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Conference or Workshop Item

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Understanding Loving Kindness Meditation; Western meditators' views of their practice

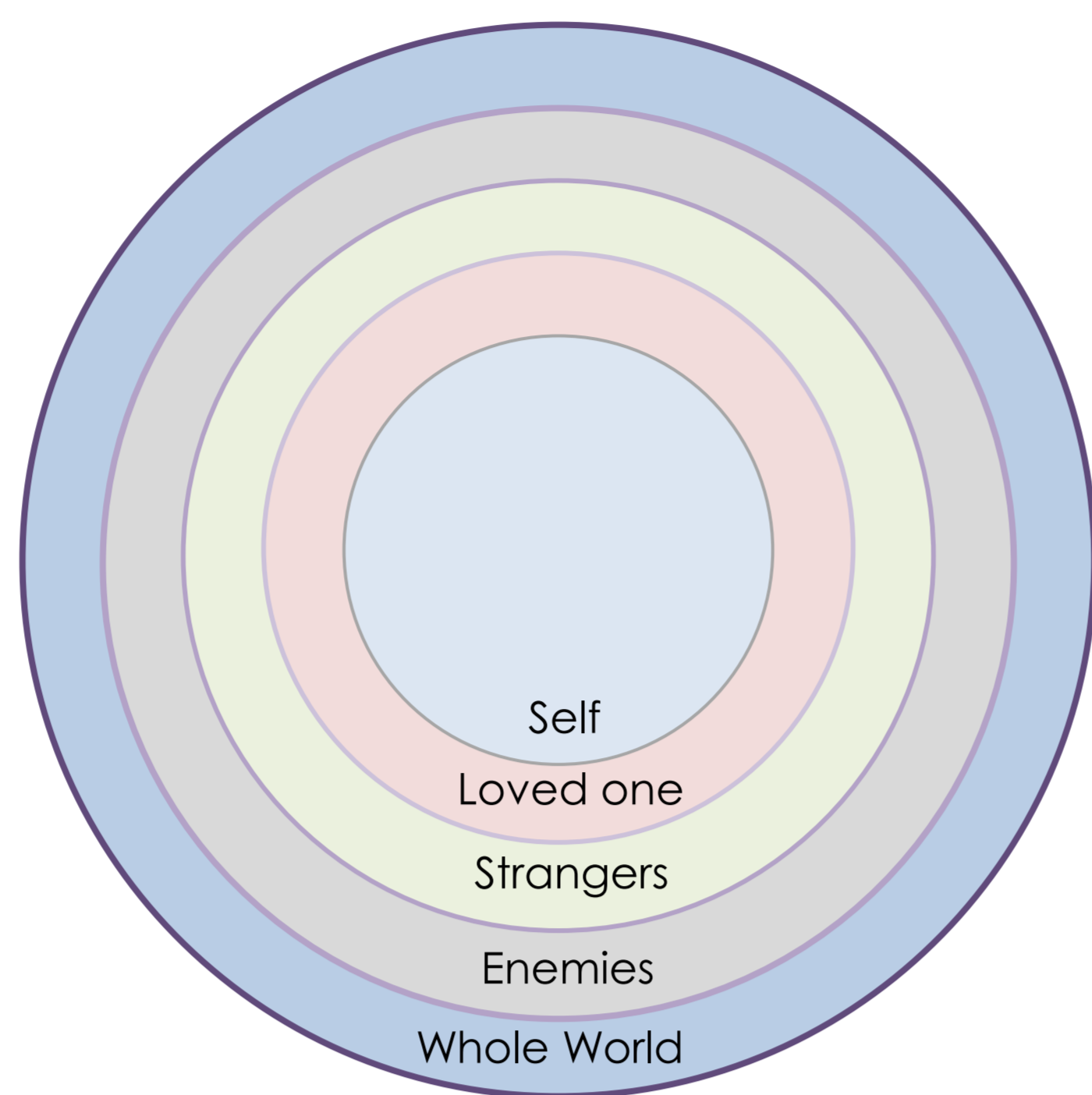
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Introduction

Loving Kindness (Metta): A practice which focuses on sending feelings of kindness to the self and others

Existing research: increases empathy¹, positivity towards strangers², performance on cognitive tasks³, reduced levels of pain intensity, has an effect on implicit attitudes towards the self and others⁴ and increases in frequency and intensity of positive emotions in participants who have schizophrenia⁵

Rationale: Lack of research conducted on Loving Kindness Meditation, inconsistencies in how the practice is explored within research, and potential implications of the specific focus of the practice on social connectedness and relationships.



'...the cultivation of a steady, unconditional sense of connection that touches all beings without exception, including ourselves'⁶

The overarching, broad aim of the project is to:

Understand the effects of LKM

Explore how LKM is being defined currently by practitioners

Examine the cognitive and social effects of LKM with students

Stage 1 – Qualitative interviews

Stage 2 – Q-sort methodology

Stage 3 – Quantitative project – student population

1. Interviews

Rationale: Explore how LKM is being defined and understood by experienced meditators. Also identify 'key' components of the practice to feed into student sessions (stage 3)

Participants: Five 'experienced' meditators with between 10 and 25+ years experience practising LKM. Varied backgrounds and ways of practising e.g. being Buddhist, coming to meditation following crisis.

Analysis: IPA was used to explore meditators' understanding of their practice, what it meant to them, and how it related to other forms of meditation.

Themes:

Importance of the practice;

- For personal change and becoming a 'better person'
- Daily practice and intention in achieving personal change

Components of the practice;

- Importance of the Self within practice
- Personalisation of practice

Relation to other practices;

- Seen as separate practice
- 'Essence' of Metta and way of living

Being a Western meditator;

- View of LKM as being almost opposite of Western way of living
- Conflict between wanting to live in more 'LK' way, but environment sometimes causing conflict

2. Q-study

Rationale: Explore understanding of LKM with wider group of meditators – to include all 'experience levels'. Further identify key components of the practice and commonalities/differences across meditators.

Method: Q is used for finding out attitudes towards a topic so was seen as an appropriate method choice. It asks participants to sort a set of statements into a forced distribution which allows for existing groups of opinion or understanding to emerge.

Participants: 20 LKM meditators with between 10 month's and 35 year's experience

Statements: should reflect all opinions about a topic; statements were drawn from interview transcripts in stage 1.

Analysis: Uses a mixture of correlations and factor analysis to explore patterns in how participants sort their statements as a whole set. Qualitative analysis of the emergent groups can be written up and described as themes

Findings: Statistically ONE main factor; commonalities in sorting statements at the negative end. But at the other end of the distribution, differences emerging in three factors

*I don't see the value in sending Loving Kindness to 'enemies' (-4)
I think directing feelings of Loving Kindness towards my self is more a formality (-3)*

Cluster 1: The practice as a life-changer

Loving Kindness practice is a fundamental part of me and my life (42; +4)

Loving Kindness has made me a better person than I used to be (25; +3)

Loving Kindness has wider physiological and physical implications (21; +4)

Cluster 2: The practice and its components

Loving Kindness is more like friendliness than love (27; +4)

Loving Kindness has a physical element (32; +4)

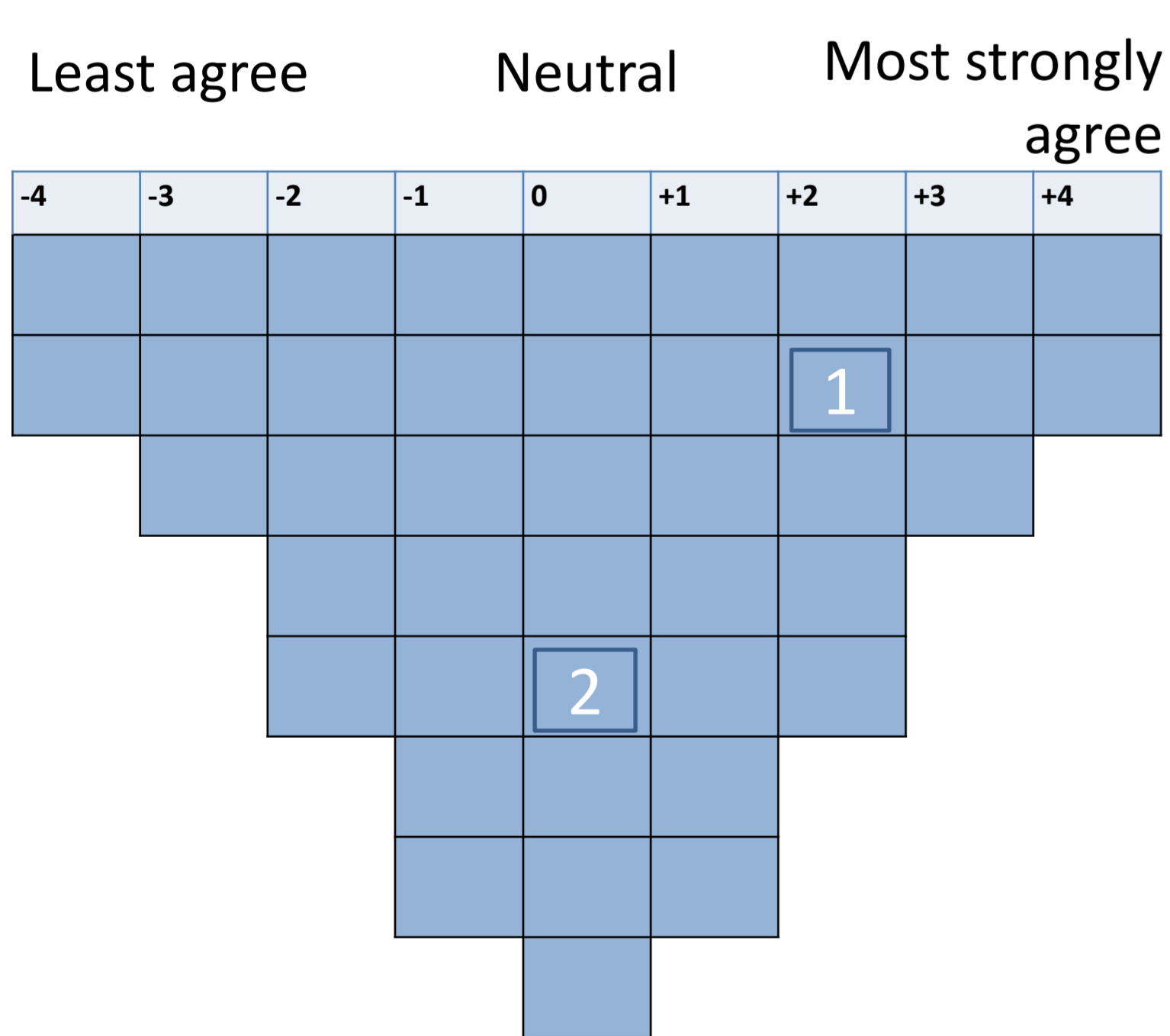
Loving Kindness has helped me to see my emotions in a different way (23; +3)

Cluster 3: I am my practice

Loving Kindness Meditation has helped me realise that I deserve happiness as much as anyone else (16; +3)

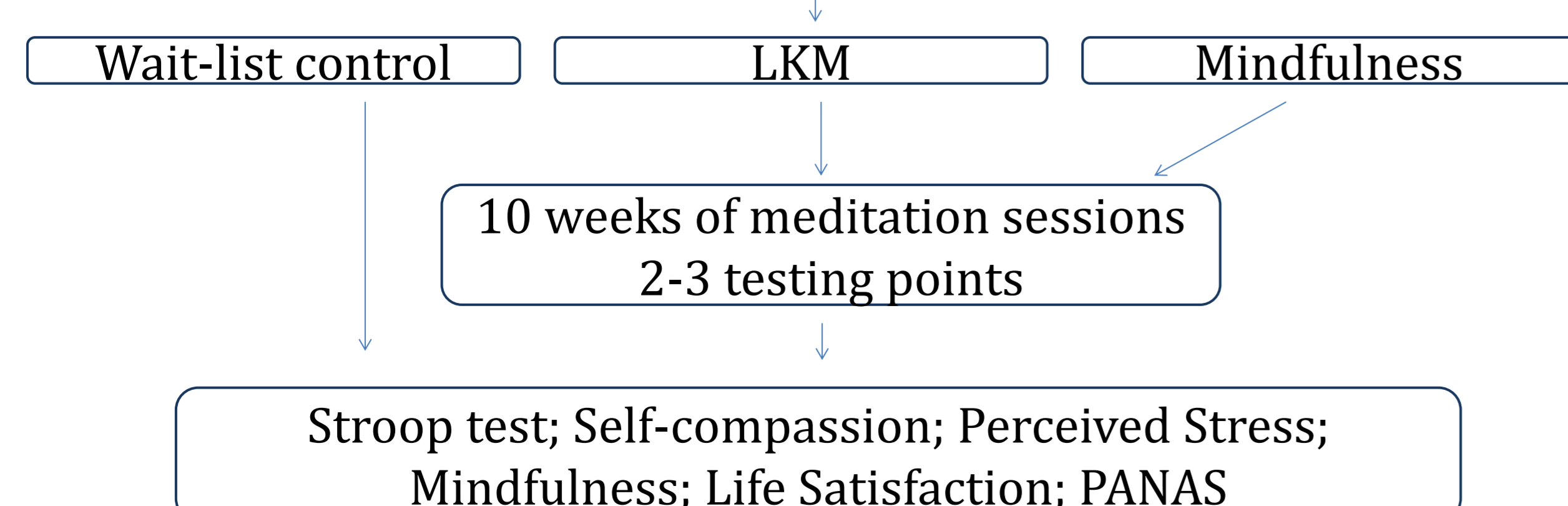
I believe Loving Kindness can change default attitudes (24; +3)

Loving Kindness is like connecting with an energy that is always there in my heart (10; +4)



3. Student groups

Learnings from stage 1 and 2



Conclusions

- Variation in ways of practising as well as understanding and view of the practice, including differences in language used and potential challenges in misunderstanding what 'Metta' is.
- Clear differences in views and understanding of the practice, but commonalities when it comes to what was sorted as 'negative'; enemies as core part of LKM, and the importance and value of the practice.
- Therefore, focus on Self and 'enemies' very important to practice and need to be emphasised when introducing practice to novices.
- Practice has self-reported effects on behaviour and provides support to explore this further.
- Reported effects include inter and intra personal benefits as well as increased compassion, empathy and a difference in perception of emotion.
- Seen as practice that has its own benefits and effects, so supports further exploration in stage 3.