AN EXAMINATION OF THE IMPACT OF A COLLEGE LEVEL MEDITATION COURSE ON COLLEGE STUDENT WELL-BEING

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Statement of the Problem: The competing pressures of college life can increase stress and anxiety in college students and have negative outcomes on academic performance and overall well-being. The purpose of this study was to use qualitative measures to examine how participation in a college level experiential meditation course impacted students’ outlook on life and relationship with others. Method: Participants were (N=28) enrolled in a 15 week meditation course which blended techniques from the Buddhist and mindfulness traditions. Data was compiled from written contemplations students completed about their meditation experience. Results: Qualitative analysis revealed that students became more mindful, compassionate, and experienced a heightened sense of psychological well-being from practicing meditation. Results demonstrated the practice of meditation can facilitate exploration of emotional states that support the process of self-actualization and improve overall college student well-being. Conclusions: Further study of the use of meditation in higher education with students will be beneficial in establishing the credibility of this practice in higher education institutions.

Keywords: Mindfulness, Meditation, College Student Well-being, Compassion, Psychological well-being, positive relationships

A well-established idea in meditation is that mindfulness is related to the integration of meditation into daily living experiences to bring about psychological well-being (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Research has shown that meditation reduces anxiety and negative affect, augments the experience of hope, and ultimately enhances a person’s state of well-being (Coppola & Spector, 2009; Sears & Krauss, 2009). In addition, while attention and awareness are thought to be relatively constant features of normal functioning, research has suggested mindfulness can be considered an enhanced attention to and awareness of current experience or present reality (Brown & Ryan, 2003).

Through the practice of meditation, mindfulness and its many benefits such as increased ability to concentrate, recall and memory, and flexibility in response to life circumstances, are enhanced. Mindfulness practices are also believed to enhance self-insight, self-regulation, compassion, wisdom and other outcomes (Shapiro & Walsh, 2003). Mindfulness, or Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy, is associated with increased experience of momentary positive emotions as well as greater appreciation of, and enhanced responsiveness
to, pleasant daily-life activities (Geschwind, Peeters, Drukker, van Os, & Wicchers, 2011).

Meditation incorporates mindful attention as part of its practice and requires that practitioners be actively engaged in the process. Moreover, it creates an opportunity to find resolution to challenges, leaving room in the mind for the pleasures of each moment. The remedy is not to suppress negative experiences. Rather, it is to foster positive, and in particular, to take these experiences in so they become part of you (Hanson & Mendi­us, 2009; Stella, 2011). Gaining insights and creating coping skills that develop during meditation can be especially helpful to college students and, adoption of these insights and skills can lead to a sense of mastery and acceptance of life circumstances (Shapiro, Brown, & Astin, 2011).

In the Buddhist tradition, it is thought that anxiety is often produced by a future oriented thought process (Tolle, 1999). Thus through meditation, if the practitioner learns how to become more focused on the present, anxiety should decrease because the focus of the mind has shifted away from the unknown future, which is the object of anxiety. Another major cause of anxiety is becoming attached to a certain object or outcome (i.e., a grade in a class) where wanting creates tension that is actually painful (Kornfield, 1993). If the item or outcome desired is withheld or there is a fear of losing it, anxiety ensues. Even when desired outcomes are fulfilled, there continues to be a cycle of expectations and desired outcomes, resulting in the development of anxiety (i.e., future grades in a course, graduation, employment, etc...). The use of meditation can begin to shift ones awareness away from these expectations and towards the experience of the present. It also reduces the stress-response system and facilitates the experience of tranquility. Over time, being less reactive deepens into profound inner stillness which is increasingly woven into a person's daily life.

In addition, based on the result of research done on mindfulness training, an increase in attention to the moment brings a decrease in negative affect and an increase in the sense of well-being which may contribute to a more positive outlook on life (Broderick & Metz, 2009; Kabat-Zinn, 1994).

These perspectives on meditation expose the question of whether there might be a perceived positive outcome of practicing meditation for college students who are balancing work, school, family, new social experiences and other life responsibilities. It is clear that the stresses of managing all of these aspects of college life can have an adverse effect on student's psychological well-being as well as both academic and cognitive performance (Shapiro et al., 2011). While there has been some research to suggest that daily meditation is effective in maintaining lower levels of anxiety among university students (Rahul & Joseph, 2010), more studies are needed. Little work has been done relative to the length and format of meditation practice, or the effectiveness of integrated college meditation courses. Opportunities to participate in meditation are growing in college campuses through co-curricular clubs and recreation programs, however research is scant on the impact of meditation as an integrated part of the curriculum. Furthermore, much of the work in this area has used quantitative methodology and fixed item response instruments. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to use qualitative methodology to examine how practicing meditation in a 15 week long college course impacted students well-being.

Method

Participants

Participants for this study were 28 undergraduate students in a large Midwestern university who were enrolled in an elective 3 credit Meditation for Health and Wellness
An Examination of the Impact of Meditation on College Students /

course which emphasized practicing meditation. In the first week of class, the instructor for the course, who was also the PI, explained the IRB approved study to the students and asked if they would like to volunteer. It was made clear that all data was confidential, that students could choose not to participate or withdraw at any time, and that participation was in no way connected to their grade in the course. Written consent was obtained from 7 male and 21 female participants who had no prior knowledge of the study. Twenty-five participants were white, 3 were nonwhite, 22 students were seniors, and 6 students were juniors. Participants were not surveyed to ascertain their prior knowledge of or experience with meditation.

Meditation Course

The course used for this study was modeled after the mindfulness discipline of meditation which aims to open and expand one's awareness of thoughts and feelings as they pass through the mind, without focusing on a single purpose. It involves three core elements: intention, attention, and attitude (Goleman, 1972; Shapiro, Carlson, Astin & Freedman, 2006). The overall purpose of this course was to expose students to meditation as a way to facilitate a deeper understanding and ultimately acceptance of the inner workings of their minds, and of the experiences they have. Overall learning objectives for students at the completion of the course were that they would be able to practice basic meditation skills, apply meditation to their everyday life (i.e. mindfulness), recognize and articulate feelings of increased self-awareness, explain the role of meditation in a healthy lifestyle, and understand how meditation affects the body and brain.

Because this meditation class was structured to meet university criteria, attendance, class participation, weekly written contemplations and reading Wherever You Go, There You Are (Kabat-Zinn, 1994) were required. Each week different concepts related to mindfulness meditation were explored including meditation on forgiveness, compassion, and present moment awareness. Other concepts included were contemplation of suffering and how to cease the suffering of the mind. This was primarily an experiential class with limited lecture involved, thus material was presented quietly to students while in meditation for the purpose of contemplation. There were long periods of silence to cultivate contemplation of the readings. The purpose of this structure was to expose students to a variety of techniques that would facilitate a deeper understanding and ultimately acceptance of the inner workings of their minds, and of the experiences they have. This course met twice a week for 75 minutes for 15 weeks. Each bi-weekly class was broken into 2 or 3 meditations per class. The first meditation was the longest, lasting 20-30 minutes. The remaining two were 10-20 minutes each. Moreover, occasional guided meditations and breathing exercises were included. In addition to the meditations, students participated in interactive work with partners or small groups. This interaction was used to facilitate community and provide opportunities for questions and discussion. Students were also encouraged, but not required, to practice meditation outside of class.

Procedures

At the end of the 15 week course, students were asked to turn in a written contemplation discussing the question, “How has meditation impacted your outlook on life and your relationships with others?” To reduce participant bias towards responding in a way that would be viewed as favorable by the PI, it was explained that this assignment was not graded on content; rather credit would be received for meeting length criteria and time deadlines. The qualitative data for
this study was compiled from these written contemplations. The primary investigator and experienced co-researcher first independently familiarized themselves with the raw data by reading transcripts several times, then coded data line by line. Inductive analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was then employed by the two researchers to organize coded data into meaningful themes. This process involved comparing and contrasting each quote with all other quotes and emergent themes to unite quotes with similar meaning and to separate quotes with different meanings. The PI and co-investigator reviewed and discussed divergent themes until consensus was reached. Finally, to reduce analyst bias, researchers engaged in deductive analysis (Patton, 2002) using a certified mediation instructor with 20 years of experience teaching and practicing meditation to affirm appropriateness of inductive analyses and organization of themes.

Furthermore, similarities and differences in analyses were discussed, including data that did not fit into categories, until consensus among investigators on the emerging 12 themes was reached. Lower order themes were then further organized into 3 over-arching themes.

Results

The data gathered from student’s demonstrated meditation practice impacted their outlook on life and relationships with others in 3 major areas; mindfulness, psychological well-being, and compassion. Discussed below are the higher order themes and subcategories most frequently expressed by students and identified by researchers.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a way of paying attention that originated in Eastern meditation practices (Baer, 2003). People who are mindful are deliberately paying attention, being fully aware of what is happening both inside themselves and outside themselves in a nonjudgmental way, manifesting acceptance, curiosity, and openness (Holzel, Lazar, Gard, Schuman-Olivier, Vago, & Ott, 2011). It has been defined as bringing one’s complete attention to the present experience on a moment-to-moment basis (Marlatt & Kristeller, 1999) and as paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). All participants (n=28) reported an increase in mindfulness, primarily in being in the present moment and being more reflective.

Defined by Buddhism and many of its associated paradigms, experiencing the present moment is being fully aware of what is happening now and not dwelling on the past or worrying about the future. It is a constant focus of the current time and space. Eighty nine percent of students (n=25) reported being more focused on the present moment. One student spoke of their attempts to be more present in the following way:

More and more I find myself trying to find holes in my schedule for just a few seconds of quiet reflection and just focusing on my breath and coming into the present... it has made me more present in my day to day life

In addition, 86% of students (n=24) reported an increase in reflective thinking as a result of meditation class. Reflection is an active and purposeful process of exploration and discovery often leading to unexpected outcomes. It is the bridge between experience and learning, involving both cognition and feeling (Gray, 2007). One participant spoke of having more perspective in the following way:

Meditation has allowed me to have more perspective in my life, I find that meditating helps me realize that most of my problems are trivial and there are more important things in the world. It
helps me to realize that everything will be okay and I just need to be present in each moment and make the best of it because that is all any of us have anyway.

**Psychological Well-being**

Psychological well-being can be defined as a reduction in stress, depression and anxiety. It is the ability to better regulate emotional reactions and to cultivate positive psychological states, which lead to the development of emotional balance (Shapiro et al., 2011). Psychological well-being is characterized by being able to witness thought and emotion so as not to react impulsively or destructively but to reflect with a sense of curiosity, creativity and flexibility. Overall, 96% of participants (n=27) reported an increase in psychological well-being primarily in the areas of peace and gratitude.

Often defined as the absence of conflict in an individual, peace also refers to happiness; those who have peace of mind in their lives will have both mental and physical happiness (Nimanong, 2008). Eighty six percent of students (n=24) reported either an increase in feeling calm and peaceful or a decrease in stress levels. One student expressed the following:

...I now feel calm and at peace with my surroundings, though very few things have been resolved for my future... meditation has helped give me the calm demeanor that I carry throughout the day...

Gratitude is defined as the quality or feeling of being grateful or thankful. It is a feeling, emotion or attitude in acknowledgement of a benefit that one has received or will receive (Sansone & Sansone, 2010). A total of 19 students (86%) reported that as a result of meditation they experienced feelings of gratitude in their daily lives. One student wrote:

Little things have changed—and it is those little things that I am thankful for. Little things like making fewer to-do lists, enjoying time spent with friends rather than feeling guilty that I’m not doing homework, being thankful for a beautiful sunrise rather than angry that I’m up early enough to see it on my way to work.... These little things-appreciating the moment I am in...

**Compassion**

Defined as a virtue of empathy for the suffering of others; the wish that other beings not suffer, the third theme that emerged, compassion is regarded as a fundamental part of human love and a cornerstone of greater social connection. Meditation is typically practiced with an intention to cultivate self-compassion as well as compassion toward other beings (Holzel et al., 2011). Overall, 79% of students (n=22) reported an increase in compassion, namely empathy. One student expressed how they had become more compassionate:

I feel like meditation has helped me realize that everyone is connected and everyone has their own suffering. Why would I be uncaring to others when I have no idea what they are going through and instead I could just be friendly and maybe bring a little sunshine into their life.

**Discussion**

Consistent with research on meditation (Cahn, & Polich, 2006; Joseffson, Larsman, Broberg, & Lundh, 2011) this study suggests that students’ outlook on life and their relationships with others were positively impacted by the practice of meditation for a semester. With increases in mindfulness, psychological well-being, and compassion, students reported being less focused on future stressful events and more aware of current
experiences that generated joy, peace, gratitude and self-acceptance.

There is evidence to suggest that trait changes from long-term meditation can include a deepened sense of calmness, increased sense of comfort, heightened awareness of the sensory field, and a shift in the relationship to thoughts, feelings, and experience of self (Cahn & Polich, 2006). Mindfulness practice has also been shown to lead to increases in positive reappraisal, an adaptive process through which stressful events are reconstructed as beneficial, meaningful or benign, thus create an improvement in stress level (Garland, Gaylord, & Fredrickson, 2011; Holzel et al., 2011). For college students, finding meaning and value in difficult circumstances can reinforce continued reflection on events and the ability to positively re-structure their response to them, thus resulting in a more positive outlook on daily life situations.

Compassion is a natural response to suffering, whether it be your own or someone else’s. Students cited they felt more interconnected, forgiving, and empathetic to the lives of other’s around them. This outcome suggests that compassion can be brought forth and enhanced deliberately through the use of meditation. Evidence has suggested self-compassion is important to whole person development because it has been related to other positive psychological features, including wisdom, personal initiative, curiosity and exploration, happiness, optimism, and positive affect (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick 2007). It is difficult to cultivate compassion for others without having the experience of self-compassion first. Through meditation, students became more mindful in their own lives, which in turn fostered their ability to grow mindful of others.

Limitations and Strengths

While participant responses yielded valuable information, one limitation of the study is that it relied on a small, relatively homogenous sample. While the data was reflective of the general population of the university in that respondents were primarily white, female, traditional aged college students, application of the findings to other sub-groups might be limited. Further research is needed to explore the impact of meditation on students differing in age, gender, ethnicity, and social class.

A second limitation of the research could be the self-report format based on a written assignment. Although students were informed at the beginning of the course, and again at the time the final contemplation was assigned that the content of their writing would not impact their grade in the course, one cannot discount the possibility that student’s responses still may have been influenced to some degree by the fact that it was part of their coursework. In addition, because the course was an elective, individuals who enrolled, regardless of prior meditation experience, could have had increased interest in the outcomes being explored by investigators. Similarly, students may have had expectancies about positive effects, and may have been aware that the instructor/researcher expected positive effects.

On the contrary, it is possible this method of data collection strengthened results because participants were not influenced by an interviewer who may have asked leading questions or shown biases about student responses. This is especially true since the PI was the instructor for the course. A second strength of using an open-ended response item to collect data versus pre-test/post-test survey was that the qualitative assessment allowed students complete freedom to express a variety of experiences beyond those that would be assessed in fixed item mindfulness questionnaires. The results in this study indicate a need for further research on
the benefits of integrated meditation courses on college students well-being and qualitative and mixed-methods exploration of this topic would be a good direction for future investigations.

A final strength of this study was the amount of meditation students participated in. Most of the class time was spent in meditation, two to three meditations per class period, and two classes per week for 15 weeks. Because students were not screened for prior meditation experience, this allowed ample time for all students to become accustomed to the practice and to begin observing the benefits of meditation. The breadth and depth of experiential learning participants were exposed to lend credibility to their responses.

Conclusion

Higher education can be a stressful experience for students because of the demands of learning new and sometimes complex material under time pressures caused by competing demands of full course loads, and part-time jobs. These stressors can adversely affect the psychological well-being of students and negatively influence their productivity in school, their work, and personal lives (Shapiro et al., 2011). Therefore, it is important for universities to assist students in their journey into adulthood. Education goes far beyond the realm of developing cognitive skills. It includes emotional well-being and tools to support the experience of overall well-being. A national study of freshman college students suggested that about two-thirds of the students consider it “essential” or “very important” that their undergraduate experience enhances their self-understanding, prepares them for responsible citizenship, develops their personal values, provides for their emotional development, and encourages their personal expression of spirituality (Astin, Astin, Lindholm, Bryant Calderone & Szelenyi, 2006; Lee, 2012). Through the exploration of the mind and emotions, meditation can facilitate exploration of these emotional states that support the process of self-actualization. Further study of the use of meditation in higher education with students will be beneficial in establishing the credibility of this practice in higher education institutions.

References


