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## Integrating Mindfulness into the Training of Helping Professionals

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## Integrating Mindfulness into the Training of Helping Professionals

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### Abstract

Mindfulness refers to the purposeful and nonjudgmental focus on internal and external experiences in the present moment. Extensive research in the fields of psychology, medicine, and counseling has explored the use and benefits of mindfulness-based practice in general. Such research has determined that mindfulness enhances skill development and counselor preparation within the human service professions. Therapeutic and educational settings have thus increasingly embraced mindfulness practices. This exploratory paper posits that the study and practice of mindfulness can be beneficial for both faculty and graduate students in the fields of Mental Health, School Counseling, and School Psychology. The aims of this paper are three-fold: 1. Review the literature on mindfulness-based practices across these disciplines; 2. Assess the benefits of mindfulness and how it aligns with the professional missions; and 3. Outline the contours of a curriculum designed and implemented by the co-authors to educate and train future counselors and school psychologists in mindfulness practices.

*Keywords:* mindfulness, counselor education, professional identity development

## Integrating Mindfulness into the Training of Helping Professionals

Mindfulness is the practice of paying attention, without judgment and with curiosity, to one's experience as it unfolds in the present moment (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

“Experience” is defined broadly as “each breath, each movement, every thought and feeling, everything which has any relation to ourselves” (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1976, pp. 7-8). With roots in Buddhist philosophy, mindfulness refers broadly to the practice of intentionally enhancing one's awareness and acceptance of each moment with “the aim of helping people live each moment of their lives—even the painful ones—as fully as possible” (Kabat-Zinn, 1993, p. 260).

Mindfulness therefore entails exploring one's reality as it is, rather than seeking to change or manipulate it into something it “could” or “should” be (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). It requires, and enhances, executive skills such as attention regulation, cognitive flexibility, and metacognition (Allen et al., 2006). While formal mindfulness practice often includes dedicated, disciplined time for meditation, informal practice entails bringing mindfulness into ordinary, daily activities, such as walking down the street, doing the dishes, or playing cards with a child (Germer, 2005). Hence, mindfulness can be conceptualized as a *method* of redirecting attention; as a *perspective* that involves direct experience and objective awareness rather than abstraction; and as a *cognitive process* of active attention, flexibility, and metacognition (Bishop et al., 2004).

Mindfulness has been increasingly utilized within therapeutic and educational settings and a growing body of research demonstrates its benefits in the fields of education, psychology, medicine, and counseling. This exploratory paper posits that the study and practice of mindfulness can be beneficial for both faculty and graduate students in the fields of Mental Health Counseling, School Psychology, and School Counseling. The aims of this paper are to: 1. Review the literature on mindfulness-based practices across these disciplines; 2. Assess the

benefits of mindfulness and how it aligns with the professional missions; and 3. Outline the contours of a curriculum designed and implemented by the co-authors to educate and train future counselors and school psychologists in mindfulness practices.

### **Occupational Stress, Compassion Fatigue, and Burnout**

Research indicates that occupational stress is common among mental health practitioners (Figley, 2002; Jenaro, Flores, & Arias, 2007) and school professionals (Shernoff, Mehta, Atkins, Torf, & Spencer, 2011). The negative consequences occupational stress poses to helping professionals include increased depression, emotional exhaustion, and anxiety (Tyssen, Vaglum, Gronvold, & Ekeberg, 2001), decreased job satisfaction (Blegen, 1993), reduced self-esteem (Butler & Constantine, 2005), disrupted personal relationships (Myers, 1994), and loneliness (Lushington & Luscri, 2001). Additionally, stress can compromise important executive functioning skills (e.g., attention, concentration, judgment, decision-making) and interpersonal skills that are foundational to mental health and educational practice (Zeiidan, Johnson, Diamond, David, & Goolkasian, 2010).

Occupational stress can in turn lead to compassion fatigue and burnout. Burnout results from dissatisfaction with and conflicts within work settings, while compassion fatigue results when one's attempts to help another are unsuccessful, leaving the helper with feelings of guilt and distress (Najjar et al., 2009). Burnout and compassion fatigue can, in turn, contribute to additional psychological distress, depression, anxiety, and other such difficulties (Smith & Moss, 2009). When helping professionals are personally compromised in these ways, —their students, clients, and colleagues can also be negatively impacted (Young & Lambie, 2007).

Early career professionals may be particularly vulnerable to occupational stress, which can make them susceptible to burnout early in their careers (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 2003). The

developmental stage of helping professional trainees also places them at risk for increased compassion fatigue, as many enter the field with unrealistic expectations that if they work hard and care, clients and students will respond and improve. However, clients and students often have complex problems that are not easily rectified, and measures of “progress” can be difficult to define, monitor, and ultimately assess; this can diminish trainees’ sense of self-efficacy and confidence (Jenaro, et al., 2007). Helping profession trainees likewise have additional demands vis-à-vis other graduate students as they face the challenges of self-development necessary for clinical and educational work, in addition to balancing coursework, fieldwork, employment, and personal obligations (Christopher, Christopher, Dunnagan & Schure, 2006).

### **Mindfulness as an Approach to Wellness and Antidote to Compassion Fatigue**

Self-care and achieving wellness are important antidotes to combating the deleterious effects of job-related stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout among helping profession trainees. Training programs can play an important role in teaching and reinforcing self-care skills and wellness orientations. Despite espousing self-care as important in the abstract, educational programs in the human service professions often do little to concretely promote it (Christopher et al., 2006). Rather, self-care is presented as an individual responsibility, with curricula and clinical training taking precedence. Increasingly, however, programs are changing, gradually incorporating mindfulness as both an intervention and an orientation to enhance self-care and decrease compassion fatigue (Gockel, Burton, James, & Bryer, 2013). This also extends to mindfulness as an approach to faculty wellness. Craig (2011) evaluated the impact of the Contemplative Practice Fellowship program by assessing the experiences of 158 faculty fellows over the course of 12 years. 82% of the participating faculty fellows reported a greater sense of personal and professional integration following the incorporation of contemplative practices in

their academic work. Although few studies have looked at the impact of mindfulness on faculty wellness, it is reasonable to infer that mindfulness is a useful complement to the professional practice of faculty members.

Educational programs increasingly avail themselves of mindfulness because of the clear evidence of its efficacy. Mindfulness training has been found to decrease emotional exhaustion and anxiety, and increase job satisfaction, self-compassion, self-esteem, and happiness (Hollis-Walker & Colosimo, 2011; Hülshager, Alberts, Feinholdt, & Lang, 2013; Rasmussen & Pidgeon, 2010; Thompson, Amatea, & Thompson, 2014). Mindfulness practice enhances executive skills (e.g., attention regulation, self-monitoring, flexibility), which, in turn, improve emotional regulation skills (Teper, Segal, & Inzlicht, 2013). For students, mindfulness enhances the general ability to identify, prevent, and tolerate stress (Felton, Coates, & Christopher, 2015). Mindfulness training also has led to improved clinical skills, including self-awareness and flexibility, among counselors in training (Gockel et al., 2013). As faculty members in programs that educate and train mental health counselors and school psychologists, we next review approaches to and evidence supporting the integration of mindfulness within these specific disciplines.

### **Mindfulness in School Psychology**

School psychology as a field has not yet integrated mindfulness into common practice. As the benefits of mindfulness-based interventions, curricula, and treatments for children and adolescents grow, its popular use in the school setting will likely follow. Further, given the range of possible applications in terms of work with students, parents, and teachers, mindfulness practices have the potential to enhance current service delivery (Davis, 2011). For example, the range and intensities of mindfulness practice are compatible and consistent with the Response to

Intervention (RTI), Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS) and Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS) protocols currently used in many school systems. Indeed, at the universal level, mindfulness techniques can help students enhance their everyday lives and combat stress and emotional challenge. Felver, Doerner, Jones, Kaye, and Merrell (2013), who highlight the probable role of the school psychologist in a mindfulness-based tiered treatment model, argue that mindfulness practice has the potential to improve overall psychological service delivery from the universal to individualized treatment.

Following mindfulness interventions, furthermore, children and adolescents exhibit increased focus and concentration, decreased stress and anxiety, improved impulse control, and enhanced empathy (Burke 2010; Harnett & Dawes, 2012). In fact, several programs have been developed for use in schools (see Meiklejohn, Phillips, Freedman, Griffin, Biegel, Roach et al., 2012 for a review), and several research-based school programs currently exist (e.g., the Inner Resilience Program and Mindful Schools). These programs are largely preventative in orientation, designed to undermine stress and enhance general wellbeing among school-aged youth. These programs typically take one of two approaches: 1) mindfulness-trained practitioners go in to schools to provide the teaching or 2) teachers and service providers are trained in the schools' mindfulness practice and related curriculum.

Zenner, Herrnleben-Kurz, and Walach (2014) conducted a review and meta-analysis of 24 studies on school-based mindfulness programs. Results of the meta-analysis were promising, particularly related to improving cognitive performance and resiliency to stress. However, the authors noted several shortcomings, such as limitations in certain study designs and the difficulty in measuring effects within school settings. Such research in the field is suggestive and preliminary; additional research on mindfulness interventions within schools is needed to



corroborate these positive findings. Conducting such research presents another possible area of involvement for school psychologists.

Another important role school psychologists play is in the professional development and ongoing support of teachers. A growing body of research supports the benefits of mindfulness to teachers. Teachers' social-emotional competence and wellbeing is vital for an effective classroom. As described above, teachers, like other helping professionals, exhibit high levels of stress and unfortunately low levels of job satisfaction (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005), which can contribute to high recidivism (Ingersoll, 2001). Several programs integrating mindfulness for teachers include modifying established programs such as MBSR (Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, Bonus, & Davidson, 2013) as well as specifically designed social-emotional learning and mindfulness programs, targeted to pedagogical settings. Other studies have considered self- or teacher-guided work in meditation (Napoli, 2004). School psychologists can begin integrating mindfulness into their own self-care at the pre-service level and later engage in training within their university or through the many outside opportunities available for educators (e.g., Garrison Institute, Mindful Schools Project).

### **Mindfulness in School Counseling**

As providers of support for diverse groups within their campuses, school counselors are uniquely positioned to effect positive change throughout the school environment. Currently, mindfulness practices are not well utilized in the school counseling environment or studied within the school counseling literature; however, other school-based disciplines (e.g., school psychology, higher education) have underscored the importance of mindfulness within school settings. Furthermore, mindfulness dovetails with the American School Counselors Association

(ASCA) National Standards, which emphasize a holistic approach to student support, and the integration of personal, social, academic, and career development.

Research supports the integration and implementation of mindfulness practices within the field of school counseling. At an individual, group, or classroom-based level, mindfulness lends students increased personal self-awareness, which in turn leads to enhanced academic performance, social-skill functioning and coping- skill development (Semple, Reid, & Miller, 2005; Tadlock-Marlo, 2011; Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008). Research has also demonstrated that breathing techniques and concentration exercises increase mental focus among students (Hamiel, 2005; Tadlock-Marlo, 2011). School counselors can also improve the school community by teaching students to accept thoughts, feelings, and physical reactions in a nonjudgmental way, which may help them cultivate self-esteem, mutual respect, compassion, empathy, and other important values (Tadlock-Marlo, 2011). Additionally, studies have demonstrated that mindfulness practices within the classroom can help teachers improve academic ability, decrease test anxiety, and increase social skills among their students (Lee et al., 2008).

School counselors are pivotal in helping students cope with stress, an ideal context for the promotion of mindfulness-based practices (Tarabochia, 2013). Tarabochia (2014) proposed a student well-being model, which begins with graduate students who are then encouraged to implement it within school settings. Tarabochia (2014) outlines each of the ASCA standards and their relationship to stress, providing school counseling graduate students with stress education and stress reduction techniques that they can utilize themselves and transmit to their middle and high school students. In this model, counselors focus on 5 domains of wellbeing: cognitive, physical, academic, social, and emotional. Within each domain, Tarabochia proposed stress-

education and stress-reduction techniques that can be utilized in the classroom, small groups, or during individual counseling sessions. This student wellbeing model encourages school counselors to utilize and teach students to use a variety of meditation techniques, including relaxation and meditation. This is just one type of mindfulness stress reduction model available to school counselors.

### **Mindfulness in Mental Health Counseling**

The mental health field is perhaps furthest along in integrating mindfulness as standard, mainstream practice. There is strong support for integrating mindfulness as a clinical intervention, including evidence-based treatments such as Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT; Linehan, 1993), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes, Strosahl & Wilson, 2003), and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT; Segal, Teasdale, & Williams, 2002). Studies have also explored the utility of mindfulness-based interventions in trauma counseling (Goodman & Calderon, 2011) and supported the effectiveness of DBT and ACT in treating trauma (Harned & Linehan, 2008; Twohig, 2009). Presently, there exists a growing body of research supporting the integration of mindfulness in both the practice and training of mental health professionals and graduate students.

With respect to training and educating graduate students, mindfulness has shown to facilitate the cultivation of counseling skills such as empathic abilities and attentional processes (Buser, Buser, Peterson, & Seraydarian, 2012), and increase counselor self-efficacy (Greason & Cashwell, 2009) and self-compassion (Moore, 2008; Shapiro, Brown, & Biegel, 2007). Studies have also supported mindfulness as a pathway to increase focus on therapeutic processes (McGollum & Gehart, 2010; Schure, Christopher, & Christopher, 2008), self-attunement (Bruce, Manber, Shapiro, & Constantino, 2010), and self-awareness (Gockel, Burton, James & Bryer,

2013; Ruths, de Zoysa, Frearson, Hutton, Williams, & Walsh, 2013). Mindfulness-based practices help students develop the Rogerian ideals of acceptance, genuineness, and empathy (Christopher & Maris, 2010). As stated earlier, mindfulness also leads to improved counselor mental health (Shapiro, Brown, & Biegel, 2007) and self-care (Christopher et al., 2006; Christopher & Maris, 2010; Felton, Coates, & Christopher, 2013). In a recent experimental study, mindfulness training was found to significantly improve measures of trait anger and attentional control among mental health trainees (Rodriguez et al., 2014).

Mindfulness-based research suggests benefits for mental health professionals as well. Christopher and colleagues' (2011) qualitative study of 16 former students even indicated that the benefits of mindfulness endured up to six years after the initial training. Ruths' et al., (2013) study of mental health professionals found that those who adhered to and practiced the MBCT meditation experienced an increase in mindful awareness and attention, general psychological wellbeing, and a decrease in general psychopathology, trait anxiety, and worry. Aggs and Bambling (2010) utilized an eight-week mindful therapy (MT) training with 47 mental health professionals and similarly found mindfulness enhancement in clinical skills such as attention regulation and an accepting orientation towards client-related processes.

As Davis and Hayes (2011) summarize, while counselors and trainees who practice mindfulness report many benefits, both personally and professionally, there is less conclusive evidence for whether these self-perceived benefits include a positive impact on clinical outcomes. To date, only a few studies suggest that mindfulness practice positively impacts clinical outcomes, such as improvement in symptoms (Grepmaier, Mitterlehner, Loew, & Nickel, 2007) and client perception of empathy, lower experiential avoidance and greater session depth (Fulton, 2016), while other studies do not support this finding (Bruce et al., 2010; Stanley et al.,

2006; Vinca & Hayes, 2007). Furthermore, while the preliminary studies are promising, a majority of the studies are qualitative and rely on self-report data.

In summary, students pursuing helping professions in counseling and school psychology are choosing fields as challenging as they are rewarding. They will experience high degrees of occupational stress, which for some will lead to compassion fatigue, burnout, and psychological distress. Mindfulness practice may be an antidote to these deleterious consequences, and evidence supports its utility and efficacy, particularly within these disciplinary settings. In this context, the co-authors developed a method of integrating mindfulness education and practice into each program, and using this as a springboard for also increasing interdisciplinary collaboration, dialogue, and self-care.

### **Approach**

As an interdisciplinary department, which includes mental health counseling, school psychology, and school counseling, the co-authors are implementing mindfulness practice within their higher education programs specifically and department generally. Faculty members and students were encouraged to integrate and practice mindfulness both in and out of the classroom, considering how the contexts, populations, and roles of their specific disciplines would meaningfully benefit from this practice. What follows is the curriculum designed to provide: 1) dedicated class time to teach mindfulness to graduate students, 2) interdisciplinary meetings, and 3) department-wide commitment to faculty wellness.

Dedicated classes for mindfulness education and practice include clinical practice or practicum-based courses. The co-authors selected a set of common readings, including *Wherever You Go There You Are* by John Kabat-Zinn (2005) to be read across programs. Stahl and Goldstein's (2010) *A Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Workbook* and Kabat-Zinn's

(2012) *Mindfulness for Beginners* helped further develop and focus the six-week sessions. Six topics were featured on a bi-weekly basis throughout the semester. The alternate weeks were dedicated to practicing mindfulness, journaling, and discussion about experiences on a digital learning management system (Blackboard). Each in-class session began with mindfulness education and approximately 20 minutes of instructor-led mindfulness practice, self-reflection, and discussion. For a detailed description of the six sessions, please see Appendix. Additionally, students enrolled in these courses completed The Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS; Brown & Ryan, 2003) prior to and following the twelve-week mark. The MAAS is a 15-item scale designed to assess a defining characteristic of mindfulness - open or receptive awareness of and attention to what is occurring in the present. The scale shows strong psychometric properties and has been validated with college, community, and cancer patient samples (MAAS; Brown & Ryan, 2003). The scale was used to instruct the faculty and modify the program.

In order to take advantage of the unique interdisciplinary nature of the approach, a three-hour interdisciplinary seminar took place at the end of the semester with students and faculty from each program within the department. The agenda for this meeting included mindfulness practice and dialogue among students and faculty. Small groups engaged students within or across disciplines in guided discussion. Collectively they considered shared experiences, mindfulness as a practice of self-care, ways to utilize mindfulness as graduate students and young professionals, and opportunities for questions and self-exploration. For example, students described how mindfulness practice may have contributed to personal growth, skill development, and sense of competency. Through interdisciplinary dialogue, faculty and students broadened their perspectives and learned from one another's experiences and reflections on the relevance,

impact, and meaning of mindfulness practice across their varied disciplines. Their collective findings will help refine and develop the program.

Finally, the faculty incorporated mindfulness practice into the first 15 minutes of monthly department meetings. Individual faculty shared the responsibility of leading the practice which allowed for the discussion of diverse mindfulness activities (e.g., mindful eating, breathing, body movement).

### **Discussion**

The current paper reviewed literature on mindfulness within several helping professions. Current research strongly supports the numerous benefits of mindfulness, both professionally and personally. The co-authors posit that mindfulness can be utilized as a proactive way to support graduate students and clinicians from developing stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout. We also hold that incorporating mindfulness into clinical training and teaching is a feasible, promising endeavor as it may inform and enhance students' work as helping professionals. For example, students from clinical mental health counseling, school psychology, and school counseling now have a potential tool (i.e., the mindfulness curriculum) to use with clients or students. The authors also believe that by teaching mindfulness to leaders in higher education, they will be more likely to incorporate such a program with their students.

### **Future Research Directions**

Research examining the impact of mindfulness is expanding; however, research on mindfulness in the field of higher education is relatively preliminary. Studies reviewed in this paper provide an overview of a broad range of outcomes. These outcomes are encouraging for continued investigation of the importance of mindfulness in higher education. It is vital that future research assess the impact of mindfulness on variables that are of particular interest in the

fields of school psychology, school counseling, and mental health counseling (e.g., compassion fatigue amongst mental health counselors in training) within academia. Limited attention has been paid to examining the way in which clinicians' practice of mindfulness impacts client, and student outcomes.

Existing research is heavily dependent on qualitative and self-report data. Research that uses quantitative data, random assignment of participants to experimental and control groups, larger sample size, and longer-term follow of outcomes is needed. Future research efforts are needed to operationalize the type of mindfulness activity clearly and specifically. To illustrate, some studies utilize mindful eating while others utilize body scan or breathing exercises. Additionally, both clinicians and researchers need to make use of the assessment tools available for evaluating the impact of mindfulness. Measures that evaluate behavior patterns and functioning related to academic outcomes (e.g., academic performance) should also be included in pretest and posttest assessments.

Further research into the effects of incorporating mindfulness training in higher education should include the systemic examination of the overall effectiveness of such programs. In addition, research should examine the value of integrating regular self-care practices on student stress management as well as student perceptions of self-efficacy and quality of therapeutic skills in clinical work. Research should also explore methodology and benefits of integrating mindfulness practice into faculty wellness approaches and supervisory practice.



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Appendix  
Mindfulness Practice

Adapted from:

Stahl & Goldstein (2010). A Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Workbook  
Kabat-Zinn (2012). Mindfulness for Beginners

Content: Six sessions conducted every other week at the beginning of class for approximately 20 minutes

- Each session has four components:
  1. Topic for Learning: Education about different aspects of mindfulness (5 minutes)
  2. Experiential: Practicing of mindfulness (10 minutes)
  3. Mindful Self-Reflection: Reflection on how mindfulness impacts you or relates to your role as graduate student or instructor (5 minutes)
    - What did you notice before practice (emotions, thoughts, sensations)
    - What did you notice after?
    - What did you learn?
  4. Mindful Practice: Students are encouraged to practice the experiential portion over the following week and keep an on-line record of their practice
    - What did you notice when you practiced mindfulness?
    - What did you notice when you forgot?

Outline of Sessions:

- Session 1: What is Mindfulness?
- Session 2: Mindfulness Meditation
- Session 3: Mindfulness of the Body
- Session 4: Mindfulness and Well- being (emotion)
- Session 5: Mindfulness and the Heart
- Session 6: Interpersonal Mindfulness

Sample Session:

- Topic for Learning: Mind- body connection
  - The body is the vehicle you live within through the journey of life and you must care for it as to promote its health, wellness, and longevity.
  - Bringing mindfulness to the body can help you learn what your body does and doesn't need in order to thrive.
- Experiential: Body scan/ Progressive Muscle Relaxation
  - Today we will practice the body scan... objective is to have an “in-the-body” experience. By practicing the body scan, we will bring attention to the body. As we begin, simply become aware of the physical sensations by exploring their felt sense. This is distinct from thinking about your body...
- Mindful Self-Reflection
  - What did you notice before practice?
  - What did you notice after?
  - What did you learn?
- Mindful Practice: Practice a meditation from Part II of Kabat- Zinn (2010).