

Mindfulness as a core strategy for promoting mental health and increasing positive (flourishing) states of well-being

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Introduction

The growing evidence for mindfulness practice shows significant benefits for health across multiple settings (Mental Health Foundation, 2011). The Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand (MHF) is interested in promoting mindfulness in education, workplaces, and healthcare settings in Aotearoa/New Zealand. This interest has grown out of the development, delivery, and research of a New Zealand specific mindfulness in schools programme, the compiling of international and local research looking at the benefits of mindfulness in a range of settings, and the development of an online directory of New Zealand mindfulness trainers. Due to the potential for significant mental health benefits, the MHF views mindfulness as a core strategy for helping to reduce psychological distress and increase positive (flourishing) states of wellbeing.

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the practice of giving our full open-hearted attention to what is immediately occurring, physically and mentally, both within and around us. This quality of attention - mindfulness - depends upon the balance of body and mind in accord with sensory experience. It is a quality that has been empirically validated in a range of settings and can be trained through intentional practice, independent of affiliation with any philosophical system (Black, 2011).

A brief summary of the evidence base

Evidence shows reductions in multiple negative dimensions of psychological stress and beneficial structural changes to the brain following eight weeks of mindfulness training (Goyal et al., 2014; Hoffman Sawyer, Witt, & Oh, 2010; Holzel et al., 2011). Brain activity associated with increased feelings of spaciousness and a sense of coherence has been observed in long-term practitioners, even when they are not formally meditating (Lutz, Greischar, Rawlings, Ricard, & Davidson, 2004). Further evidence from large-scale studies indirectly supports the value of mindfulness practice.

One study looked at the effects of mind-wandering on wellbeing and concluded that people are happier when they are present, even for the most mundane of tasks (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010). Another study concluded that the strongest psychosocial determinant for depression was ruminating about negative events (Kinderman et al., 2013). These studies underline the importance of helping people to develop strategies to interrupt unhelpful mind-wandering and recollect the attention in the present moment when required.

Benefits for children

International research shows promising results, particularly in relation to cognitive performance and resilience, in children and young people (Zenner, Herrnleben-Kurz & Walach, 2014). Based on the evidence, the MHF developed a mindfulness in schools programme in 2012 that considered the NZ Education Curriculum. Eight lesson plans were developed, and a model of hauora (holistic wellbeing), Te Whare Tapa Whā, was incorporated as a core element of the programme.

Pilot research 2013

One hundred and twenty-six students ranging in age from six to eleven years and six classroom teachers participated. The classroom teachers were asked to complete fortnightly journal entries as part of a qualitative analysis of the effectiveness of the programme. A three-month follow-up survey was completed to assess any potential long-term effects. Preliminary findings suggest that the programme may be efficacious for increasing calm, improving focus and attention, enhancing self-awareness, helping with conflict resolution and the development of positive relationships, and reducing stress. A number of these outcomes were observed in both students and teachers (Rix & Bernay, under review).

Further research 2014

Two studies were conducted in 2014 (results were preliminary at the time of writing).

A mixed-methods approach

This study aimed to verify the positive results of the pilot study by again asking teachers to respond to a series of journal prompts to analyse the effect of the mindfulness sessions on children's social interactions and classroom behaviour. In addition, children were asked to complete self-reports of their own wellbeing and mindfulness using the Stirling Children's Wellbeing Scale (SCWBS) and the Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale for Children (MAAS-C) to determine if students also reported the benefits noted by teachers. Preliminary results from the teacher's journals indicate that the teachers observed a general positive response to the mindfulness practices, improvements in social interactions, and a genuine sense of calm. Initial review of the students' self-reports indicates a positive effect on wellbeing and mindfulness in some of the classrooms. Although further analysis of follow-up data is needed, the findings so far appear to indicate that the level of the teacher's involvement and commitment to the programme has a direct effect on the students' improved social interactions and classroom behaviour.

A randomised-controlled study

This study was an active-controlled, group-randomised study to test the effect of a mindfulness programme on children's self-reported wellbeing. The wellbeing effects of the mindfulness programme were compared with the effects of a control condition that incorporated standard skills-based lessons used to enhance emotional literacy and wellbeing. One hundred and six children from a primary school in Auckland, New Zealand were allocated randomly by classroom to either the eight-week mindfulness programme or the eight-week active control programme. Self-reported wellbeing and mindfulness were measured at baseline and upon completion of the programmes using the Stirling Children's Wellbeing Scale (SCWBS) and the Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale for Children (MAAS-C). Mindfulness significantly increased for the mindfulness group but not for the control group. Self-reported general wellbeing significantly increased for both groups, but change scores were significantly greater for the mindfulness group, even when controlling for differences in baseline scores. Analysis of the subscales of the SCWBS showed a similar pattern for emotional wellbeing. Although the results are encouraging, more work needs to be done on assessing the mindfulness programme's impact on other important outcomes associated with children's wellbeing, mental health, and academic functioning.

Next steps

Based on these encouraging results, the MHF will continue to promote the mindfulness in schools programme. Work is also progressing in the workplace setting, and opportunities for workforce development, particularly within healthcare and youth work settings, are being explored. In partnership with researchers from New Zealand universities, the MHF is interested in continued research of mindfulness initiatives. In addition, exploratory work is underway to consider a population health approach to mindfulness promotion. The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion will provide a useful framework. There are others in New Zealand involved in researching and delivering mindfulness initiatives in multiple settings using well-researched, traditional, and innovative methods. Developing key relationships and ensuring a degree of co-ordination among these researchers and practitioners would be a useful next step in assisting with the vision the MHF has for this work.

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