PAPER 288

REHABILITATION OF JUVENILE OFFENDERS THROUGH THE TRANSCENDENTAL MEDITATION PROGRAM: A CONTROLLED STUDY*

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A group of juvenile offenders on probation who were instructed in the Transcendental Meditation technique showed reductions in anxiety as compared to a non-meditating control group.
—EDITORS

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Eight 13 – 16 year-old boys from lower-income black families who were on probation in an Atlanta juvenile court received Transcendental Meditation (TM) instruction and 3 – 9 months follow up over a 1-year period beginning March 1981. Scores on the Spielberger Trait Anxiety Scale were found to decrease significantly from before to 3 months after TM instruction when compared to a control group of nine other boys from the same probation group with comparable backgrounds ($p < .05$). The apparent benefits of the TM group were also confirmed by individual interviews of seven of the eight boys conducted 4 – 12 months after TM instruction. Five boys reported they were still meditating regularly on their own twice daily, and six reported important positive changes in their lives which they attributed to their TM practice. The amount of decrease on the anxiety test and the amount of self-reported improvement from the interviews were uncorrelated with scores on a preinstruction expectations questionnaire.

INTRODUCTION

Juvenile and youthful offenders committed more than 40% of all violent crimes reported in 1980 (U.S. Department of Justice, 1981). Moreover, seriousness of crimes committed tends to increase with age and the earlier the age of police contact, the more likely a career of crime; thus prevention and rehabilitation are recognized as crucial, yet remain inadequate—the percentage of crimes committed by juveniles has not decreased over the last decade (U.S. Department of Justice, 1980). Rehabilitation by institutionalization, the main approach to rehabilitation, is now considered to be counterproductive. Yet if Atlanta is typical, there are almost no programs for youths placed on probation instead.

One new approach to rehabilitation is suggested by a series of recent experiments with adult offenders and drug abusers (for reviews, see Aron and Aron, 1980; Orme-Johnson, 1980). These studies indicate that the Transcendental Meditation (TM) program helps prisoners control aggression, cope with stress, feel more positively, and above all, not come back to prison. Most of these studies employed random-assignment, double-blind designs, and one (Alexander, 1981) compared TM benefits to alternative educational and personal development programs.

Of course, the TM program has been mainly used by adults and young people in the general population. Results of several hundred studies (for reviews, see Aron and Aron, 1979; Dillbeck, Aron, and

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Dillbeck, 1979; Kanellakos, 1978) suggest that this easily learned, simple mental procedure is associated with dramatic physiological changes during its 10 – 20 minutes twice-daily practice, and a wide range of apparently beneficial effects outside the practice, including improved physiological immunity to stress, better physical and mental health, higher scores on standard tests of creativity and intelligence, and improved social relationships, among others.

Thus, although there has been little direct study of the program's effects on juvenile offenders, its effects on youth from the general population (e.g., Abrams, 1977; Shecter, 1978), and on adult offenders, suggests that it could be appropriate for this population. Observing one of the few previous TM programs with juvenile offenders, this one in an institution, an official at a California Youth Authority facility commented:

> Wards' reactions to the TM program . . . have been highly favorable. One ward, describing the experience as "peace . . . it's like a natural high," reports that he is more able to cope with the tensions and stresses of life in the institution. Another ascribes a dramatic decrease in disciplinary incident reports to his practice of TM . . . [another] says, "I sometimes feel like the counselors are picking on me, and sometimes I blow up . . . but now that I'm meditating, before I do this I start thinking." (Kimble, 1975, pp. 38 – 39)

The one formal study that has been completed (Childs, 1973) examined the effect of TM practice on a small group of 14 – 17 year-old probationers. On standard personality tests, results showed significant decreases in anxiety and increases in self-esteem; in addition, parents' and youths' responses on self-report questionnaires also indicated significant improvements.

The study reported here was the first controlled evaluation of the potential of the TM technique for rehabilitating juvenile offenders.

METHOD

Participants for this project were recruited from 13 – 16 year-old boys who were attending weekly group meetings with their juvenile court probation officer between March 1981, and March 1982. All were black, from economically deprived homes in Southwest Atlanta. Three times during this period a qualified TM instructor (who also had extensive previous experience as a teacher of juvenile offenders) attended these meetings to introduce the TM program to the boys and invite them to participate. Those who were interested were required to obtain parental consent and to agree to attend all instruction and follow-up meetings. Of the 13 youths who were interested, all of the parents consented, but two could not participate due to scheduling conflicts and three did not show up for instruction at the appointed time. The remaining 8 boys received the standard seven-lesson TM instruction course, plus approximately 10 additional weekly or biweekly follow-up sessions. Their mean age at the time of instruction was 15.9 years.

A control group of nine boys consisted of all those in the same probation group who attended the meetings at which both pre- and posttests were administered. Their mean age of 16.2 years was not significantly different from the TM instruction group.

Prior to the interested group's instruction, the Trait form of the Spielberger (1970) State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI-T) was administered at the group probation meetings to everyone attending. (An intelligence test and a locus-of-control measure were also administered, but due to irregular attendance and difficulties the boys had with these tests, too few completed these tests to use them in the statistical evaluation). The STAI-T was administered three times as newly recruited boys were about to learn, and a final time about four months after the last group had learned. One boy had moved with his family and could not be located, so a total of seven of the TM instruction group completed both pre- and post-testing. The tests were administered in the group; examiners (and later, also the scorers) did not know which boys were in the TM instruction condition.

In addition, all eight of the TM participants completed a questionnaire on their expectations about the TM program just prior to instruction; and all but the one whose family had moved were contacted and interviewed in March 1982 (4 – 12 months following their initial instruction). The interviewer (one of the researchers, not associated for the boys with the courts or the TM program) first assured the boy that everything he said would be kept completely confidential; that his personal response would not be communicated to any part of the court system, to the TM instructor, to his parents, or to anyone else; and that the interview was only to determine

whether the program "had been any good—any use at all." The interviewer also added, "And don't be afraid you'll be rude or hurt my feelings if you say you didn't like it. All we want to know is whether it was any help so we'll know whether to teach it to other boys like yourself." Next the boy was asked when was the last time he had meditated, how often he had meditated during the last week, and how often he had been meditating generally. After his regularity of practice was indicated, he was asked how his life seemed to have changed, if at all, since learning the TM program. A scale of choices was offered, from "worse" through "no different" to "very much better." (This is the same scale used on the preinstruction expectations questionnaire.) And then additional comments were encouraged.

RESULTS

STAI-T—As shown in table 1, the juvenile offenders who received TM instruction showed a clear decrease on the STAI-T from before learning to when they were tested again 3 – 12 months later, while the control group showed an increase in anxiety over this period. The comparison of TM versus control group changes (difference between groups on posttest scores with pretest scores as a covariate) was significant at the $p < .05$ level. The amount of decrease in anxiety among the TM group was somewhat (but not significantly) correlated with their initial expectations.

TABLE 1

MEAN TRAIT ANXIETY SCORES

	BEFORE	AFTER
TM Instruction Group (N = 7)	44.61	42.57
Control Group (N = 9)	43.67	48.89

INTERVIEW RESPONSES—Two of the seven boys who were interviewed said they had never missed either of their twice-daily meditations, and two had missed two or three times in all (one of these was meditating *three* times a day because he felt he "needed it to get to sleep"—it was later suggested he see his TM instructor). One had missed an average of two days or four meditations a week (on the weekends), and two had essentially stopped meditating.

On the "change" question, of the two who had stopped, one had meditated regularly for 2½ months and then stopped a month before the interview because he had "finally gotten a job" and didn't have time to meditate, but his life was "much better" for it. "In fact," he said, "I feel like a different person." (He was later encouraged to continue and to see his TM instructor.) The other person who had stopped had meditated once every two days for one week, "saw no change," "didn't enjoy it," and felt "it didn't do any good." (This boy had a severe hearing problem which he was having trouble facing up to, according to his probation officer. The interviewer found it difficult to communicate with him and wondered if he ever really, actually, "received" TM instruction at all, even though it was "given" to him.)

The other five, regularly practicing boys made the following responses to the scale, along with their comments taken from the interviewer's notes of their words:

1. Life was "somewhat better"; no additional comment.
2. "Very much better"; "It is good for learning to relax and control temper. I can be mad, and then meditate, and then rejoy (sic) me again."
3. "Much better"; "I have improved a lot in school. People should try it. TM is good for their life."
4. "Somewhat better"; "Since starting, it gave me a great deal of help. I'm glad I got into it. It's helped a lot. It's a good program. It helps me deal with pressure."
5. "Much better"; "I have a lot more self-control, a lot less anger. It was a good class for the problem I was having—anger. It helps me stay happy most of the time. If I feel mad, I just take a walk—then come back and meditate."

Regarding the role of expectations in producing these effects, there was actually a slight *inverse* correlation (but not statistically significant) between expectation of benefits on the preinstruction questionnaire and responses given at the posttest interview.

DISCUSSION

Juvenile offenders who received TM instruction showed clear reductions in anxiety when contrasted with an uninstructed control group of their peers, and reported improvements in their overall quality

of functioning which they attributed to their TM practice. Moreover, these results do not appear to be due to initial expectations about the program.

Of course, this study involved only a small sample and does not control for possible initial differences between those who do and do not choose to take TM instruction. Nor does it control for differential attention given to the two groups. Future research, involving greater numbers, random-assignment, and a placebo-type control-group treatment—as well as a broader range of measures—will be necessary before any final conclusions can be drawn.

Nevertheless, the clear, statistically significant effects obtained with such a small sample on an important, widely-accepted measure—and the lack of correlation with initial expectations—are provocative in an area where little else seems to do much good at all. Especially when taken together with the substantial body of data on TM effects on the general population and with adult offenders, these results offer the hope of an important new tool in rehabilitating juvenile offenders.

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