

'The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgement, character, and will. No one is *compos sui* [master of himself] if he have it not. An education which should improve this faculty would be *the education par excellence*. But it is easier to define this ideal than to give practical directions for bringing it about' (James, 1890, vol. 2, p. 424, original italics).

ABSTRACT: Mindfulness is a way of being, which involves two key components. The first is self-regulated attention focusing on the present moment. The second is the attitude towards present moment experience, characterised by a sense of openness, acceptance and curiosity. There are a variety of mindfulness based approaches which seek to help individuals become more mindful. There is a growing body of literature which suggests that mindfulness training provides a number of benefits for a wide range of populations. Mindfulness training for university students is gaining international interest, with research into the benefits being conducted in the USA, UK, Australia, and Singapore. This paper will use the existing literature and the author's own doctoral research to introduce some of the benefits of mindfulness training for university students.

1 Mindfulness: A very short introduction

Psychologists have defined mindfulness as self-regulated attention which is focused on the present moment while maintaining an open curiosity and acceptance of one's experience (Bishop et al., 2004) so from this perspective, we are all naturally more or less mindful. Mindfulness training aims to help individuals become more focused in the present moment, more open to new experiences and more accepting of where we find ourselves. In mindfulness meditation one chooses an anchor for one's attention. For example, in the sitting meditation, this would be the breath. When the mind drifts off, as it invariably does, the first key moment is becoming aware that the mind has drifted off. So rather than being anchored to the breath, one's attention may be anywhere in the past, present or future. When people start practising mindfulness many see this as failure, or as a sign that they can't meditate. However, nothing could be further from the truth. Rather than failure, noticing that one's mind has wandered provides the opportunity for acceptance and compassion, and the chance to choose to let go of those thoughts or feelings and bring the attention back to the breath, back to the anchor. This does not mean 'pushing away' thoughts, or trying to 'have an empty mind', but rather to bring the mind back gently when it has wandered. Over time, the mind will wander less and the individual will notice the mind has wandered more quickly (Bishop et al., 2004).

It is understandable that mindfulness, and mindfulness training, may seem like 'just another fad', but when one takes a closer look it soon becomes clear that there is substance beneath the snappy headlines. For a start, mindfulness, while only becoming popular in the West in the last 20 years, has been practised by Buddhists for over 2500 years. Back in the late 1970s Jon Kabat-Zinn and his colleagues at the University of Massachusetts developed and implemented a training programme to help patients manage chronic pain, which has come to be known as mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), (Kabat-Zinn, 1982). MBSR is an 8-week group programme, with anywhere between 10-30 people meeting every week for around 2 hours to practise mindfulness meditation, explore how it can help them manage stress and reflect on how it can be brought into their daily lives. Regular practice is also a key part of the programme (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). There are now hundreds of published empirical studies suggesting that MBSR can lead to significant reductions in stress, anxiety

and depression in clinical and healthy populations (Grossman et al., 2004; Fjorback et al., 2011).

In addition to being a useful programme in and of itself, MBSR has also become a template programme for more tailored mindfulness programmes (McCown, Reibel & Micozzi, 2010). The most well-known of these is the Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy programme (MBCT) (Segal, Williams & Teasdale, 2002) which has been found to help prevent depressive episodes (Ma & Teasdale, 2004). The success of MBCT has led to it being widely implemented in the British National Health System. It has also been used for a variety of populations and has an ever growing evidence base (Fjorback et al., 2011; Grossman et al., 2004). While MBCT is the most well known offshoot of MBSR, there are many others, such as the mindfulness-based eating programme (MB-EAT), developed by Jean Kristeller (1999). Most of these programmes follow the MBSR format but vary the didactic elements and length of the meditations and individual sessions (McCown, Reibel & Micozzi, 2010). As part of my PhD, I developed mindfulness-based coping with university life (MBCUL) to explore the benefits of a tailored mindfulness programme for university students.

2 Stress reduction

Recent evidence suggests that not only are a large number of students experiencing clinical levels of stress, anxiety and depression, but that this appears to be directly linked with becoming a student (Andrews & Wilding, 2004; Bewick et al., 2010). Students appear to experience more mental health issues than their non-university attending peers (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2003), while at the same time, many do not seek any sort of support (Blanco et al., 2008). MBCUL was developed as a supportive programme which might help students cope better with the stress of university life (Lynch et al., 2011). It follows the 8-week MBSR format.¹⁵ The first two weeks introduce students to mindfulness meditation and help them to establish their own practice. Week three focuses on mindful art and play, which introduces students to the idea that they can bring mindful awareness to any activity. Weeks four to seven focus on student-specific issues: stress at university, academic issues, managing their own health and communication and relationships. Week eight serves as a reflection on what has been discovered and how students can take things forward. Between weeks seven and eight there is a half day mini retreat. MBCUL was designed to serve as a template programme which could be used by educators with at least two years of personal experience in mindfulness meditation or those with an existing mindfulness teacher training qualification.

The MBCUL programme was evaluated between 2007 -2010 at the University of Northampton (UK). Attendance was optional and MBCUL was advertised to students on university computer screens, posters around campus and a few informal talks. Over a period of three years a general picture of who was attracted to MBCUL emerged. Generally, participants were female, experiencing mild to moderate stress and anxiety and in their mid 20s. There were four key reasons students gave for attending:

- Final year stress
- Coming with friends
- Hope to meet new people
- Curiosity

When compared to wait-list controls, those students who came to MBCUL showed significant reductions in measures of perceived stress and anxiety. What is particularly noteworthy is that while there were significant decreases in scores of stress and anxiety in those attending MBCUL, the scores of those in the control groups were actually increasing.

¹⁵ Full details of the MBCUL programme are available free as an online supplement.

This is in keeping with other research which suggests mindfulness training is a useful way to help students manage stress (Regehr, Glancy & Pitts, 2013).

3 Beyond stress reduction

While it is well accepted that mindfulness training can lead to reductions in stress, mindfulness training may also lead to more academically focused changes. Looking at Bishop et al.'s (2004) operational definition of mindfulness, where mindfulness is described as self-regulated attention which is focused on the present moment while maintaining an open curiosity and acceptance of one's experience, it is easy to argue that mindfulness training may be just the education par excellence that William James sought over a hundred years ago.

There is evidence that brief mindfulness training may lead to changes in how students approach reading and their reading comprehension. A recent study randomised of a brief 2 week mindfulness training programme randomised students to either the mindfulness group or a control group. Measures were taken before and after the training programmes. Pre-test scores on the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) were comparable between the two groups at time one and were in keeping with participants' pre-university Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores. However, after the training those who attended mindfulness training demonstrated significant improvements. This improvement was mediated by a reduction in mind wandering. Given that GRE scores are thought to be reasonably 'fixed', the finding that mindfulness training appears to be able to impact them is quite remarkable (Mrazek, Franklin, Phillips, Baird & Schooler, 2013) These results also fit with qualitative data (Lynch 2011), in which university students who attended an 8-week MBCUL programme felt that they were able to pay more focused attention to what they were reading or listening to in lectures. There is initial evidence which suggests mindfulness training may lead to improved memory in university students. In addition to exploring reading comprehension, Mrazek et al. (2013) found changes in measures of working memory, also thought to be reasonably stable, only in those who attended the mindfulness training.

Students may also become more aware of the way they approach and complete, academic tasks. For example, in the qualitative results of a wait-list controlled trial of MBCUL, students didn't just remember more, but many also reported changes in the way they approached their work. For example, many became aware that they needed to take breaks or plan their time more effectively (Lynch, 2011). These findings suggest that mindfulness training may lead students to pay greater attention to texts, change their approach to studying and possibly even remember more.

But the benefits of mindfulness training extend even further. There is a growing body of literature which suggests that mindfulness training leads to increased compassion, empathy and listening skills in professionals (Grepmaier et al., 2007). It is easy to see how these skills may benefit students not just during their time at university, but may also help them in their future lives, both personally and professionally. Almost all the students who participated in a post MBCUL interview reported some change in the ways they communicated with others. The key way this manifested was by being aware when they were listening to someone properly and when they were just mindlessly nodding along but paying no real attention. They realised that the other people knew they weren't really there and they could tell that the quality of their conversations changed when they were really present with them (Lynch, 2011). Following on from this, there are studies coming out which suggest that patients who are treated by clinicians or therapists who have undergone mindfulness training feel that they are listened to and are more satisfied with the support they receive (Grepmaier et al., 2007).

4 Win-win

Mindfulness in Higher Education really is a win-win situation. Students win by learning to manage their stress and anxiety better, by developing better communication skills, and

possibly by improving their academic performance. It is also possible that students may have a better experience if staff experience mindfulness training, as they also learn to manage their stress better and develop greater compassion for themselves and their students. This may also benefit Higher Education institutions in terms of increased student satisfaction scores, less staff burnout and perhaps even greater academic success. While it is well established that mindfulness training will reduce stress, it has so much more to offer and, while not necessarily for everyone, may be just the education par excellence that James sought in the 19th century.

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