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Her Majesty's Penitentiary Mindfulness Training Program

Report and Evaluation Summary

A mindfulness training program was presented in June / July 2017 to seven male inmates at Her Majesty's Penitentiary in St. John's. They were invited to participate by Susan Green, Addictions Coordinator, who facilitates various therapeutic and educational groups for inmates. The program consisted of ten 1.5-hour sessions that met twice per week for five weeks from 9:30 to 11:00 am in the Program Room. The inmates ranged from 19 to 46 years of age. Some had received instructions in meditation practice before, but mindfulness meditation was new to them. All parties agreed to confidentiality so that personal information disclosed during the sessions would not be repeated outside the group.

The Mindfulness Approach

Mindfulness practice cultivates present-moment awareness free from preoccupation and judgment. 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 difficult states of mind involves (1) an orientation to the present moment as opposed to being lost in thought about the past or the future; (2) a willingness to relate to current experience whether it is agreeable or disagreeable; (3) cultivating awareness free from judgment; (4) developing the ability to distinguish between thoughts and reality; (5) recognizing the beliefs and habitual thought patterns that feed troubling emotions and learning to disengage from them; (6) cultivating kindness towards oneself and others.

Program Elements and Content

Through mindfulness-awareness meditation (both sitting and walking) and other practices that are introduced, participants cultivate their innate capacity to be mindful—precise with a present moment orientation—and aware. One of the practices is “head and shoulders,” which facilitates pausing in order to interrupt habitual thought patterns (acting automatically) and any involvement that flows from these. The other practices include Loving-kindness and a variety of mindfulness-in-everyday-life activities, which develop present-moment awareness through the performance of routine daily tasks. The sessions also included PowerPoint presentations,

worksheet completion, and discussions both in pairs and within the group. Outside the sessions, participants did meditation and mindfulness-in-everyday-life practices, and read selected articles.

The session themes were:

- 1. What is Mindfulness?
- 2. Mindfulness Practice (Sitting and Walking)
- 3. Making Friends with Yourself
- 4. Simplicity—Synchronizing Body and Mind
- 5. Recognizing Thoughts
- 6. Checking Your Impulsiveness—Pausing Practice
- 7. Relating to Emotions
- 8. Stress—Awareness Is Your Friend
- 9. Anxiety—Feel It, Hear the Message, and Move On
- 10. Mindfulness in Everyday Life

Participants were encouraged to practice mindfulness-awareness meditation on their own time, leading up to one-half hour daily by the end of the program, as well as the mindfulness-in-everyday-life practices as they were introduced. Daily Practice Logs were distributed at each session to assist them in keeping track of their practice time.

Evaluation Summary

The evaluation instrument was developed collaboratively by Martha Traverso-Yepez (PhD), a professor and researcher in the Division of Community Health and Humanities at Memorial University, and Andrew Safer, mindfulness instructor, trainer and program developer. (See Evaluation Form on pages 7 and 8.) Participants completed the pre-intervention quantitative evaluation during the first session and the post-intervention quantitative and qualitative evaluation at the end of the last session. (Note: One participant completed his final evaluation after the ninth session because his early release precluded him from attending the tenth session. One participant did not complete his final evaluation prior to early release, so he is not included here.) 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.

Jeff Doucet, MSW, RSW, and Julie Huntington, B.Sc., and B.Ed. compiled and transcribed the data from the evaluations. Mr. Doucet and Mr. Safer categorized the qualitative responses. Dr. Traverso-Yepez reviewed this document. Participant responses that included more than one idea were apportioned to the appropriate categories. The categories are listed in descending order, showing responses by the greatest number of participants first.

The aggregate total score increased from 250 before the intervention to 292 after: a 16.8 % increase.

Quantitative Evaluation

Pre- / Post- Comparison

Participant	Pre	Post	Change
1	35	43	+8
2	50	49	-1
3	60	71	+11
4	42	57	+15
5	23	33	+10
6	40	39	-1
Total Score	250	292	+42

The following statements showed the most significant changes between pre- and post- scores. Totals include responses from all participants.

Evaluation Statement	Pre	Post	Change
I keep thinking about either my concerns for the future or a problem from my past.	10	16	+6 (60%)
I'm often thinking about my problems, and I'm not aware of my surroundings.	14	21	+7 (50%)
I have difficulty accepting things as they are.	15	22	+7 (47%)
Usually, I don't know which things or events trigger stress or anxiety.	17	24	+7 (41%)
I feel like I have no control over my thoughts, moods or feelings.	15	19	+4 (27%)
I have difficulty dealing with troubling emotions.	13	16	+3 (23%)

Qualitative Evaluation

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

Categories	Frequency
Rephrasing expressions of elements of practice - meditation instructions / breath, sitting posture, thought labeling	4
Awareness of thoughts / knowing thoughts are not necessarily true may prevent impulsiveness / not trying to control thoughts	2
Importance of awareness during meditation	1
Ability to let go	1
Focus - how to keep on track	1
Learn to feel compassion towards ourselves	1
Synchronizing mind and body can help improve life	1

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

Categories	Frequency
Head and shoulders – Helps ground me in reality	2
Mindful eating – Enjoy food more / making every meal, snack and drink more satisfying	2
Loving-kindness – See goodness in world and myself and let go of anger / perhaps can help with forgiveness and resentment	2
Mindful listening – Helps alleviate social anxiety	1
Walking meditation	1
Sitting meditation – increases awareness of what I’m doing	1

3. How helpful has this workshop series been for you? (0 = not helpful; 10 = extremely helpful)

Ranges / categories	# Participants
4 (a little helpful) =	1
7 (somewhat helpful) =	1
8-9 (very helpful) =	2
10 (extremely helpful) =	2

Average score: 8.0

Participants were asked to explain why they found the practice to be helpful. Their comments follow:

H1-Extremely helpful...Mindful eating has been a most effective way of practicing mindfulness in general.

H2-It made me try to stop thinking of my problems.

H3-It helped me see that helping is my very nature.

H4-It has taught me how to put into practice all of the skills I’ve been trying to learn from books.

H5- Your extensive experience and knowledge, calm demeanour and wisdom are characteristics that I wish I could emulate. Thank you for treating us as human beings rather than criminals. However, under the circumstances I find it extremely difficult to perform these meditations. Possibly I can use the meditations in the future to prevent any emotional outburst like those that led to my incarceration.

H6- It’s great because of where I am at the present, and for the future of my life.

4. *Have you been able to do some meditation on your own time? How many times per week?*

Times / Week	Length of session	# Participants
1-2	5 min.	1
5	30 min.	1
7-8 (2)	20 min. / 45 min. to 2 hr.	2
8-10	15 - 20 min.	1
More than 10	15-30 min.	1

5. *Do you think other inmates could benefit from learning about mindfulness—both meditation and other practices? Why do you think so?*

All six participants responded “Yes”.

H1- Yes. The monotony of prison makes all things boring and numbing...Other inmates ask often to show what we have learned.

H2- Yes, because it would take a lot of my stress away.

H3- Absolutely. People in jail could definitely use more stress relief, self-awareness, and an increase in prefrontal cortex size 😊

H4- Yes. It can teach you forgiveness.

H5- Yes. Many of the inmates in our group found mindfulness practices beneficial and I would recommend it to other inmates. It helps to have an open mind.

H6- Yes, because of the stress of incarceration.

6. *Do you have any suggestions on how this workshop series can be improved?*

Suggestions for improvement	# Participants
Keep as is – Nope, best kind – No, it is good	3
No answer	1
Could be more frequent	1
Increase duration from 5 to 6 weeks or more; I’m sure more on topic that can be learned	1

During the sessions, participants commented on changes they had noticed since beginning the program. They included not throwing a punch when provoked, which was a first; better able to deal with loud noises at the Penitentiary, such as during lock-down; eating snacks and meals and drinking beverages mindfully, which brings present-moment experience, less rumination, and greater appreciation of food and drink; and greater focus and openness since beginning mindfulness practices.

Final Considerations

With the completion of this pilot Mindfulness project, it is clear that inmates can benefit from this training, as has been demonstrated at other correctional institutions where Mindfulness training has been presented. As indicated during the sessions, the Mindfulness training was helping the inmates deal with difficult thoughts and emotions in their lives. They were urged to continue with their daily mindfulness practice going forward. If they do, one can assume that these skills will go with them upon release. As one inmate wrote, “Possibly I can use the meditations in the future to prevent any emotional outburst like those that led to my incarceration.”

With this in mind, it would be advisable to monitor the impact of Mindfulness training on recidivism. In “Dangerous Prisoners Taught Mindfulness and Meditation”, Ruth Mann, the head of rehabilitation at the national offender management service in the UK, said to the high-security prisons group: “Early evidence suggests that mindfulness could impact factors linked to reoffending, so we’d like to test whether it can improve outcomes for certain groups of offenders.”¹

In an effort to support these inmates’ mindfulness practice on a go-forward basis, a colleague who is a mindfulness-awareness meditation instructor has offered to lead weekly Mindfulness sessions with these inmates, on a voluntary basis. Discussions are underway. This initiative would provide ongoing support for their regular practice. Once they are released, they are welcome to join the Safer Mindfulness weekly Monday night meditation group that meets at The Lantern. These community supports greatly increase the chances that one’s mindfulness practice will continue.

The potential for mindfulness training to positively impact inmates has been borne out in this pilot program, as in others. It is our hope that these benefits continue post-release, and that by continuing to equip inmates with mindfulness tools and strategies, and working together, we can help to build a safer and healthier community.

¹ Sophie Jamieson, *The Telegraph*, “Dangerous Prisoners Taught Mindfulness and Meditation”, October 21, 2015

MINDFULNESS PROGRAM AT HER MAJESTY'S PENITENTIARY

Personal code

(Pre-post intervention)

Please write down in the box on the left the number that best fits how you feel about the statement:

1=Strongly Agree 2=Agree 3=Neither Agree, nor Disagree 4=Disagree 5=Strongly Disagree
0=Don't Know

- When I start thinking about something that concerns me, I can't get it out of my head.
- My mind never stays in one place and keeps jumping from one thing to the next.
- I keep thinking about either my concerns for the future or a problem from my past.
- I tend to act without thinking, and it gets me into trouble.
- I don't believe that I can make a difference in my life.
- I don't have confidence in my ability to deal with the stressful things that happen to me.
- I am always putting myself down, and I become my worst enemy.
- Staying in the present hurts so much that I prefer to run away from what is unpleasant.
- I have difficulty accepting things as they are.
- I have difficulty dealing with troubling emotions.
- I always have the feeling that there is something I should be doing to get rid of my troubling emotions.
- I'm often thinking about my problems, and I'm not aware of my surroundings.
- Usually, I don't know which things or events trigger stress or anxiety.
- I feel like I have no control over my thoughts, moods, and feelings.
- I get stuck with thoughts that can make me feel anxious and I don't know how to pause or interrupt this pattern.
- I always assume that my thoughts and emotions are part of who I am.

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[Qualitative Evaluation – See next page]

(Post-intervention only):

1. What are some of the main points about “mindfulness” that now makes sense to you?

2. Which mindfulness-in-everyday-life practices are you finding helpful, and in what way?

3. How helpful has this workshop series been for you? (0 = not helpful; 10 = extremely helpful) _____

Specifically, how has it helped you?

4. Have you been able to do some meditation practice on your own time? _____

If yes, about how many times a week? _____ Usually for how long? _____

5. Do you think other inmates could benefit from learning about mindfulness—both meditation and the other practices? _____ Why do you think so?

6. Do you have any suggestions on how this workshop series can be improved?

Thank you!