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Q: What is mindfulness-based cognitive therapy?

A: Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) for depression is designed to treat patients who have recurring depressive episodes. MBCT combines components of cognitive therapy with meditative practices that include mindfulness meditation, imagery, and experiential exercises. MBCT uses mindfulness techniques as the primary change agent to help patients become more aware of and less reactive to negative thinking patterns that can trigger a depressive episode (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002).

Q: What is the treatment model underlying MBCT for MDD?

A: MBCT is based on the cognitive theory of depression which emphasizes the role of negative thinking patterns in triggering depressive states. MBCT focuses on the relapse and recurrence of major depressive episodes, recognizing that individuals with previous depressive episodes may have a tendency to reactivate automatic and negative thinking patterns that can trigger a new depressive episode (Felder, Dimidjian, & Segal, 2012). MBCT aims to help patients become more aware of when these thoughts and feelings are beginning to occur, and to practice mindfulness techniques that help the patient become more detached and less reactive to these negative thinking patterns (Teasdale et al., 2000).

Q: Is MBCT recommended as a treatment for MDD in the Military Health System (MHS)?

A: Yes. The 2022 VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guideline for the Management of Major Depressive Disorder suggests MBCT for uncomplicated mild to moderate MDD, as well as for patients at high risk for relapse of depression (e.g., two or more prior episodes, unstable remission status) during the continuation phase of treatment, with a “weak for” strength of recommendation. MBCT is also recommended for the initial treatment in pregnant or breastfeeding women and older adults (greater than or equal to 65 years) with mild to moderate MDD with a “strong for” strength of recommendation.

The MHS relies on the VA/DoD clinical practice guidelines (CPGs) to inform best clinical practices. The CPGs are developed under the purview of clinical experts and are derived through a transparent and systematic approach that includes, but is not limited to, systematic reviews of the literature on a given topic and development of recommendations using a graded system that takes into account the overall quality of the evidence and the magnitude of the net benefit of the recommendation. Recommendations for or against a treatment may be characterized as strong or weak based on a variety of factors (e.g., confidence in the quality of the evidence, weight of treatment benefits versus risks, feasibility). The CPGs also state if there is insufficient evidence to develop a recommendation. A further description of this process and CPGs on specific topics can be found on the VA clinical practice guidelines website.

Q: Do other authoritative reviews recommend MBCT as a treatment for MDD?

A: No. Other authoritative reviews have not substantiated the use of MBCT for MDD.

Other recognized organizations conduct systematic reviews and evidence syntheses on psychological health topics using grading systems similar to the VA/DoD CPGs. Notable among these is Cochrane, an international network that conducts high-quality reviews of healthcare interventions.

- Cochrane: Two systematic reviews of third wave cognitive and behavioral therapies (including MBCT) for depression did not identify any eligible studies evaluating MBCT (Churchill et al., 2013; Hunot et al., 2013).

Q: What conclusions can be drawn about the use of MBCT as a treatment for MDD in the MHS?

A: MBCT is suggested as a treatment for MDD. Clinicians should consider several factors when choosing an evidence-based treatment for their patients. Treatment decisions should incorporate clinical judgment and expertise, patient characteristics and treatment history, and patient preferences that might influence treatment engagement and retention. For additional guidance on selecting a treatment for MDD, please visit the PHCoE Clinician Resources section of the intranet and navigate to clinical support tools.

References

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