

Integrating Mindfulness Meditation Into the Organizational Behaviour Curriculum

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There is a body of evidence demonstrating the positive relationship between mindfulness and a range of Organizational Behaviour (OB) based skills and capabilities. These include perception, emotional regulation, stress management, ethical decision-making, and teamwork. Based on this research, a 10-module introductory mindfulness program was developed for use in Organizational Behaviour classes. This program was successfully introduced to undergraduate, organizational behaviour classes, and was found to 'set the stage' for student participation and reduce stress for 72% of participants. This article expands on existing research on targeted mindfulness intervention programs through the development and initial testing of an OB-specific program.

Keywords: mindfulness meditation, organizational behaviour curriculum, undergraduate students

INTRODUCTION

The inclusion of an introductory mindfulness meditation program into Organizational Behaviour (OB) curriculum is not only relevant given the impact of mindfulness on many of the personal and interpersonal skills related to OB courses but also can assist students in managing the stress associated with academic study. The program has been introduced into a variety of undergraduate courses including Organizational Behaviour and Interpersonal Skills, Interpersonal and Team Dynamics and Negotiation and Conflict Management as well as Negotiation and Conflict Management at the graduate level within a traditional classroom format.

THERORECTICAL FOUNDATION AND TEACHING IMPLICATIONS

Over the past 40 years mindfulness and mindfulness meditation has been increasingly utilized in clinical and non-clinical settings as a vehicle to improve well being and human functioning. While Mindfulness Meditation has been practiced in the East for centuries (Palmer & Rodger, 2009), its introduction as a well-being intervention in the West began as a vehicle to assist patients with chronic illness as a method to manage issues associated with medical conditions (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Mindfulness itself can be defined as

“mental state with the characteristics of present-focused awareness and attention (Zhang & Wu, 2014, p.24). Mindfulness meditation, on the other hand, can be defined as a set of practices and exercises that can play a role in achieving a mindful state (Brown & Ryan, 2004).

Since its initial introduction in the West, Mindfulness Meditation has been applied as an aid in managing a wide range of populations in clinical settings including veterans (Heffner, Crean & Kemp, 2016), prisoners (Auty, Cope & Liebling, 2017), people with addiction (Riggs, Greenberg & Dvorakova, 2019), mental health (Galante, Iribarren & Pearce, 2013) or sleep issues (Spijkerman, Pots, & Bohlmeijer, 2016). The implementation of Mindfulness Meditation has since been extended to a range of non-clinical settings (Kendrick & Peveler, 2010) and has demonstrated affirmative effects on stress and other aspects of mental health including positive affect, self-attributed mindfulness and increased levels of attention (Eby, Allen, Conley, Williamson, Henderson & Mancini, 2017).

The application of mindfulness meditation has also made in-roads into the workplace, as of 2016 13% of U.S. workers reported engagement in mindfulness activities (Good, Lyddy, Glomb, Bono, Brown, Duffy, Baer, Brewer, & Lazar 2016) and employers such as Google, Target, Aetna, Dow Chemical, Intel, and the United States Marine Corps have instituted training programs (Eby et al., 2017). Mindfulness Based Interventions (MBIs) for employees have been implemented in a wide range of sectors including chemical processing, primary education, health care, social service, law enforcement, government, biotechnology, information services, energy, finance/banking, manufacturing, military, higher education, and human services (Eby et al., 2017; Jamieson & Tuckey, 2017). MBIs focus on improving a range of human functioning including attention, cognition, emotion, behaviour, and physiology (Good et al., 2016) and have centered on efforts to improve worker well-being, work performance, relationships and task performance, leadership and teamwork (Good et al., 2016; Sutcliffe, Vogus & Dane, 2016). With the growth of interest in mindfulness there are an array of MBIs used in the workplace. The most common ones include mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), modified versions of MBSR and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) (Bamber & Morpeth, 2018).

Part of the overall growth in mindfulness meditation has extended to the post-secondary education sector. The application of mindfulness-based interventions to College and University students is particularly relevant. The American College of Health Association (2015) has reported that students reporting anxiety has doubled since 2004 and 21.9% of students indicate that anxiety has a negative impact on their academics. The COVID-19 pandemic has created a new, significant stressor for students, increasing student anxiety globally (Kercojevic, Basch, Sullivan, & Davi, 2020; Cao, et al., 2020; Alemany-Arrebola, Rojas-Ruiz, Granda-Vera, & Custodio Mingorance-Estrada, 2020), decreasing student's ability to focus on academic work by as much as 73.5% (Kercojevic, Basch, Sullivan, & Davi, 2020). Students cite academic pressure as the main source of their stress (Galante, Iribarren & Pearce, 2013). To address this, issue many colleges and universities have implemented a range of MBIs. These programs include MBSR, MBCT, Meditation and Yoga, mindfulness-based technology, mindfulness-based compassion training and mindfulness-based eating (Cieslak, Hardy, Kyles, Miller, Mullins, Root & Smith, 2016). These programs are typically stand-alone programs and are not incorporated into specific academic courses. The formats include 4 to 8-week programs, 2-hour introductory, drop-in programs and apps (Dawson et al., 2019). A particularly popular program is Koru Mindfulness, developed by Duke University, which is now being offered by 94 Universities (Center for Koru Mindfulness, 2020). Research has demonstrated that MBI programs can have significant impact on improving student mental health by reducing stress, anxiety, and depression (Bamber and Schneider, 2016; Bamber and Morpeth, 2019; Dawson et al., 2019).

There is a body of research that suggests mindfulness has a significant impact on a range of interpersonal skills and capabilities related to OB including communication (Jones & Hansen, 2015; Jones, Bodie & Hughes, 2019), emotional management and regulation (Arch & Craske, 2006; Winning & Boag, 2015; Remmers, Topolinski & Koole, 2016) perceptual accuracy (Moore & Malinowski, 2009; Kiken & Shook, 2011; Hafenbrack, Kinias, & Barsade, 2014; Hophthrow, Hooper, Mahmood, Meier & Weger, 2017), job satisfaction (Hülshager, Alberts & Feinholdt, 2013; Dane & Brummel, 2014), leadership (Roche, Haar & Luthans, F., 2014; Schuh, Xue Zheng, Xin & Fernandez, 2019; Rupperecht, Falke, Kohls, Tamdjidi, Wittmann and Kersemaekers, 2019), ethical decision-making (Shapiro, Jazaieri & Goldin, 2012; Culiberg

& Mihelic, 2019), conflict management (Fan, Tang, Tang, & Posner, 2015), prosocial behavior (Donald, Sahdrs, Van Zanden, Duineveld, Atkins, Marshall & Ciarrochi, 2019), negotiation (Reb & Narayanan, 2014), power (Xiaoming & Xin, 2017), teamwork (Yu & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2017), motivation (Papies, Pronk, Keesman, & Barsalou, 2015; Donald, J. N., Bradshaw, E. L., Ryan, R. M., Barsarkod, G., Ciarrochi, J., Duineveld, J. J., & Sahdra, B. K., 2019) and stress management (Wolever, Bobinet, McCabe, Mackenzie, Fekete, Kusnick & Baime, 2012). The link between mindfulness and skills and capabilities related to organizational behaviour provides a rationale to expose students to mindfulness in OB based courses.

INTRODUCTION TO MINDFULNESS MEDITATION PROGRAM

In Fall 2018 the program was introduced into two 90 student sections of an introductory Organization Behaviour undergraduate course in the HRM/OB Department at the Ted Rogers School of Management, Ryerson University in a traditional classroom format. The program had been previously implemented into an undergraduate Interpersonal and Team Dynamics course and subsequently in a graduate Negotiations and Conflict Management course. In January 2022 the program will be introduced into an undergraduate Negotiation and Conflict Management course. For the Negotiation courses the supporting research has been slightly modified to include research directly related to negotiations, conflict, and management skills.

Exercise Overview

The Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation consists of 10, ten-to-fifteen-minute modules (Appendix). Each module consists of a short meditation exercise, student feedback and the introduction of a research study pertinent to the class topic. Students are informed at the start of the first session that their participation in the modules is voluntary. As the program is conducted at the beginning of each class, students are advised if they do not want to participate, to wait outside the class and the doors will be open when the module is completed. The students are also informed that on the rare occasion, participation in meditation exercises may raise unwanted, difficult experiences and emotions. If they have any difficulties of this type, they are advised to see the instructor or seek support from Student Services. This type of occurrence is less likely to occur in an introductory program as the meditations are quite short. At the beginning of each session students are reminded that their participation is voluntary and to seek assistance if they are experiencing difficulties because of participating in the exercise.

Learning Objectives

The program has the following learning objectives:

- Increase student familiarity with personal physiological, mental, and emotional states
- Provide students with the ability to perform introductory meditation practices
- Provide students with techniques to reduce and manage stress
- Enable students to recognize the connection between mindfulness and a range of personal and interpersonal skills

Student Feedback

The feedback from the Fall 2018 programs was encouraging. Seventy-two per cent of students reported they found the exercises helpful in reducing stress. Sixty-two per cent of students indicated that the exercises presented in the program would be helpful to them in the future. Although students did not receive instruction to practice the exercises outside of the class, almost forty percent of students did so. Close to eighty percent of students recommended that the training be used in future courses. Ninety three percent of students found the content was easy to follow. Given the introductory nature of the program thirty eight percent of students indicated interest in pursuing more training. Interestingly, despite the presentation of research indicating the relevance of mindfulness to course topics, only forty-four percent of students found the content of the modules relevant to the course content.

CONCLUSION

Mindfulness meditation programs have been successfully adapted into clinical, educational, and workplace settings (Creswell, 2016). Within the classroom, MBI programs have been implemented to reduce student anxiety and improve overall student wellbeing (Bamber & Schneider, 2016; Bamber & Morpeth, 2019; Dawson et al., 2019). Mindfulness mediation programs significantly impact OB related interpersonal skills including emotional regulation and communication (Remmers, Topolinski & Koole, 2016; Jones & Hansen, 2015.). Given the overall classroom success of MBI programs, and its impact on OB related skills, we created an MBI program for the OB Classroom.

This program was introduced to 160 undergraduate HR/OB students and was found to help set the stage for students to be relaxed, motivated, and prepared to participate in classroom activities. While not formally tested, our results suggest that an MBI program can be successfully integrated into the OB curriculum, without greatly altering course curriculum or available class time.

Limitations

This study included a relatively small sample size (n=180), and a single data collection which limits the generalizability of outcomes. In addition, there was no baseline measurement of student anxiety levels or testing of causal relationships. Despite these limitations, we found that most students evaluated the program as helpful (62%) and worth continuing (80%). Students perceived the program as helpful in reducing anxiety and demonstrated a surprising willingness to engage in meditation outside of the classroom. While preliminary, our results suggest MBI modules can successfully be integrated into the OB classroom. We suggest future research replicate the proposed MBI program with more rigorous evaluation and increased sampling.

Implications and Future Research

There is a wide range of scope for MBI programs within the classroom. The main purpose of this program was to introduce students to mindfulness meditation, within the limitations of a regularly scheduled OB curriculum. As with any educational offering, the effectiveness will increase with the experience and training of the instructor. However, the proposed structured modules serve as a valuable template, which can be adapted to a variety of OB related courses. During the initial program, students were not instructed to practice the exercises outside of the classroom. Although almost 40% of the inaugural students did practice outside of the classroom, the impacts of the program may increase by encouraging outside meditation.

The COVID-19 pandemic created new challenges and opportunities for mindfulness interventions. Students have reported significantly higher anxiety and depression, increased by both direct health concerns and the abrupt switch to online learning (Alemany-Arrebola, Rojas-Ruiz, Granda-Vera, & Custodio Mingorance-Estrada, 2020). This increased anxiety heightened the need for student supports (Cao, et al., 2020), which can include wellness focused MBIs. However, there are significant challenges in incorporating mindfulness programs in the online classroom. Meditation type exercises can invoke anxiety or discomfort in some students, especially those with more vulnerable conditions. Instructors interacting with students through video platforms have less access to early warning signs of student distress. Any mindfulness program introduced online must include accessible and relevant supports. In addition, reduced online engagement may eliminate the benefits of MBI programs. Further evaluation is needed to determine how to adapt the proposed modules to the online classroom.

In conclusion, we have contributed a structured MBI program, grounded in relevant OB literature, and demonstrated a preliminary, but promising impact on individual students and the learning environment. We suggest future researchers and instructors continue to adapt the proposed modules to meet the needs of OB classrooms and conduct more rigorous program evaluation.

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APPENDIX

Organizational Behaviour and Interpersonal Skills (MHR405) Mindfulness Meditation Modules

- Module 1 **Individual Behaviour, Personality, and Values**
Meditation: Introduction to the Breath (Williams & Penman, 2011).
Check in with Students
Shared Research: Mindfulness-based stress reduction effects on moral reasoning and decision making (Shapiro, Jazaieri & Goldin, 2012).
- Module 2 **Perceiving Ourselves and Others in Organizations**
Meditation: Tracking Breath through Respiratory System (Williams & Penman, 2011).
Check in with Students
Shared Research: Looking up: Mindfulness increases positive judgments and reduces negativity bias (Kiken & Shook, 2011).
- Module 3 **Workplace Emotions and Attitudes**
Meditation: Belly Breathing (Rogers & Maytan, 2012).
Check in with Students
Shared Research: Why Being Mindful May Have More Benefits Than You Realize: Mindfulness Improves Both Explicit and Implicit Mood Regulation (Remmers, Topolinski & Koole, 2016).
- Module 4 **Team Dynamics**
Meditation: Extending the Breath (Hahn, 1976).
Check in with Students
Shared Research: Introducing team mindfulness and considering its safeguard role against conflict transformation and social undermining (Yu & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2017).
- Module 5 **Foundations of Employee Motivation**
Meditation: Body Scan (Rogers & Maytan, 2012).
Check in with Students
Shared Research: Mindfulness and its association with varied types of motivation: A systematic review and meta-analysis using self-determination theory. (Donald, Bradshaw, Ryan, Barsarkod, Ciarrochi, Duineveld & Sahdra, 2019).
- Module 6 **Communication**
Meditation: Counting the Breath (Hanh, 1976).
Check in with Students
Shared Research: The impact of mindfulness on supportive communication skills: Three exploratory studies (Jones & Hansen, 2015).
- Module 7 **Power and Influence in the Workplace**
Meditation: Conscious of Breath (Hanh, 1976).
Check in with Students
Shared Research: The Buffering Effect of Mindfulness on Abusive Supervision and Creative Performance: A Social Cognitive Framework (Xiaoming & Xin, 2017).
- Module 8 **Conflict Management**
Meditation: Labelling Thoughts (Rogers & Maytan, 2012).

Check in with Students

Shared Research: Time course of conflict processing modulated by brief meditation training. (Fan, Tang, Tang & Posner, 2015).

Module 9

Leadership in Organizational Settings

Meditation: Identifying with Emotions (Less, 2013).

Check in with Students

Shared Research: Mindful Leader Development: How Leaders Experience the Effects of Mindfulness Training on Leader Capabilities. (Rupperecht, Falke, Kohls, Tamdjidi, Wittmann, & Kersemaekers, 2019).

Module 10

Stress

Meditation: Labelling Emotions (Rogers & Maytan, 2012)

Check in with Students

Shared Research: Effective and viable mind-body stress reduction in the workplace: A randomized controlled trial. (Wolever, Bobinet, McCabe, Mackenzie, Fekete, Kusnick & Baime, 2012).