct.co.uk).

Brief bio:

Mark Williams is Professor of Clinical Psychology and Wellcome Principal Research Fellow at the University of Oxford. He holds a joint appointment in the Department of Psychiatry and the Department of Experimental Psychology. He has held previous posts at the Medical Research Council Applied Psychology Unit in Cambridge and the University of Wales, Bangor. He is a Fellow of the British Psychological Society and of the Academy of Medical Sciences.

His research is concerned with psychological models and treatment of depression and suicidal behaviour, particularly the application of experimental cognitive psychology to understanding the processes that increase risk of suicidal behaviour in depression. With colleagues John Teasdale (Cambridge) and Zindel Segal (Toronto) he developed Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) for prevention of relapse and recurrence in depression, and two RCTs have now found that MBCT halves the recurrence rate in those who have suffered three or more previous episodes of major depression. His current research focuses on whether a similar approach can help prevent suicidal ideation and behaviour during a depressive episode.

His articles focus on the way that autobiographical memory biases and deficits may act as the critical mediator of current and future vulnerability (see Williams, J.M.G. Barnhofer, T., Crane, C., Hermans, D., Raes, F., Watkins, E., & Dalgleish, T. (2007) Autobiographical memory specificity and emotional disorder. *Psychological Bulletin* 133, 122-148).

His books include *The Psychological Treatment of Depression* (Routledge, 1992), *Cry of Pain: understanding suicide and self harm* (Penguin, 1997) *Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy for Depression: A new approach to preventing relapse* (Guilford, 2002, with Z. Segal and J.D. Teasdale) and *The Mindful Way Through Depression: Freeing Yourself from Chronic Unhappiness* (Guilford, 2007, with J.D. Teasdale, Z.V. Segal and J. Kabat-Zinn).