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MINDFUL LEARNING

Can the introduction of mindfulness meditation relieve stress in students, and improve performance?

Why mindfulness?

Mindfulness practice is an area that is gaining momentum as a method for enhancing personal and professional development (Nugent et al., 2011). It is currently attracting widespread attention in a large number of spheres far removed from its natural and original home, Buddhist philosophy and practice. Athletes use it to sharpen their game; corporate executives use mindfulness to learn to handle stress better; chronic pain sufferers apply it as a coping strategy; primary school teachers use it to help children give attention. In the context of Buddhist teachings and precepts, mindfulness is of overriding importance and at the heart of the learning environment. Thich Nhat Hanh, the renowned Vietnamese Buddhist teacher and campaigner for world peace and justice, has brought mindfulness to the Western world. The foundation of his teaching is that mindfulness involves a form of 'attention to the present moment' that is 'inclusive and loving' and 'accepts everything without judging or reacting' (Nhat Hahn, 1999: 64).

John Kabat-Zinn, Professor of Medicine Emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, has been largely responsible for transforming the original spiritual notion into a powerful and universal therapeutic tool based on forms of meditation and mindful practices. It was on a retreat, led by Thich Nhat Hanh, in the United States (US) that Kabat-Zinn first realised the appropriateness of mindfulness in the treatment of chronic medical conditions. Kabat-Zinn later adapted Hanh's teachings on mindfulness into the structured eight-week Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course (Kabat-Zinn, 1996). The MBSR approach is currently offered across a broad range of settings in the US, including hospitals, clinics, schools, workplaces, universities, and prisons. The practice of mindfulness has shown to be successful in a diverse range of contexts including the treatment of depression, addictions of various kinds, and the promotion of physical and mental health and wellbeing generally (Baer, 2006). It is widely accepted within healthcare in the United Kingdom that mindfulness plays a central role in the development of recovery focused therapeutic interventions for the treatment of a range of psychological disorders as recommended by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (e.g. NICE, 2009).

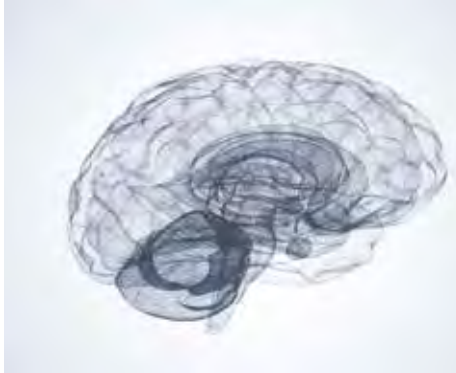
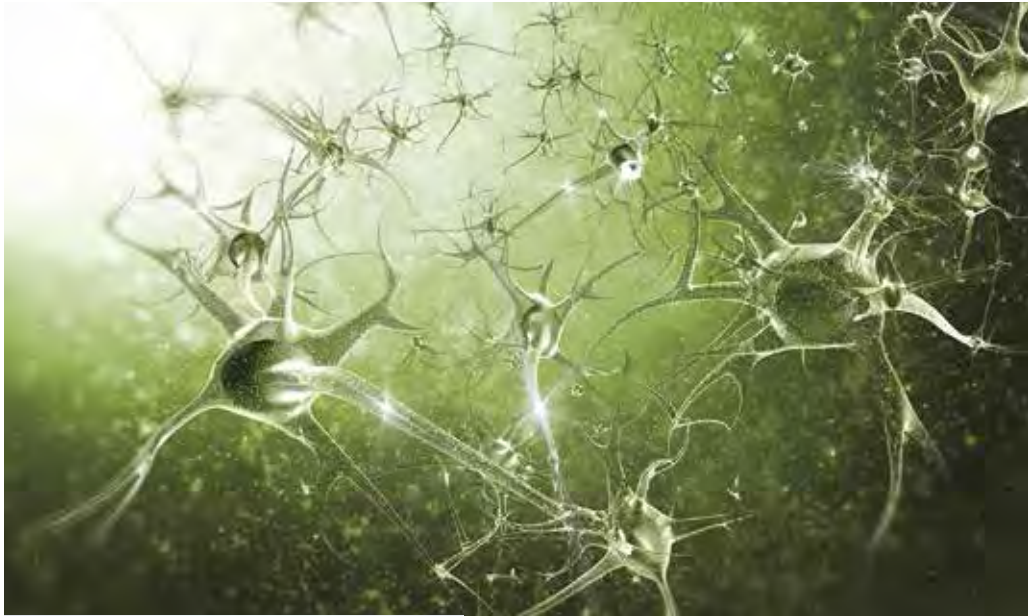
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Mindfulness for learning in higher education

Students in the field of nursing tend to report high levels of stress and anxiety in the clinical learning environment (Sharif and Masoumi, 2005). Beddoe and Murphy (2004) suggest that high anxiety and stress impede concentration, memory, and problem-solving, which in turn, adversely affects academic performance and learning. Studies in neuroplasticity have also suggested that the adult brain is more malleable than previously thought (Draganski et al., 2004). Neuroscientists studying the effects of mindfulness practice on the brain have indeed observed that it can foster sustained neural changes (Hölzel et al., 2011), with brain activity increasing in the pre-frontal cortex: a crucial area of the brain in terms of understanding social interactions (Wang et al., 2007). This claim represents a significant departure from views which consider traits such as attention span and emotional regulation as fixed properties that cannot be greatly altered. If, as neuroplasticity proponents report, mindful reflection intensifies the activity in the prefrontal cortex and 'this neural integration promotes a reflective mind, an adaptive, resilient brain and empathic relationships' (Siegel, 2007: 262), mindfulness in learning is a concept well worth exploring. This theoretical shift in perspective accounts better for the complexity of learning, and the narrowness of a focus on innate cognitive properties or fixed views of intelligence (Dweck, 1999), and suggests a relation with views of learning that take into account social and personal factors. For teachers in higher education, this means that using effective mindful teaching strategies might increase students' learning potential, as it impacts on the affective domain of learning. Educators who intentionally incorporate insightful, mindfulness-oriented learning experiences may help students with stress, and potentially enhance their learning (Bushnell and Henry, 2003).



The positive experience of students

A group of 28 first year nursing students were invited to attend a practice development workshop during the early stages of their first placement experience in the clinical environment, where mindfulness training was introduced. It consisted in a ten minute breath awareness exercise following a presentation on the nature of mindfulness including reference to the literature and research on this topic. Students were later invited to reflect on the qualities associated with mindfulness skills. Six students were later selected to attend a focus group to further discuss their experiences and views of mindfulness in learning. Their feedback is discussed here, using pseudonyms to report their comments. The students indicated that they found it helpful to focus and to pay attention to how they communicated. Shan, for example indicated that she was 'becoming more aware of how [she] responded to clients' including aspects such as her 'looks, words, and expressions'. Julie indicated that conscious awareness of the breath had helped her focus:

Trying out a new idea, breath awareness and feeling changes in my body that helped me think clearly and focus on tasks.

Respondents also indicated that silent reflection and mindful breathing enabled them to overcome stress, as in the case of Jon below:

I [first] felt unable to take the initiative due to lack of confidence during the role play. When I did eventually participate in the role for the first time, I was too anxious to think clearly. The second time I used breath awareness prior to my turn, and enjoyed the experience much more. I now need to practice this to become more comfortable with using it.

Neuroscientists studying mindfulness practice have observed that it can foster sustained neural changes, with brain activity increasing in the pre-frontal cortex: a crucial area of the brain in terms of understanding social interactions



Why develop mindfulness?

The students I interviewed identified a number of benefits to the introduction of this exercise. They reported that this had strengthened their values in caring and compassion; enhanced their communication skills; and their approach to the quality of patient care. They thought it had helped them think more deeply about professional conduct issues, and become more open to others' perspectives. The views expressed by students were about qualities beneficial to their personal and professional development, including increased self-awareness, deeper empathy, ability to adapt to change, and greater resilience to face challenging situations. Although this experience was confined to a very small number of students, similar themes were present in findings from other studies bearing on health and social care students (e.g. Napoli and Bonifas, 2011).

Those students who reported problems with the mindfulness exercise also found it difficult to differentiate between the concepts of *mindfulness meditation* and *relaxation*. This may highlight the need to take time to introduce mindfulness to ensure students grasp the concept more fully. It may also indicate that this approach is not beneficial for all students. Nevertheless, all the students involved in this study reported enjoying the approach to learning and requested further sessions to practice and develop mindfulness skills. One participant indicated that this allowed her to 'think creatively'.

Mindful conclusions

Mindfulness has been explored in a number of studies (e.g. Napoli and Bonifas, 2011; Nugent et al., 2011) which have suggested that this approach encourages an openness to change; a willingness to try out new approaches to learning; and a tendency to become more aware of others. However, mindfulness is a skill that needs to be practiced to obtain full benefit, both professionally and on a personal level. Nhat Hanh also suggests that regularly practising the fundamental skills is essential for any benefits to be sustained and behaviours changed (Nhat Hanh, 1999). There are clear limitations. There are few opportunities in the current teaching schedule to initiate mindfulness in learning, and maintaining it over a whole course is clearly a challenge. Critics of this type of approach also express concern that research on the potential benefits gained from mindfulness teaching are not supplemented with research on potentially harmful or negative effects. Some students in my study reported problems in practicing these skills. This may indicate that this approach is not beneficial for all students. It also highlights the fact that to be effective, this method requires understanding and application of the concept. The modern curriculum, with its set of predicted learning outcomes, does not allow for much space to introduce and practice *mindfulness*. This small scale intervention explored the concept with a group of students, who on the whole reported benefits from it. It remains to re-imagine a curriculum that would enable full integration of this approach into a modern curriculum.



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About the author

Tina Stern is Lecturer in Mental Health and a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy

Keywords

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