Mindfulness and the transformation of despair: Working with people at risk of suicide
By: Mark Williams, DPhil, Melanie Fennell, PhD, Thorsten Barnhofer, PhD, Rebecca Crane, PhD, DipCot, Zindel Segal, PhD, John Teasdale, PhD
Reviewed by Raymond P. Tucker, M.S.

Over a decade of research has indicated that Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) is an effective intervention for preventing the relapse of a Major Depressive Episode in those diagnosed with a major depressive disorder (e.g., Teasdale et al., 2000). Despite growing evidence for the efficacy of MBCT for the prevention of depression, little research has focused on how the treatment can be tailored to those vulnerable for suicide. 

*Mindfulness and the Transformation of Despair* details how the MBCT treatment protocol can be modified and applied to the treatment of those at risk for suicidal thinking and behavior. Chapters are structured to depict four important elements of how and why this treatment may reduce suicide risk.

The book begins with a description of how vulnerability to suicide develops, specifically in the context of negative mood and depression. Williams and colleagues illustrate a "cry of pain" framework for understanding the suicidal mind. This framework is heavily influenced by the arrested flight model (Gilbert, 1989), a theory indicating that helplessness occurs when an animal/individual feels defeated and perceives current circumstances as inescapable. The cry for pain model of suicide expands upon arrested flight, detailing how individuals come to feel defeated (hypersensitivity to defeat-related environmental cues), entrapped (problem-solving deficits and vague/overgeneral memory), and as though rescue is not possible (inability to generate positive future thoughts and increased hopelessness). The authors indicate how these factors may be "differentially activated" when negative mood occurs and depression relapses in individuals with a history of suicidal depression. Additionally they discuss how using MBCT may help prevent the recurrence of suicidal thinking in the context of relapsed depression.

The authors then detail how MBCT can be administered in a group setting to reduce the reoccurrence of suicidal ideation in those experiencing a relapse of depression. The book clearly depicts important elements of this treatment, including assessment, a session-by-session descriptions of the treatment (including online access to all mindfulness meditations and skills practices), and important factors a therapist, or MBCT teacher, should consider during treatment (e.g., how to respond when suicidal thinking is discussed). The authors also discuss specifics regarding how MBCT teachers should be trained and assessed for their ability to provide the intervention as intended.

The book concludes with the presentation of Randomized Control Trial (RCT) research depicting that MBCT may reduce the risk of depression relapsing in those with a history of experiencing three or more depressive episodes as compared to a group-based psychoeducation protocol regarding depression and treatment as usual. This research also indicates that those who
eventually relapsed into a depressive episode were less likely to also relapse into suicidal thinking and suicidal cognitions (e.g., Rudd, Joiner, & Rajab, 2001) if they received MBCT as compared to psychoeducation or treatment as usual.

*Mindfulness and the Transformation of Despair* provides compelling support for the use of MBCT in a group setting for those in remittance of multiple depressive episodes in the hopes of preventing relapse of depression and suicidal thinking. This therapy is highly specialized and is intended to be administered to people who are vulnerable to suicide. The authors are thorough in their description of theoretical and empirical support for the application for MBCT and clearly detail how MBCT teachers can provide the treatment with fidelity. This book will be of interest to those in the American Association of Suicidality who provide clinical services to at-risk populations as well as those involved in Suicidology research. Therapists in training will particularly benefit from the in-depth discussion of potential etiological factors of suicide and step-by-step detail regarding how MBCT can be effectively administered. Those conducting clinically applicable research in Suicidology will appreciate the discussion of how RCT investigations for reducing suicide, specifically in the context of a mental health disorder, can be conducted.

**References**


