

### ABSTRACT

The difficulties that women face during substance abuse recovery and re-integration into society after incarceration are staggering in number and combined severity. Over the last several decades, a substantial body of research has investigated the psychological, neurobiological, and public health aspects of the actual experience – as well as the sustained perception of – resource depletion that everyday life in low-income communities creates. The tide of research is now headed towards evaluating new treatment strategies that respond to the understanding gained from this research. Mindfulness Training (MT) is one strategy that promises particular efficacy in addressing the root of these difficulties, as they pertain to the individual person. For the population represented by the women in recovery at Mercy Hospice in Philadelphia, PA, the future will hopefully include research that explores this technique and demonstrates its superiority in terms of helping patients to cope with stress and maintain sobriety.

### THE POPULATION

In 2005, 22 million Americans struggled with a drug or alcohol problem, which translated into an economic burden of \$600 billion for that year.<sup>1,2</sup> Drug use and incarceration are intimately connected, especially for women.<sup>3</sup> The majority of women with this combined history are under the age of 35, are women of color, are mothers, and are residents of low-income urban neighborhoods perennially plagued with unemployment and under-education.<sup>4</sup> A large percentage of these women were victimized prior to incarceration and for most, freedom from jail means a return to the same neighborhoods and the conditions that led to their present situation.

### THE BARRIERS

Despite an overall eagerness to participate in programs that could help them, these women are often not able to participate due to an overload of responsibilities.

“I start my day running to drop my urine [drug testing]. Then I go see my children, show up for my training program, look for a job, go to a meeting [Alcoholics Anonymous] and show up at my part-time job. I have to take the bus everywhere, **sometimes 8 buses for 4 hours a day.**

I don't have proper outer clothes, I don't have money to buy lunch along the way, and everyone who works with me keeps me waiting so that I am late for my next appointment. **If I fail any one of these things** and my PO [probation officer] finds out, I am revoked [probation is revoked]. I am so tired that I sometimes fall asleep



on my way home from work at 2 a.m. and that's dangerous given where I live. And then the next day I have to start over again. **I don't mind being busy and working hard...that's part of my recovery. But this is a situation that is setting me up to fail.**<sup>5</sup>

Many studies have illustrated how self-control in the face of stressful situations is a depletable resource, so dealing with constant stresses of returning home can significantly affect the ability of these women to maintain their sobriety.<sup>6</sup> What is hopeful is that studies have clarified that it is the perception, regardless of the reality, of resource depletion that affects self-control.

### THE IDEA: MINDFULNESS

A therapeutic approach that seeks to strengthen how one deals with the perception of resource status could hold the key to helping these overwhelmed women to achieve their goals. This hope was reinforced when the *Seeking Safety* therapy program was tried out in 2003 within the residential substance abuse treatment program in a minimum security wing of a women's prison. The program emphasized stability, coping skills, and self-harm reduction strategies, and had very positive results.<sup>7</sup> Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) has been tested most extensively in cancer patient populations, with great success.<sup>8-12</sup> The results have included improvements in the symptoms of anxiety and depression after extended meditation practices.

### CONCLUSION

This year, a review by Yale researchers hypothesized that the greater success of MT in comparison to cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), long considered the “gold-standard” for addiction treatment, is that MT targets the core links of the addictive loop.<sup>13</sup> The sustained focus on and acceptance of immediate experience fostered through MT is thus a very hopeful method of empowering women in recovery and reintegration.

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