



Protocol

Impact of mantra meditation on health and wellbeing: A systematic review protocol



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ABSTRACT

Introduction: A growing body of empirical, systematic research points to the efficacy of meditation as an aid to relieve stress and promote psychological wellbeing in both clinical and non-clinical populations. Mantra meditation however (the repetition of a word or phrase, silently or aloud), has yet to be evaluated with such rigour. Given this, a systematic review will be conducted to explore and synthesise existing research investigating the impact of mantra meditation on the health and wellbeing of those who engage in the practice.

Methods: The protocol for the systematic review is conducted according to the PRISMA-P (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic review and Meta-Analysis Protocols) guidelines. Electronic searches will be performed in the PsycINFO, MEDLINE, EMBASE, PUBMED and Scopus databases. Hand searches of the reference lists of identified studies will supplement the database search. Eligible articles will be independently assessed against inclusion criteria including but not limited to: the use of a control group, a non-clinical population, written in the English language and published in a peer-reviewed journal.

Results: Data analysis will be completed and synthesised into a systematic review. The review will combine the existing literature on mantra meditation to date and offer insights about the effectiveness of mantra meditation programmes from a pragmatic perspective.

Conclusion: This protocol will promote transparency of methods and research integrity in the systematic review, which will ultimately progress research in the field of mantra meditation.

Systematic review registration: PROSPERO CRD42017079294

1. Background

Meditation amongst other mind-body interventions has been gaining considerable momentum in the literature over the last number of decades. A brief search on the PsycINFO database for the word 'meditation' in the title of publications between 1950 and 1980 retrieves 319 results; the same search strategy for publications between 1980 and 2018 retrieves an impressive 2145 results. With roots tracing back to ancient spiritual and religious traditions from all over the world, meditation has evolved rapidly in modern day society to include a diverse range of practices, such as mindfulness meditation, breathing meditation, guided meditation and mantra meditation, to the benefit of

the meditator's physical and psychological health [1]. Despite this growing interest in meditation and an ever-expanding research base, there remains a paucity of summaries on the empirical evidence of specific practices such as mantra meditation. This systematic review will seek to explore and summarise the existing evidence regarding the impact of mantra meditation practice on health and wellbeing in a non-clinical population (i.e. individuals who have no discernible diagnosis of mental or physical ill-health). For the purpose of this review, health and wellbeing takes account of physical, psychological, cognitive, social or occupational health.

Some conceptual clarification around meditation may be useful. Meditation can be considered an umbrella term, encompassing a variety

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of practices that share unique features, but that also differ in purpose and practice [2]. Approaches to meditation differ in the mental faculties employed (e.g. attention, bodily awareness), the manner in which these faculties are used (e.g. actively, effortlessly), and the objects to which these faculties are directed (e.g. body parts, mantras) [3]. Mantra meditation involves repeating a chosen word, phrase or set of syllables while passively disregarding any internal or external distractions. Although it may be argued that discreet differences exist between the various approaches to mantra meditation (i.e. Transcendental Meditation®, ‘OM’ chanting, Japa yoga, etc.), they are all based on the same fundamental principle of repeating a word or phrase (silently or aloud) thus for the intent and purpose of this research will be considered one and the same and referred to as ‘mantra meditation’.

The practical elements of mantra meditation and mindfulness meditation appear similar, however subtle technical differences exist. The practitioner of mantra meditation is encouraged to return to the use of a specific mantra or sound, while those who practice mindfulness usually employ the breath as an anchor; both practices advocate remaining in the present moment in the face of distraction. Mindfulness practices often incorporate different types of meditation, from walking meditation to an emphasis on elements of the mind and body in the present moment; mantra meditation practice remains rooted in the repetition of the mantra. Finally, mindfulness meditation is commonly employed as a tool to gain insight into the nature of the mind and body, whereas the sound or mantra in mantra meditation is proposed to act as the most effective vehicle for directing and focusing the attention and awareness of the body and mind. The ultimate goal is to transition from a way of doing to a way of being, as is the case with most approaches to meditation. It is important to note that mantra meditation is not being posited as superior to mindfulness or other forms of meditation. It is simply being investigated as another pragmatic, portable, rapid-focus tool that is readily implemented anytime, anywhere, without the need for specific equipment, setting or posture [4,5].

The number of research studies investigating the impact of mantra meditation on health and wellbeing is substantial, with reductions in anxiety, depressive symptoms, psychological distress and burnout widely observed [5–7]. However, to date no systematic review has been carried out (to the authors’ knowledge) to gather a comprehensive overview of the scientific literature in this area. This is likely inhibiting the development of novel research on mantra meditation. The aim of the systematic review is to explore the impact of mantra meditation on health and wellbeing (physical, psychological, cognitive, social and occupational) in a non-clinical population. A secondary goal of the systematic review will be to identify issues of feasibility in the delivery of mantra meditation programmes, in an effort to gain insight into the effectiveness of such programmes from a pragmatic perspective, and to guide future researchers in conducting methodologically and theoretically robust studies in this area.

1.1. Research questions

The primary objective of this review is to explore the impact of mantra meditation on the health and wellbeing of non-clinical populations.

This question is guided by the PICO framework, as outlined in

Table 1
PICO Strategy.

Participants	Healthy, non-clinical population (individuals with no discernible diagnosis of mental or physical illness)
Interventions	Mantra meditation (also sometimes referred to as transcendental meditation or the relaxation response)
Comparisons	Control group (if applicable)
Outcomes	Any impact on health or wellbeing (both physical and mental health)

Table 1 below.

This research question will be addressed using a systematic review of the qualitative and quantitative literature. The conclusions will be summarised in a narrative style.

A secondary objective of this review will be to determine the strengths and limitations of the identified studies, and determine how these may guide future delivery of mantra meditation interventions. The components of the systematic review are outlined below.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design

This systematic review protocol is designed in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic review and Meta-Analysis Protocols (PRISMA-P) [8] and the results of the systematic review will be reported in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic review and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) [9] guidelines.

2.2. Study registration

As per the PRISMA-P guidelines, this protocol has been registered with the International Prospective Register of Systematic Reviews (PROSPERO) on 27th November 2017 (registration number CRD42017079294).

2.3. Eligibility criteria

2.3.1. Participants

This review will report on studies that utilise healthy participants (i.e. a non-clinical population). To elaborate slightly, the review will exclude studies that evaluate the effect of a mantra meditation intervention on a specific clinical population (for example veterans with PTSD, patients diagnosed with cancer or hypertension, etc.). This distinction between a clinical and non-clinical population is important for this review as it may not be appropriate to contrast and/or generalise the effects of mantra meditation on a clinical population to the general population. There will be no restriction on the age of participants.

2.3.2. Types of interventions

Eligible interventions for the review will include programmes that specifically deliver mantra meditation to participants. This includes studies that deliver transcendental meditation techniques or ‘OM’ chanting techniques (as discussed above, these techniques are based on the same fundamental principles and thus will all be referred to under the collective term ‘mantra meditation’). Should some interventions or programmes involve a hybrid of mantra meditation with other types of meditation (i.e. mindfulness meditation), the study will be included if mantra meditation is presented as the primary intervention for participants. Interventions that do not include mantra meditation in the programme will be excluded.

2.3.3. Types of studies

The search will include all study types including randomised controlled trials (RCTs), non-randomised trials, controlled pre-post studies, cross-sectional studies, quasi-RCTs, etc. Qualitative studies will also be taken into consideration. Articles such as letters to the editor, conference abstracts, etc. will be excluded.

2.3.4. Outcome measures

Studies that quantify health and wellbeing by any method (i.e. self-report assessment tools or direct measures) will be included. For the purpose of this review, health and wellbeing takes account of physical, psychological, cognitive, social or occupational health.

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