

Mindfulness support group for college students: Combatting their fears and stresses

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Introduction and background

College students suffer from a variety of stressors (Lynch, Gander, Kohls, Kudielka, & Walach, 2011). Lynch et al (2011) noted that students are juggling academic issues, financial problems and possibly first-time separation from their parents. Stress is extremely common among university students in the U.S (Lynch et al, 2011). In a random sample of 8155 students from 15 U.S. universities, 6.75% reported suicidal ideation, 0.5% attempted suicide in the past years, and only 15% of students with moderately severe or severe depression or suicidal ideation seek treatment (Regehr, Glancy & Pitts, 2013). In another study, Regehr et al (2013) found that among 729 students, only 16.5% reported no symptoms of depression, 23.2% reported moderately or severe depression and 50.7% tested positively for major depression, panic disorder and generalized anxiety. Downs and Eisenberg (2012) found that the most common barriers to seeking treatment were preference for (1) dealing with stress alone, (73.3%), (2) the belief that stress is normal at a university (52.1%) and (3) not having time for treatment (46.7%). Repeated studies indicate that approximately 50% of the student body experiences significant levels of stress in the form of anxiety and depression and that universities should utilize preventative interventions to reach a larger group of students and not rely solely on individual counseling services (Regehr et al, 2013).

One of the interventions that have been utilized to decrease stress is Mindfulness Meditation Groups at university counseling centers (Murphy,

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2006). Mindfulness is a concept that came from the Eastern and Asian cultural tradition which has become popular in the field of clinical and counseling psychology (Masuda, Wendell, Yi Chou & Feinstein, 2010). Research conducted with European Americans has indicated that mindfulness significantly reduces depressive and anxiety symptoms, pain and emotional distress (Masuda et al, 2010). Lynch et al (2010) observed that mindfulness has been a successful treatment for clients in a non-clinical population and has been linked to well being in students.

Mindfulness consists of helping students focus on the present, facilitating their awareness of their body, and awareness of the self (Newsome, Waldo, Gruszka, 2012). The practice is centered on staying in the present, and not necessarily to achieve a relaxed state (Newsome et al, 2012). The ultimate goal of mindfulness is to be focused on the present moment and accepting it whether it is pleasant or unpleasant (Newsome et al, 2012). The notion is that by changing the way students relate to their experience through the use of nonjudgmental compassion or understanding, students can lessen the impact on their wellbeing and stress levels that such circumstances can have. (Newsome et al, 2012). According to Neff (2003) a compassionate attitude may provide individuals with clarity and perspective on their personal experiences. Regehr et al, (2013) conducted a meta-analysis of 24 studies involving 1431 students and found that mindfulness training significantly contributed to decreased symptoms of anxiety and depression.

The group proposal

This support group will be based on Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction by Kabat-Zinn (1990), which has been rigorously studied. Kabat-Zinn (1990) observed that mindfulness could reframe people's perspective of stresses in their lives and improve the way they respond to stressors. The purpose of the group is to reduce levels of stress and anxiety among college students. The goals and objectives will include teaching students to respond to stressors differently in a non-judgmental, compassionate way. Students will learn to increase their control over their environment based on how they appraise their situations differently (Newsome et al, 2012). For example, instead of a student thinking, "oh my gosh, I have to work on a thesis and it is so awful" the student could reframe their thinking to create

a more positive outlook such as “I am noticing that I feel uncomfortable when I think about my thesis. I accept this feeling of discomfort and acknowledge how I feel. I will examine it and study this feeling further and try to determine how it affects my body.”

In this manner, the student is using mindfulness as a way of developing a heightened sense of self-awareness. In other words, the student is paying attention to the present moment and noticing discomfort, yet the student is not judging the self. By paying attention to ways in which the student's body is affected, the student may develop a sense of compassion for the self together with kindness and understanding, rather than using a self-critical voice to judge the experience. Thus, another goal for this group is to increase awareness of the present moment and to increase levels of self-compassion or self-love.

The student will develop more self-awareness and learn how to focus on the present moment. With this frame of mind, the student is more likely to experience reduced levels of stress and there is less likelihood for the mind to ruminate about the past or worry about the future (Newsome et al, 2013). The structure of the Mindfulness group is based on Lynch et al (2011) and is described in Table 1.

The first three weeks of the Mindfulness group will focus on a general introduction to meditation and mindfulness. In this case, students will learn to conduct a body scan and also the basic elements of a sitting meditation (Lynch et al, 2011). The following four weeks will be more topic-focused based on discussions of stress, learning, health, communication, and relationships (Lynch et al, 2011). The last weeks will be devoted to reflecting on what was learned and preparing the group for termination (Lynch et al, 2011).

This psycho-educational group will be hosted at Santa Ana College for community college students, a homogenous group, and will be held for eight consecutive weeks for one and a half to two hours each week. This will be a closed group so that members can build up their knowledge from previous sessions. There will be a maximum of 10 group members and one group facilitator. Referrals for potential members will be obtained from instructors or counselors at Santa Ana College. There will also be flyers with information about this group posted all over campus. Before the group commences, the students will be screened for their appropriateness for the group. The criteria to be eligible are that the participants have to be at least 18 years old

Table 1: The structure of the Mindfulness Group

Week No.	Topic
1	Introduction to Mindfulness, key aspects of mindfulness and body scan meditation
2	Automatic pilot-sitting meditation, being in the present moment, how this can impact life generally and academic performance, and sitting meditation
3	Mindfulness in everyday life
4	Health: yoga, health meditation, discussion of health in student life and how mindfulness can help.
5	Learning: Sitting meditation, learning, attention, learning meditation and how mindfulness can help.
6	Communication: Sitting, meditation/body scan, aikido exercises, communication meditation and how mindfulness can help
7	Relationships: Sitting meditation, managing relationships and loving kindness meditation
8	Review: Course review, sitting meditation and loving kindness meditation

and have scored high on the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983) and the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck, Epstein, Brown & Steer, 1988).

In order for the group to run successfully, it is important to delineate the structure and format of the group. The facilitator will spend 5-10 minutes asking group members to check-in and report how their week is going. Then, the facilitator will spend 5 minutes discussing the agenda for the group and a meditation exercise will follow for 30 minutes. After the meditation exercise, for another 30 minutes, participants will be asked to participate in an activity that will identify their present feelings (through drawing, shaping clay). For 20 minutes, the facilitator will provide information about the topic of the week (Table 1) For the remainder of the time, 20-30 minutes, participants will be encouraged to share extracts from their weekly journals. Throughout the week they will be encouraged to write about their observations during their own meditation practices.

Group evaluation

The success of the group will be evaluated using pre and post-test measures of the Perceived Stress Scale and Beck Depression Inventory. The Perceived Stress Scale is a 10-item self-report schedule that consists of questions such as “In the last month, how often have you felt nervous or stressed?” (Cohen et al, 1983). The Beck Depression Inventory is a 21-item multiple-choice self-report inventory, which identifies whether clients suffer from mild, moderate or severe levels of depression. Significant decreases in depression and anxiety scores comparing pre- and post-test measures (before commencing the first group and after the last session of the group) would indicate that the intervention was effective.

In addition, pre-and post-test measures of the Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (Brown & Ryan, 2003) and the Self Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003) will be utilized to determine if the group was successful in increasing scores of self-awareness and self compassion. The Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale consists of 15 items and examples of questions include “I tend to walk quickly to get where I’m going without paying attention to what I experience.” The Scale particularly measures awareness and attention, which are two important aspects of mindfulness. The Self-Compassion Scale is a 26-item report using a 5-point Likert scale. Clients are asked to rate the degree to which they experience emotional pain, or are judgmental about their flaws and inadequacies.

Examples of questions are “I try to be loving to myself when I’m feeling emotional pain.” Higher scores on the post-test compared to the pre-test measures would indicate that the group intervention succeeded in increasing attention/awareness and self-compassion in

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