Pilot Mindfulness Intervention to Reduce Stress & Anxiety in College Students
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Abstract

Stress and anxiety are among the top mental health concerns of American college students that interfere with successful academic performance and are linked to poor mental and physical health.

This study’s goal was to pilot test an 8-week mindfulness program that facilitates development of applied mindfulness skills in the context of daily living.

22 students (45% graduate and 55% undergraduate) kept daily diary and reported on stress, anxiety, and program adherence.

Adherence to daily meditation was 62.5% (SD = 6.54) and to daily practices 70% (SD = 6.77).

Controlling for sleep, students demonstrated a consistent reduction in their stress level every week (p < .05). Similarly, their anxiety decreased from week to week (p < .05).

These findings demonstrate general acceptance and efficacy of the program.

Introduction

Prevalence of stress & anxiety among college students is historically high.

Based on the 2008 Associated Press and mtvU survey of college students, 80% report experiencing daily stress & 13% have been diagnosed with a mental health condition such as an anxiety disorder or depression.

Stress & anxiety interfere with completion of college assignments, co-morbid with mental illnesses (depression, suicidality), impact physical well-being, and may lead to college drop-out.

Mindfulness practices are a collection of techniques that promote awareness and acceptance of the present moment (vs. rumination). It has been shown to promote stress resilience and reduce anxiety.

Empirically validated mindfulness programs, however, are not readily available to college students because of cost & lack of access.

Sample

22 students (45% graduate and 55% undergraduate)

82% were female.

Caucasian (70%), African-American (10%), Asian (10%) & mixed (10%) median age of 22.5 (SD = 5.82).

27% with prior experience in mindfulness (e.g., yoga, meditation, tai-chi), varying in length, with median of 5 months of experience (SD = 29.6)

Students come from a variety of disciplines: audiology, psychology, journalism, education, chemical engineering, & political sciences.

“Just Be” - the Mindfulness Program

Over 8 weeks, participants learn mindfulness skills in the context of daily living and practice those skills daily. Two months are required to develop an initial habit of self-awareness, equanimity and unconditional kindness. Skills are practiced through formal and informal exercises.

Weekly Themes
1. Breath awareness
2. Body awareness (sensations)
3. Equanimity/non-resistance
4. Unconditional kindness
5. Thought awareness
6. Emotional awareness
7. Deep listening
8. Non reactivity

Practice Format
- Daily formal practice (guided meditation – 20 min – one meditation theme per week)
- Daily informal practice to facilitate transference of skills to daily life (e.g., breaths & body awareness, taking breaks, making choices)

Study Design

Meta-Analysis Results

Program Adherence:
- On average, participants completed 30 out of 48 daily meditations (62.5%, SD = 6.54, Range: 18-41)
- On average, participants completed 34 out of 48 daily informal practices (71%, SD = 6.77, Range: 22-46)

Daily Stress & Anxiety:
- Controlling for the amount of sleep, participants demonstrated an overall reduction in stress and anxiety (p < .05)
- The pattern of changes was quadratic (p < .05)
- Results were robust despite the progressive demands of the semester and coursework

Discussion & Future Directions

- Results support efficacy of the mindfulness-based program to reduce stress and anxiety in college students
- The findings hold despite the increasing demands of the semester
- Uniquely, the study utilized the daily diary method to capture adherence and daily experiences of participants
- Adherence to daily formal and informal practices was high
- Forthcoming follow-up data will be assessed to examine global pre-to post-changes in major study outcomes (i.e., stress, anxiety, mindfulness) and capture general experiences with the program
- Overall, students benefitted from the program & reported general program satisfaction

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