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Dealing with Anxiety and Stress Through Mindfulness Workshop Series

Program Evaluation Summary

Evaluation support provided by Dr. Martha Traverso-Yepetz

This workshop series was presented in June / July 2014 to eight individuals who self-identified that they were experiencing anxiety and/or stress in their lives. The program consisted of six two-hour weekly sessions on Tuesday nights and one three-hour session on Saturday morning. Six females and two males between the ages of 36 and 67 participated in the series. The majority of participants had attended a Mindfulness-Awareness workshop series previously conducted by Andrew Safer. The sessions were held in Canon Wood Hall at St. Thomas' Anglican Church in St. John's. Confidentiality was agreed by all parties.

The Mindfulness Approach

Whereas normally we become identified with our thoughts, feelings, emotions, and impulses and are immediately drawn in to the ongoing drama, mindfulness practice enables us to take a step back and see these states of mind as mental events that come and go. This approach to dealing with anxiety and stress involves (1) the development of non-judgmental awareness, (2) an orientation to the present moment as opposed to being lost in thought about the past or the future, (3) a willingness to relate to current experience regardless of whether it is agreeable or disagreeable, (4) developing the ability to distinguish between thoughts and reality, and (5) recognizing beliefs and habitual thought patterns that feed anxiety and stress, and learning to disengage from them.

Through mindfulness-awareness meditation (both sitting and walking) and other practices that are introduced, participants cultivate their innate capacity to be mindful and aware. One of the practices is "head and shoulders," which facilitates pausing in order to interrupt habitual thought patterns and any actions that flow from them. The other practices include both paying attention to routine daily tasks and "tonglen" which develops a compassionate attitude towards others and oneself while undermining the tendency towards self-absorption.

Program Elements and Content

The sessions include mindfulness-awareness meditation practice, PowerPoint presentations, worksheet completion, journaling, and discussions both in pairs and within the group.

Key themes include:

- Introduction to Mindfulness and Anxiety / Stress
- Key Elements of Mindfulness and Awareness

- Anxiety: Imagination vs. Reality
- Stress: Reacting vs. Responding
- Attention: Our Precious Resource
- Recognizing Thoughts and Being Present
- Working with Fear and Fearlessness
- Basic Goodness: A Breath of Fresh Air

Participants are encouraged to practice mindfulness-awareness meditation at home for one-half hour daily as well as the mindfulness-in-everyday-life practices as they are introduced. A Daily Practice Log is provided.

Evaluation Summary

The evaluation instrument was developed collaboratively by Martha Traverso-Yepez (PhD), a professor and researcher at the Department of Community Health at Memorial University, and Andrew Safer, mindfulness instructor and program developer. The pre-intervention quantitative evaluation was completed during the first session and the post-intervention evaluation which included a qualitative component was completed during the last session. Participants wrote unique personal codes on their pre- and post- evaluations to facilitate pairing. Anonymity was ensured in both instances and all of the participants provided written consent authorizing the presentation of aggregated data with no personal identification.

Dr. Traverso-Yepez oversaw the evaluation process. Jeff Doucet, MSW, RSW, and Julie Huntington, B.Sc., compiled the data from the evaluations and, together with Dr. Traverso-Yepez, categorized the qualitative responses. Some of the participant responses included different ideas, which were assigned to the appropriate categories. The categories are listed in descending order by frequency in the following tables.

All participants showed significant improvement in their grasp of the material that was presented during the “Dealing with Anxiety and Stress Through Mindfulness” program. The average score change after the intervention was +13.75.

Quantitative Evaluation

Pre- / Post- Comparison

Participant	Pre	Post	Change
1	44	63	+19
2	54	60	+6
3	30	61	+31
4	26	37	+11
5	42	62	+20
6	32	36	+4
7	50	54	+4
8	33	48	+15
Total Score	311	421	+110

The following statements evidenced the most significant changes between pre- and post-scores. Totals include responses from all participants. (1=Strongly Agree; 5=Strongly Disagree)

Evaluation Statement	Pre	Post	Change
I have difficulty accepting things as they are.	17	29	+12
I have difficulty dealing with troubling emotions.	14	23	+9
Staying in the present hurts so much that I prefer to run away from what is unpleasant.	18	26	+8
I don't have confidence in my ability to deal with the stressful things that happen to me.	19	27	+8
I keep projecting my concerns for the future.	11	19	+8
This pattern of not being fully present in my immediate experience is normal for me.	11	19	+8

Qualitative Evaluation

1. *What are some of the main points you remember about mindfulness?*

Categories	Frequency
Increased awareness of thoughts/of what is happening around me/ present in the moment	6
Living in the present	2
Recognizing and breaking away from habitual patterns / interrupting storylines	2
Accepting discomfort	2
Trying not to be judgmental	1
Accepting limitations	1

Some of the participants' comments are listed below:

"Extension of awareness for me oscillates back and forth as practice improves."

"I plan to stay more and enjoy all my experiences in the present as gifts—the good through the uncomfortable ones (fingers crossed)."

"This has made me aware of living in the present moment, not on automatic pilot."

"I can take risks. Fear is not the thing that should stop me. I do not have to be perfect."

2. *Which mindfulness practices in everyday life do you find most helpful and why?*

Categories	Frequency
Sitting meditation, walking meditation	7
Head and shoulders (pausing)	5
Tonglen	2
Mindfulness in everyday life practices / awareness of surroundings	2
Understanding that thoughts are not reality	1

Participants mentioned the different mindfulness practices, often adding complementary comments:

“My mood has lifted over the past 6 weeks, despite a huge goal setback in my life. I am pleasantly surprised.”

“Head and shoulders because it helps me to come back to the present and get out of my head.”

3. *How helpful has this workshop series been for helping you deal with anxiety and stress? (0 = not helpful; 10 = extremely helpful)*

Ranges / categories	Participants
5-7 (somewhat helpful) =	2
8-9 (very helpful) =	4
10 (extremely helpful) =	2

Participants were requested to explain why the practice was helpful. Some of their comments follow below:

“The realization that I create much of my rumination and negative self-talk. Now that I know I create it, I have control over it. I can begin facing it. This was the Ah-ha moment for me.”

“Learning not to feed the storyline; non-judgment of whatever arises. I feel that I am believing more that my irrational thoughts are not real.”

“Being aware and being OK with being uncomfortable. Realizing that I can’t control others to make the world right, from my perspective.”

4. *Have you been able to do some meditation at home?*

Frequency of meditation practice at home:

Times / Week	Participants
1-2	1
3-4	3
5 or >	4

Length of time per session:

Length of session	Participants
5-15 min.	2
> 15 min.	6

5. *Do you think other people can benefit from learning about mindfulness—both meditation and other practices?*

Eight participants responded “Yes”. None responded “No”.