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Online Navigating Anxiety and Stress through Mindfulness: Program Evaluation Summary

This workshop series was presented from May to July 2017 to seven individuals who self-identified that they were experiencing problematic anxiety and/or stress in their lives. Some were referred by health care professionals. The program consisted of seven one-and-a-half-hour weekly sessions on Wednesday nights. Four females and three males participated in the series. All seven participants completed both pre- and post-evaluations.

The sessions were conducted via Zoom video conferencing with four participants in St. John's, Newfoundland and the remaining three in Florida, Texas, and Colorado. This was the first group that met via video conferencing, rather than face-to-face. The sessions were shortened from 2.5 hours to 1.5 hour to accommodate the online environment.

Seven sessions were presented instead of eight in order to complete the series by the beginning of summer.

Confidentiality was agreed by all parties.

The Mindfulness Approach

Mindfulness practice cultivates present-moment awareness free from judgment. Whereas normally we become identified with our thoughts, feelings, emotions, impulses, and sensations 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 events that come and go. This approach to dealing with anxiety and stress involves (1) an orientation to the present moment as opposed to being lost in thought about the past or future; (2) a willingness to relate to current experience, agreeable or disagreeable; (3) cultivating kindness and a non-judgmental attitude towards oneself and others; (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.

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 patterns

and actions that flow from them (i.e., acting automatically, without awareness). 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. “Tonglen” develops loving-kindness and compassion toward oneself and others. This undermines the tendency towards self-absorption while pointing towards interdependence.

The sessions included mindfulness-awareness meditation practice and Q&A / coaching, PowerPoint presentations, worksheet completion, journaling, and discussions both in pairs and with the group.

The session themes were:

- 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 were encouraged to practice mindfulness-awareness meditation at home leading up to one-half hour daily by the end of the program as well as a variety of mindfulness-in-everyday-life practices that were introduced.

Evaluation Summary

The evaluation instrument was developed collaboratively by Martha Traverso-Yepez (PhD), a professor and researcher at the Division of Community Health and Humanities at Memorial University, and Andrew Safer, mindfulness instructor, trainer, workshop facilitator 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.

Julie Huntington, B.Sc., and B.Ed., and Jeff Doucet, MSW, RSW, compiled and transcribed the data from the evaluations. Mr. Doucet and Mr. Safer categorized the responses.

Qualitative Evaluation

The qualitative responses that included more than one idea were apportioned to the appropriate categories. The categories are listed in descending order, showing responses from the greatest number of participants first.

Selected participant responses are listed after the following table.

1. *What are some of the main points about “mindfulness” that resonate for you and your everyday life?*

Categories	
Being in the moment; experience the now – breathe	4
Taking time out of busy day to sit and mentally unwind / very beneficial for your mental health	1
Learning to accept and feel difficult emotions in manageable way	1
Right practice, right attitude, right understanding	1
Being able to enjoy simple moments	1
Ability to practice mindfulness anywhere to help with anxiety or stressful situations I cannot leave	1
Becoming more aware of my thoughts, and that I am not my (anxious) thoughts	1
Connecting mind and physical body has been powerful. More conscious of physical reaction to my life and environment. Wanting to be more inclusive and accepting.	1
I think non-dualistic, non-judgmental approach can help with anxiety.	1

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

Categories	Frequency
Sitting – early morning, prepares me for stresses of the day	4
Being in the moment – staying present – breathe – helps centre me	3
Walking meditation – could focus more on meditation while moving	2
Awareness of ordinary daily activities (showering, etc.)	2
Head and Shoulders	2
Tonglen	2
Mindful listening – more engaged and attentive, more confident	2
Meditating during radiation treatment for cancer; tremendously helpful in trying to calm down w/ machines and people whizzing around me.	1
Non-judgmental attitude	1

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
8-9 (very helpful)	4
10 (extremely helpful)	3

Specifically, how has it helped you deal with anxiety / stress?

- “Gives me tools to use when I'm feeling anxious.”
- “Now I am more able to recognize symptoms of anxiety or stress. If I experience symptoms, I will attribute them to stress, and if I know this then hopefully I will be less nervous.”
- “It has given me a good foundation in mindfulness meditation techniques, which allow me to manage and reduce anxiety/stress.”
- “Self-Realization...and the Mindfulness viewpoint of dealing with external forces.”
- “It was the right thing at the right time.”
- “Very empowering that I am/can be in charge of my thoughts just by letting go or not entertaining or associating with the thought. A source I can draw on when needed to reduce anxious feelings caused by anxious thoughts. Knowing it has a healthy role to play in my life. Understand it.”
- “Non-duality relieves me of judgment and the anxiety having to be right, or worry that I am wrong.”
- “The anxiety and stress of sleep disturbance is much lessened when I awaken and focus on my breath rather than on the rat race in my head. My sleep patterns are noticeably less disturbed.
- “After a couple of weeks of the workshop, I realized one morning that I had a completely different approach to my life. It was as though someone had turned on a light switch and the world was clearer, lighter, and I had much more energy and enthusiasm for my life and the responsibilities that I now face.”

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

All 7 participants answered “yes”.

Frequency of meditation practice at home:

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

Length of time per session:

Length of session	# Participants
20-30 min.	4
10-15 min.	2
5 min.	1

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

Seven participants responded “Yes”. No one responded “No”.

[Evaluation Instrument – next page]

NAVIGATING ANXIETY & STRESS THROUGH MINDFULNESS

Personal code

(Pre-post intervention)

Please write down in the box on the left the number that best fits how you feel with regard to 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 mind.
- My mind never stays in one place and keeps jumping from one thought to the next.
- I think over and over about things that have already happened.

- I keep projecting my concerns for the future.

- This pattern of not being fully present in my immediate experience is normal for me.

- 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.

- Staying in the present hurts so much that I prefer to run away from what is unpleasant.
- I don't usually know what to do to bear with my discomfort and sense of vulnerability.
- 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 often don't feel grounded in my body.
- I'm not usually aware of what things or events trigger my anxiety.
- I feel like I have no control over my thoughts, moods, and feelings.
- I get stuck with the storylines that can make me feel anxious and I don't know how to pause or interrupt this pattern.
- My storylines keep the everyday stress rolling and pull me out of the present moment.

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[Post-intervention evaluation instrument – next page]

(Post-intervention only):

1. What are some of the main points about “mindfulness” that resonate for you and your everyday life?

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 deal with anxiety / stress?

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

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

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

6. Do you intend to come to Monday night meditation at least once, to check it out? _____

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

Thank you!