



The Impact of a Mindfulness Course on Therapeutic Skills and Clinical Experiences of Clinical Psychology Students

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Background Information

Introduction to Mindfulness

- Mindfulness is a mental state characterized by present-centered awareness and a non-judging attitude to ongoing experience (Kabat-Zinn, 1994)
- Informal mindfulness integrates practice into daily activities, while formal mindfulness typically involves dedicated meditation practices (Kabat-Zinn, 2012).
- Mindfulness courses can provide students with a structured setting to engage in experiential learning of formal and informal mindfulness practices (Hawkins et al., 2020).
- The benefits that students experience from participating in these classes extend beyond classroom learning and continue into their personal and emerging professional lives (Schanche et al., 2019; Hawkins et al., 2020).

Mindfulness and Personal Impact on Students

- Students experience the personal benefits of mindfulness, such as fostering acceptance, understanding, reducing ruminations, and alleviating emotional distress, anxiety, and depression (Schanche et al., 2019).
- Students become equipped with tools to navigate academic challenges and foster a deeper connection to their identity as emerging therapists (Schanche et al., 2019).

Mindfulness and Clinical Impacts for Students

- There seems to be a direct parallel between mindfulness benefits and clinical identity. The qualities developed through mindfulness activities align with the developmental journey clinical psychology students undergo to become competent and impactful psychologists.
- Mindfulness practices have been shown to promote qualities that inherently support clinicians in developing foundational clinical skill; such as acceptance, warmth, non-judgmental attitudes, and understanding towards clients (Hawkins et al., 2020).

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to identify the effectiveness of a mindfulness course for clinical psychology students, through employing experiential learning methods.

Methodology

Participants

- The participating sample consisted of graduate level students enrolled in a 15-week elective course, "Mindfulness Approaches to Health Psychology" within a doctoral program for clinical psychology (N=23).
- Participants included 19 women and 4 men.

Measures

- **Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ)** (Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, and Toney, 2006): a 39-item self-report measure assessing five facets of a general tendency to be mindful in daily life: Observing, Describing, Acting, Nonjudging, and Nonreactivity.
- Five facets: 1) observing, noticing, and attending to sensations, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings; 2) describing/labeling one's experience with words; 3) acting with awareness (i.e., automatic pilot/concentration/non-distraction); 4) non-judging; and 5) non-reactivity to inner experience.
- Item responses for the FFMQ are scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never or very rarely true*) to 5 (*very often or always true*).

Procedures

- All students who took the elective course were recruited for participation.
- Pretest assessment occurred during the 1st week of class, via completion of the FFMQ outcome measure.
- Posttest assessment occurred during the 13th week of class, respectively, to assess change in mindfulness.
- Between the 1st and 13th week of the course, students practiced weekly formal and informal mindfulness meditations, as well as an individual half-day mindfulness retreat.
- Throughout the course, students kept a weekly journal to reflect on their experiences of mindfulness practice and learning.

Results

- Changes of self-reported mindfulness between the 1st and 13th week of class were computed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Results

Table 1

Scales	Pre-Test (1 st week)		Post-Test (13 th week)		df	t	p
	M	SD	M	SD			
Observation	3.31	0.55	3.81	0.59	22	-4.37	.000
Description	3.49	0.65	3.77	0.68	22	-2.81	.01
Mindful Action	2.75	0.59	3.24	0.46	22	-4.81	.000
Non-Judgmental	3.23	0.63	3.72	0.66	22	-4.58	.000
Non-Reactivity	2.87	0.62	3.26	0.41	22	-3.88	.001
FFMQ	3.11	0.33	3.55	0.35	22	-5.64	.000

N = 23; M = mean; SD = standard deviation; df = degrees of freedom; t = t-value; p = significance level

Quantitative Findings

- As seen in Table 1, a series of dependent t-tests found significant changes in the total score of mindfulness and all the subdomains over time in students enrolled in the course.
- The results support the positive effect of meditation practices and mindfulness learning on improving mindfulness states for students in a clinical psychology program.

Table 2

Major Themes	Quotations
Positive Meditation Practice Experience	After the meditation, once I was able to free myself of a portion of the stress I was experiencing, and I let go of the thoughts in mind after the tough day I'd had. This practice (loving kindness meditation) immediately uplifted my mood. I could feel my mood shift throughout the process of bringing myself to think about someone I love, something positive, and a moment of joy and giving. The slow, measured rhythm of my breaths served as an anchor, grounding me in the present moment and diverting attention away from the pain. (Walking meditation) focusing on my breathing when I walked, the sound around me, the picturesque views of Lake Merritt and down the road from my practicum placement, I felt very calm and collected, almost like I was prepared to take on anything.
Impact on Clinical Skills	I think the overall feeling of release and control which this mindfulness practice can really help a client with releasing and letting go of some of the things which may cause or allow a headache to persist. I decided to intervene using a more somatic mindfulness practice (in a group for geriatric patients). From a trauma lens, when children can breathe and regulate their bodies, they can begin to access what I tell them is their 'upstairs brain,' where more complex thinking happens.
Impact on Self	(meditation) helped to bring clarity to my mind and develop a capacity for compassion and empathy towards myself. In the face of impending deadlines, these practices (Box breathing and meditation) emerged as anchors, grounding me in the present and ultimately facilitating a more effective solution. This experience made me feel small. It made me feel as though my problems were smaller than I thought and that my importance was less than I thought. I believe my existential thoughts came about as I really started to reflect on my experience shifting to an observer, rather than an actor.

Qualitative Findings

- Students' weekly journals were randomly selected and coded qualitatively.

Discussion

- There is a body of work dedicated to the study of how mindfulness practices for counselors or therapists benefit both their personal and professional lives.
- However, most recent studies have not closely examined doctoral level clinical psychology students as their population.
- The results of the current study supports the notion that a mindfulness course on therapeutic skills and clinical experiences benefit clinical psychology students in their own tendency to be mindful as well as in their own clinical practices with clients.
- It is beneficial to introduce personal mindfulness practices to clinical psychology doctoral students as a way of preparing them for their future profession (Schanche et al., 2019).
- The experiential learning style of the mindfulness class in this study provides avenues for students to ground their learning through integrating teachings beyond the classroom, allowing them to better implement teaching in clinical settings.

Limitations

- A single measure was utilized to operationally define mindfulness, contributing to mono-operational bias. For future research, it is recommended that other outcome measures be used in addition to the FFMQ for improved construct validity.
- Participants may have over-reported the positive implications of their experiences throughout the class for more socially desirable responses and/or the known expectations of positive experiences. However, it is unlikely that participants' past responses were remembered from week 1 to 13.
- Limited demographic information was collected throughout this study. For future research, it is recommended to gather a more extensive range of demographic data from participants, such as race/ethnicity, age, religion, etc. This will facilitate a more nuanced understanding of cultural considerations when interpreting results.
- There was a large female to male ratio among the sample. This may have impacted perceived experiences reported by participants.

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