

Middle School-Based Mindfulness Program

Ashley Gartner

Wake Forest University

CNS 771: Clinical Mental Health Counseling

Dr. Jennifer Rogers; Maggie Poandl

May 23rd, 2021

Middle-School Based Mindfulness Program

Adolescence is a time of immense biological, cognitive, and physical change (Berk, 2018). It usually starts around age 11 and signals the transition from childhood into becoming an adult. Unfortunately, this change can trigger adverse psychological effects, such as devolving self-concept, self-esteem, and self-worth (Berk, 2018). They are also at higher risk for depression, anxiety, delinquency, substance abuse, and suicide. Aside from the biological changes that increase this risk, there are also many external forces, like academic pressure or bullying, which also contribute to this risk. Fortunately, this same change leads to enhanced powers of reasoning, problem-solving, and self-understanding (Berk, 2018).

Many people do not connect the poverty of rural communities to the poverty found within the urban setting, but the compounding issues, while different, are very similar in outcome. Rural areas are rife with the same problems that plague urban centers, such as homelessness, poverty, maltreatment, substance abuse, and violence (Viafora, Mathiesen, & Unsworth, 2015). However, unlike in urban centers, they likely do not have access to mental health assistance (Blackstock, Chae, Mauk, & McDonald, 2018). There is also a higher than usual stigma attached to help-seeking behaviors because of ideas such as a lack of anonymity, mistrust of mental health professionals, and a generally negative attitude toward mental health care (e.g., you should be able to deal with this on your own, you are weak if you seek help) (Blackstock, Chae, Mauk, & McDonald, 2018).

Mindfulness, or being in the moment and purposefully paying attention to one's environment and inner self with kindness and curiosity, has been shown to increase academic outcomes and working memory, decrease levels of psychopathology and stress-related symptoms in educational settings (Caballero, et al., 2019). It has also been shown to increase attentiveness,

social skills, emotional regulation, and self-esteem, and decreases in anxiety, stress, and fatigue (Kielty, Gilligan, & Staton, 2017). Many of these factors are core concepts within the overall concept of resilience (Moore & Woodcock, 2017). Moore and Woodcock (2017) found that increasing resilience decreased bullying behaviors and increased the protective factors against depression and anxiety. Self-reports from Kielty et al. (2017) show that students use mindfulness strategies to stay calm and focused in various arenas, including various situations at home. In Bain et al. (2011), the counselors surveyed all agreed that there needed to be more resources available to the students within rural areas and that implementing them in schools would be a great way to offer them.

Mindfulness training that occurs during early adolescence would take advantage of the expanded cognitive abilities that arise at this age and gets ahead of the internal storm caused by its changes. Therefore, a program focused on directly training sixth-grade students in a small rural community will likely increase their resilience, academic outcomes, and coping mechanisms, as well as prevent many of these students from developing mental health or substance use disorders. This early introduction, before beliefs and attitudes become values, should also help to remove the stigma surrounding mental health that is so pervasive in rural communities.

The program will consist of four sessions across four days. Each session will consist of 75 students (and their teachers) and run twice a day (a morning and afternoon session). The sessions will be approximately 90 minutes to 2 hours each, dependent upon the subject matter and student interaction. The program will increase help-seeking behaviors and self-awareness, teach basic breathing exercises, body scanning, and Tai Chi, and attempt to decrease the perceived stigma surrounding mental health conditions. This program should increase

mindfulness and prevention behaviors within the student body, decrease susceptibility to mental health conditions, improve educational outcomes, and empower the students by altering misconceptions, and give them additional tools to succeed.

Mindfulness Program Plan

Session 1: Increasing help-seeking behaviors

Goals

- Reducing stigma of having and seeking help for mental health conditions
- Increasing emotional intelligence

Objectives

- Explain mental health and the effects disorders can have on adolescents
- Having the group identify and name the emotions that go along with depression and anxiety correctly, have them simulate the feeling, and locate where they feel those feelings within their bodies.
- Discuss how important it is that they ask for help when they need it, rather than trying to deal with it on

Methods

As a group, discuss what it means to have a mental health condition, relay statistics on mental health conditions in adolescents, and that having a mental health condition is not something to ignore. Also, discuss mindfulness and what benefits it offers in overcoming mental health conditions.

Discussing what anxiety and depression feel like as a group and helping the students name the feelings and emotions that they are experiencing. Helping the kids focus on where they are feeling these emotions within their bodies so that they can identify them in the future and ask for help.

Session 2: Increasing self-awareness

Goals

- Increasing self-awareness

Objectives

- Engage students in a discussion about how to look at yourself objectively
- Discuss positive self-talk; what it is, when to use it, and overcoming negative self-talk
- Teach practical goal-setting techniques

Methods

As a group, discuss and practice ways to become more self-aware. Begin by exploring ways to look at oneself objectively. Take 20 minutes to have each student reflect on and write down at least five legitimate strengths, five non-judgmental weaknesses, and then talking honestly about these strengths and weaknesses. During this discussion, bring up negative self-talk and work with the students on how to overcome it with positive self-talk. In the final part of the session, use each student's listed strengths and weaknesses and teach them about practical goal setting by walking them through the steps to set short- and long-term goals for the next year.

Session 3: Basic Breathing Exercises and Body Scanning

Goals

- Having students able to practice and utilize breathing exercises to calm anxiety
- Helping students be able to use body scanning to become aware of
- Connecting the breathing exercises and body scanning back to the emotional intelligence work from the first day and self-awareness work from the second day.
- Explain how both exercises help calm the inner storm.

Objectives

- Teach and practice multiple breathing techniques, including diaphragm (abdominal) versus thoracic breathing, deep (belly) breathing, and lion's breath.
- Teach and practice basic body scanning and progressive muscle relaxation

Methods

Explain what breathing exercises and body scanning are and why they are useful in the reduction of anxiety and depression, connecting back to the emotional intelligence work on the first day. Demonstrate and practice each type of breathing exercise with the students, until they are comfortable using them. Then move onto a step-by-step instruction on how to complete a full body scan using progressive muscle relaxation for additional awareness.

Session 4: Tai Chi

Goals

- Giving students the ability to utilize Tai-Chi as a mindfulness exercise

Objectives

- Explain what Tai Chi is (a version of karate) and its role within the mindfulness framework
- Connect Tai Chi back to breathing exercises
- Practice Tai-Chi moves, so that the students do not feel silly using them
- Possibly set up a Tai Chi club at the school, so that students can still practice the moves together and offer an additional support system for them.

Methods

Prior to the program, a local Tai Chi instructor would need to be located and commissioned to teach basic moves and philosophy of Tai Chi. The premise of the previous sessions would be explained to the instructor and the request would be made that he or she connect back to the previous sessions to build on that experience and reinforce it. During the sessions, the group would learn and practice the basic moves under the watchful eye of the instructor. If a teacher is willing to be the facilitator, help the school set up a Tai Chi Club, so that the participants (and other students if they are interested) can practice Tai Chi together.

Resources

****The following list of resources will be offered to each student on the final session day.****

Learning more about mental health conditions/stigma

Break the Stigma: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=49mfPFTZsHs>

Mental Health Stigma: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1DgYCi9IDI>

Breaking the Stigma and Shame of Mental Illness:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OsRF8xGgbPA>

Ted Talks: The struggle of mental health:

https://www.ted.com/playlists/175/the_struggle_of_mental_health

Self-Awareness Exercises

How to Be More Self Aware: 8 Tips to Boost Self-Awareness:

<https://www.developgoodhabits.com/what-is-self-awareness/>

Deep Breathing Exercises

Deep Breathing Exercises & Techniques:

<https://www.webmd.com/balance/stress-management/stress-relief-breathing-techniques>

8 Deep Breathing Exercises for Anxiety Relief:

<https://www.verywellmind.com/abdominal-breathing-2584115>

10 Breathing Exercises to Try: For Stress, Training, & Lung Capacity:

<https://www.healthline.com/health/breathing-exercise>

Body Scanning Exercises

Body Scan Meditation (Tame Anxiety) – 7 minutes:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QS2yDmWk0vs>

30-minute Body Scan: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPwHmaaaxLc>

Tai Chi Resources

Tai Chi 24 Form Step by Step Instructions:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-kJzyrIM1cg&t=41s>

7 Minute Chi – Tai Chi for Beginners: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YXPXJwjyGgM>

Tai Chi with Helen Liang: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apIffYvzuS0>

References

- Bain, S. F., Rueda, B., Mata-Villarreal, J., & Mundy, M.-A. (2011). Assessing mental health needs of rural schools in South Texas: Counselors' perspectives. *Research in Higher Education Journal*, 14(1), 1-11.
- Berk, L. E. (2018). *Development Through the Lifespan* (Seventh ed.). Hoboken, NJ: Pearson.
- Blackstock, J. S., Chae, K. B., Mauk, G. W., & McDonald, A. (2018). Achieving access to mental health care for school-aged children in rural communities: A literature review. *The Rural Educator*, 39(1), 12-25. Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/achieving-access-mental-health-care-school-aged/docview/2376227066/se-2?accountid=14868>
- Caballero, C., Scherer, E., West, M. R., Mrazek, M. D., Gabrieli, C. F., & Gabrieli, J. D. (2019). Greater mindfulness is associated with better academic achievement in middle school. *International Mind, Brain, and Education Society*, 13(3), 157-166. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1111/mbe.12200>
- Kielty, M. L., Gilligan, T. D., & Staton, A. R. (2017). Whole-school approaches to incorporating mindfulness-based interventions: Supporting the capacity for optimal functioning in school settings. *Childhood Education*, 93(2), 128-135. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2017.1300491>
- Moore, B., & Woodcock, S. (2017). Resilience, bullying, and mental health: Factors associated with improved outcomes. *Psychology in the Schools*, 54(7), 689-702.
doi:10.1002/pits.22028

- Viafora, D. P., Mathiesen, S. G., & Unsworth, S. J. (2015). Teaching mindfulness to middle school students and homeless youth in school classrooms. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 24(1), 1179-1191. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-014-9926-3>
- Wall, R. B. (2005). Tai chi and mindfulness-based stress reduction in a Boston Public middle school. *National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners*, 19(4), 230-237. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pedhc.2005.02.006>