

THE BENEFITS OF MINDFULNESS AS A WEEKLY ACTIVITY: EXPERIENCES FROM A MALE HOMELESS SERVICE

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Кевин Стивънсън. ПОЛЗИТЕ ОТ ОСЪЗНАТОСТТА КАТО СЕДМИЧНА ДЕЙНОСТ: ОПИТ ОТ СОЦИАЛНА УСЛУГА ЗА БЕЗДОМНИ МЪЖЕ

Социалните услуги в Ирландия се организират от различни организации, които имат различни виждания за социалните дейности в рамките на резидентните услуги и на такива за бездомни хора. Осъзнатостта се е превърнала в „модна дума“, когато става въпрос за лечение на психичното здраве и за всекидневно практикуване в съвременния свят. Въпреки различните начини или практики на осъзнатост, настоящото проучване дава пример за това, как осъзнатостта може да се практикува в социалните услуги и по-специално в резидентната услуга за бездомни мъже. Като предоставя информация за начина на предоставяне на осъзнатостта, проучването информира за реалния опит от седмична сесия по осъзнатост в ирландска социална услуга за бездомни мъже с петима участници. Чрез ограничен количествен подход за разбиране на опита на участниците в една от сесиите по осъзнатост, проучването дава някои прозрения, които трябва да се имат предвид при предоставянето на осъзнатост в социалните услуги или в други терапевтични среди. Сесиите са провеждани в продължение на 20 месеца, като резултатите от въпросник с Ликертова скала за отговори са получени по-скоро от мненията на участниците за една конкретна сесия, отколкото от цялостното им мнение за опита им от сесиите за осъзнатост като цяло. Резултатите разкриват, че ползите за участниците са очевидни, и осигуряват разбиране за резултатите и преживяванията на потребителите на услугата, участващи в седмични сесии за осъзнатост. Може да се заключи, че има някои идеи, които трябва да се имат предвид преди и след сесията и които дават разбиране за нужната подготовка.

Ключови думи: бездомност, интраперсонално, междуличностно, осъзнатост, социални услуги

Kevin Stevenson. THE BENEFITS OF MINDFULNESS AS A WEEKLY ACTIVITY: EXPERIENCES FROM A MALE HOMELESS SERVICE

The social services in Ireland are organized by different organizations which have different views on social activities within residential and homeless services for service-users. Mindfulness has become a ‘buzzword’ when it comes to mental health

treatment and for daily practice in the contemporary world. Despite the different modes or practices of mindfulness, this study provides an example of how mindfulness can be conducted in the social services, in particular a male homeless residential service. By providing a background on how mindfulness was provided the study informs of a real-world experience of a weekly mindfulness session in an Irish male homeless service with five participants. Through a limited quantitative approach to understanding the participants' experience of one of the mindfulness sessions provided, the study informs of some insights that need to be kept in mind for providing mindfulness in social service work or in other therapeutic settings. The sessions took place over the span of 20 months, with the results via a Likert Scale questionnaire deriving from the views of participants on one particular session rather than their overall views on their experience of the mindfulness sessions in general. The findings reveal that the benefit for the participants is apparent and provides insights into the results and experiences of service users partaking in mindfulness on a weekly basis. It can be concluded that there are some notions to be kept in mind prior and post session, which provides a keen insight into the preparations required.

Keywords: homelessness, intrapersonal, interpersonal, mindfulness, social services

INTRODUCTION

Mindfulness can be simply understood as a mental state that permits observations on feeling and thought as they emerge in the present; a skill learnt via exercises that involve directing attention which can integrate with training and therapy methods for the purpose of addressing psychological issues (Vreeswijk, Broersen, & Schurink, 2014, p. 14). Social services around the world have recognized that service users in homeless services require access to enriching experiences in their daily life that give a measure of self-esteem and stability whilst such service-users deal with their conditions (Harrington & Dawson, 1997). Recognizing mindfulness-based interventions as suitable candidates for social care settings, it will be shown in this study to be an activity that enriches participants' daily lives through the work of the facilitator/researcher.¹ The facilitator did not involve a formal modality for delivering the mindfulness sessions, which was found to allow for a freedom amongst participants which enabled the facilitator to make their own decisions on what works or not with the service-users as a result of having the option to change techniques utilized.

¹ The facilitator/researcher qualified as a Master of Arts (conferred 2019) in Counselling & Psychotherapy which covered skills and techniques within modules based on mindfulness approaches and theory which were utilized in the mindfulness sessions and for the subsequent research.

METHODOLOGY

Because the number of participants rarely exceeding six in the typical weekly sessions, it was appropriate to conduct an approach that aimed to analyse participant experience of one mindfulness session with five participants involved. This made the project a case study on this united community of service users who displayed the effort of coming to the session. Due to limitations, which will be elaborated on below, the researcher did not aim to include interviews for the approach and so exploring the participant experience was possible therefore through support of the notion that participant experience of the sessions is something that can be explored through Likert scaling questions. Epistemologically, the study aimed to understand the subjective participant experience through objective means that reflect participant state of being at a moment in time (after a mindfulness session). The simplicity of the answers and the scaling nature involved in the responses to the Likert questions, connected with the participants' experience in a manner that allowed them to express their feelings at a moment in time. Ontologically, the nature of reality and participant existence can be reflective in the responses from the participants that allowed them to reflect on their physical, mental, and spiritual nature within a specific moment in time. For this project, it involved reflection after the mindfulness session researched.

METHOD

The method deployed for the study involved ten questions that provided Likert scale responses for the participants, with the sample containing five participants in total for a view on one mindfulness session. Each of the five participants had previously attended at least two weekly mindfulness sessions before the session from which the feedback from the participants would be collected. Some of these participants had regularly attended the fifty-three sessions offered in the service by the facilitator/researcher, while others had recently become new members to the mindfulness group. This variety within the sample allowed for a more objective response from participants than having only regular or only new attendees participate, since it allowed both new and regular members to provide feedback in a manner that reflected both newcomer and regular.

The questionnaire provided allowed for subsequent survey conduction via content analysis of the responses from the participants and interpretations from the researcher/facilitator. The questions in the questionnaire (see Procedures below for the questions) were theoretically based on an intrapersonal and interpersonal theoretical framework which hypothesizes that the mindfulness session would benefit participants' personal communication and feeling with(in) themselves but also with

others. The theory that mindfulness can provide benefits that are physiological, psychological, or even spiritual was attempted to be shown in the results. Despite a concrete theoretical framework not being adhered to, the question design was influenced by the (*S-ART*) theoretical framework of Vago and Silbersweig (2012) in relation to self-processing, de-centering and regulation (Vago and Silbersweig, 2012). De-centering and awareness were also aspects influenced from the *Mindfulness to Meaning Theory* which postulates positive affectivity from mindfulness (Garland, Hanley, Goldin, & Gross, 2017). The questions thus aimed to provide a scale that aimed to measure the feelings of participants after one particular mindfulness session, rather than how the participants feel in their everyday life as the *Mindfulness Attentions Awareness Scale (MAAS)* proposes (Brown & Ryan, 2003).

Content analysis of the participant responses was conducted in order to reveal the patterns inherent in the feedback. Content analysis specifically can be taken as a general term for numerous different strategies that are used for text analysis (Powers & Knapp, 2006). It was also suited for this project since content analysis could be apt for simple reporting on common issues that are mentioned in the data (Green & Thorogood, 2004). The analysis led to the construction of a table in order to analyse the number of responses provided from the five participants for each question.

SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

The mindfulness sessions researched for this project, from which the single particular session responses derived via the sample provided, adhered to a consistent repertoire over several months. The sessions were provided to residents in a homeless hostel in Dublin City in a reflection room that was used for meetings, training, prayer, counselling, and quiet reflection. The sessions were advertised throughout the hostel via posters and vocal reminders at 13:00 pm on Thursdays or if not possible on that day, other days in the week dependent on availability and potential attendance, but no more than once a week. The sessions started in January 2019 and the feedback and consent for research was retrieved and research conducted September 3rd, 2020 for the 50th weekly session.

The number of participants at the session after which the research was conducted involved five men. Over the twenty-one months which the mindfulness sessions were conducted, participants averagely ranged from two to six in participant number, and the ages of participants averagely ranged from thirty years of age to sixty five, with an average of 47.3. The routine of each session involved different breathing, mental, and physical exercises conducted whilst sitting in a chair within a circle. Due to COVID-19 restrictions starting in March 2020, there was a guaranteed space of 2 metres between each participant whilst any sessions conducted during the pandemic occurred. The participants for the study signed consent forms which were created in conjunction with the organization and their ethics department. The participants were informed of their right

to terminate participation in the research whenever deemed necessary. Ethical consent was thus provided to the organization prior to the research being conducted for approval. Unconditional approval was granted on the 9th of October 2020 to conduct the research by the Ethics Subgroup of the Research Coordinating Council of the organization with the results of the research being shared with the organization. We will see below that the questions were divided between intra- and interpersonal questions for a holistic theoretical framework.

MINDFULNESS EXERCISES

There is a plethora of ways to facilitate mindfulness, and with the notion that a mindfulness state of consciousness which is intangible, not visible, and silent, is to thus be considered for research purposes as active, it is more than likely going to complicate attempts to argue for effects which are independent, clinical, and which could possibly with confidence be attributed solely to mindfulness (Mace, 2007, 152). The health benefits of mindfulness exercises can be classed firstly into the capacity to sustain and accept an attitude towards every sort of experience and secondly the capacity to maintain and direct awareness that is receptive (Mace, 2007, p. 148). According to Mace (2007), the way the activity of mindfulness was provided in this study relates to formal practices rather than informal; the former involving such practices as (a) group exchange that involves guided discussion on the experience with mindfulness led exercises, (b) movement meditation, particularly stretching, and (c) sitting meditation with attention to breathing, sound, thought and body sensation (Mace, 2007, p. 148). The benefits of mindfulness activities can be argued to be improved further via consistent and routine practice (Didonna & Bhattacharjee, 2014, p. 424). For this reason, the facilitator/researcher encouraged all participants to practice the exercises learnt in the weekly sessions on their own time, particularly when stress is being experienced or sleep is difficult to achieve.

The exercises, all of which involved the practitioner's vocal guidance, involved: two finger exercises, in which in one exercise, participants pressed their thumb of each hand against each of the respective hand's fingers for ten seconds, starting with the index finger and subsequently ending with the pinkie finger. The pinkie finger was then done for a second time after the return to the index finger occurred. The second finger exercise involved using the index finger and moving slowly (as slow as possible) around the circumference of the hand and back again. The breathing exercises involved breathing in each nostril and exhaling out of the same nostril whilst holding the other nostril closed with your index finger five times each. Then breathing in one nostril and exhaling out of the other nostril, five times each. These single nostril exercises were then followed by a deep breathing through both nostrils and exhaling through the mouth with pursed lips, all while having the hands resting on the knees with palms open and facing the ceiling. After the finger and breathing exercises, an exercise in which participants opened up

their arms in a V-form stretching manner and then tucking back (whilst exhaling) into a crouched position occurred with elbows pointed into the tummy. This was done ten times and then ended with a shaking of the limbs. What followed was a tapping exercise in which the hands are formed into gentle fists and the hands tap the muscles of the body. This exercise started with the shoulder chest area, down the arms, around the ribcage and tummy area, down the legs and to the ankles. This exercise occurred for approximately two minutes.

To end the mindfulness session, participants took part in a body scan, in which the practitioner vocally guides the participants to mentally scan their body, starting at the toes. The scan involved a mental scanning of the skin, muscle, nails, and even bones of each body part (excluding the pelvic area, buttocks, and sexual organs). Every new body part scanned would involve a return scanning to the toes, so after a scanning of the ankles for example, the scan would return to the toes, and back up again to the next section of the body. During this part of the session it was common for participants to fall asleep on some occasions. After the body scan, in which the top of the head is finally reached within the scanning process, participants were invited to comment on how they felt, and any feedback was welcome. On the day of the research conduction, organizational approved consent and feedback were administered. The feedback was received after the session rather than before or at another time, in order to receive an objective indication of the benefits of the mindfulness activities. Some of the internal obstacles that were encountered within sessions were excessive talking by participants, participants in emotional distress from life issues, participants under the influence of drugs or alcohol (in which they were not permitted to participate) and noise issues at the place of location. External obstacles involved time constraints and reminders for participants, and location for the sessions to take place, as the room in which the activity took place could be reserved for other meetings or training. Some participants conducted the exercises with their eyes closed and others did not.

PROCEDURES

The research was conducted via a questionnaire containing a Likert scale in the format of: Do Not Agree, Somewhat Agree, Agree, and Strongly Agree. The questionnaire was chosen due to the fact that the participants might have lacked the necessary social skills for effective interview responses that could have been conducive to the project. In order to reach an understanding of how the participants' experienced the mindfulness sessions, it was important to maintain how natural the session took place and how the routine of the sessions aligned with previous sessions to ensure their experience and results could reflect the experience over time to some capacity. The questions were answered after a typical weekly mindfulness session in order to ensure that their experience of the sessions was recent enough to provide genuine

feedback. The questions can be categorized into two camps, those of intrapersonal and interpersonal, with each question related to a key concept. The former took those feelings that existed and occurred within the mind of each participant during and after the session from which the questionnaire was provided. The intrapersonal questions related to questions asking about tiredness, sleepiness, energy, clear mindedness, hunger, thirst, and exercise, whereas the interpersonal questions related to the connection to others and the connection to the group facilitator. The intrapersonal questions, related to sleepiness, hunger, thirst, and exercise, can be transcendental, as they referred to states of being that aim for otherness and so a desire to be fulfilled. The intrapersonal questions of tiredness, energy, clear mindedness and relaxed can be quiescent, as the question does not refer to a provocative state that requires action for a desirable completion. The interpersonal question of feeling connected to others involved a communal response, measuring the feeling of community, whereas the question related to connection with the group facilitator, measuring a feeling of hierarchal connection.

The Likert scale provided an insight into the responses of the participants, allowing the researcher to interpret a richness to the experience of the mindfulness session. As the facilitator, practitioner, and a participant within the mindfulness session, the researcher was able to also engage ethnographically with the culture of the group. This also involved ensuring that the session was not interrupted from participants speaking or involving any actions which could distract the participants. The researcher as facilitator also allowed for the participants to be informed of any improvements that could be made for the weekly mindfulness session, but also for insights into any precautions which would need to be considered for future sessions.

FINDINGS

Dividing the questions and feedback into intrapersonal and interpersonal was helpful in the examination of the responses from the participants. Not only was such categorization useful in distinguishing the different feelings experienced within the particular session, but it allowed the researcher to gauge potential outcomes from sessions and prepare accordingly. The results for the findings are found in Table 1 and the questions provided were:

1. After the session I feel physically tired.
2. After the session I feel sleepy.
3. After the session I feel energized.
4. After the session I feel clear minded.
5. After the session I feel hungry.
6. After the session I feel thirsty.
7. After the session I feel relaxed.

8. After the session I feel connected to the others in the group.
9. After the session I feel connected to the group leader.
10. After the session I want to go engage in exercise.

Table 1. Number of responses received

Concept	Number of responses received
Tired	Do not agree – 2; somewhat agree – 1; agree – 1; strongly agree – 1
Sleepy	Do not agree – 3; somewhat agree – 1; agree – 0; strongly agree – 1
Energized	Do not agree – 2; somewhat agree – 0; agree – 2; strongly agree – 1
Clear-minded	Do not agree – 0; somewhat agree – 0; agree – 3; strongly agree – 2
Hungry	Do not agree – 2; somewhat agree – 3; agree – 0; strongly agree – 0
Thirsty	Do not agree – 3; somewhat agree – 2; agree – 0; strongly agree – 0
Relaxed	Do not agree – 0; somewhat agree – 0; agree – 3; strongly agree – 2
Connected to others	Do not agree – 1; somewhat agree – 1; agree – 2; strongly agree – 1
Connected to leader	Do not agree – 0; somewhat agree – 1; agree – 2; strongly agree – 2
Engage in exercise	Do not agree – 2; somewhat agree – 0; agree – 2; strongly agree – 1

To start analysis on the responses, it will begin with the intrapersonal responses. There appears to be a correlation between question two and three, in that for question three, it was three participants who agreed that they felt energized after sessions and two participants did not. The first three questions were probably difficult to answer for the participants, in that due to their health and usage of medication, notions of physical tiredness, sleepiness, and energy could be fluctuating throughout the day which would make responses to the questions one to three, difficult to have a certain response to. The more abstract question, question four, appears to be more of a shared experience than the first three questions, in that all participants agreed to be more clear minded after the session. It is interesting to note that this question is more of an intellectual question in relation to the mind, rather than the body, as the first three questions were, which provokes the question if the session allowed an increase in the participants' relationship with their mind more so than with their body. As for questions five and six, which address forms of nourishment, it appears that all participants, alike in question four, shared the experience of not becoming thirsty nor hungry by the end of the session. The intrapersonal question seven, explored the question of relaxation, which was agreed on by all participants. It appears that being relaxed was a consequence of the session, however this could have been measured even more accurately before the session as well. Question ten, as the final intrapersonal question, explored the desire to exercise after the session. It appears that this was a notion mostly agreed upon by the participants, however there were

no 'somewhat agree' responses, which shows that the two participants not wanting to engage in exercise after at all, were definitive in their response.

In terms of the interpersonal results, the first question (question eight) questions the interconnectivity felt after the session with others. The responses were quite spread across the range provided. Only one participant did not agree, which reflects the notion that the session allowed for a sense of connection with others to occur. That stated, reading the question itself after the session could have influenced the participant to reflect on their interconnection with the other members. It is interesting to see that for question nine, all the participants agreed to an extent an increased connection with the facilitator after the session. It should be kept in mind that the facilitator was the person speaking most if not all of the time within the session to guide the participants, which could have contributed to the connection with the facilitator.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to gain an insight into the experience of a mindfulness session within a social service setting, specifically a male homeless scheme. What can be learned from the results has been divided between intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects that assist in understanding the orientations of the participants and their respective outlooks towards the experience of the sessions. The participants formed a group and each member played a different role, whether their attendance was regular to the sessions, whether they learned quicker than others the mindfulness exercises, and whether or not they practiced on their own time. Despite the variety of different responses to each of the ten questions in the study, it was apparent that agreement was evident for some of the questions, however the responses that involved extreme levels of difference showed interesting insights into the possible states of being of the participants when they entered and exited the setting for the sessions. Although the sessions were treated alike exercise sessions, in the sense that neither food nor drink was promoted before, during or after sessions, the results showed that food and drink were not important after the sessions despite that fact that they could be a way to promote healthy living and replenishment after the sessions, not to mention a chance to get verbal feedback and genuine sociality. That stated, the results reflect that there is no need for this, and that the offering of food and drink might lead to attendance increasing for the sake of consumption rather than the mindfulness exercises.

LIMITATIONS

The research involved five participants for the study and this was an obvious limitation for the project in terms of quantity. A more qualitative approach could

have been more suitable in terms of the sample, however, due to the intellectual, social, and communicative challenges the participants faced, it would have been a daunting attempt to receive substantial interview responses from the participants, for example. Another limitation can be found in the fact that the participants throughout the over fifty sessions, were mostly different as there was only one participant who steadily attended every session, they were available to attend. This limitation, however, did not disrupt the objectivity of the research, rather it can be stated to have enhanced it by allowing a range of different perspectives in the study, between those participants with a steady attendance to the sessions and those who were starting to attend. Providing a more longitudinal approach would need to be feasible for a separate study in order to collate data over a longer period of time; it would also be important to have more consistent attendance amongst a larger sample for such an approach. If a larger sample is included for future research on mindfulness in social services, a questionnaire which involves closed questions could allow for important insights into the experience of mindfulness based interventions.

DISCUSSION

Despite the variety of mindfulness based theoretical frameworks that could have been used, the researcher found the questions created and used tailored to the uniqueness of the group as adult males living in a residential homeless service, but also to the exercises and the intellectual capacities of the participants. Although mindfulness appears to connote a positivity amongst those who read about it or engage with or in it, it is worthwhile exploring any possible negative connotations or interpretations it may have which current literature does not often seek to investigate in the field of mindfulness-based interventions. Although it can be challenging, mindfulness should aim for positivity, however, the neutrality that can be descriptive of the state of being mindfulness aims to reach, might lead to such positivity being labelled moot.

The questions in the study aimed to reach for neutral feedback and open levels of interpretation in order to maintain objectivity, but also to prevent the skewing of the research from providing interpretations to the participants. The study aimed to convey some of the feelings that are experienced after a particular mindfulness session in order to help understand how participants might feel after a session, but also how they are going out into the world after such a session. The study also provided insight into some of the preparations and endings that could be considered in relation to providing the mindfulness sessions. This could be something that any facilitator can plan for their own practice, whether it is providing the recommendation to fast or eat before the session, to attend only if feeling well rested and not too tired physically or in terms of sleep, or even bringing some water or providing water to

participants before, during or after the sessions. Linking with each participants' general practitioner, psychologist, therapist or even psychiatrist, or at least having them informed of the fact that their client is partaking in mindfulness sessions, could have also been a helpful approach to ensuring interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary teams are communicating.

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