

If it works for Tibetan monks, can it work for students? Combining meditation, breathing techniques and paying attention to the present moment, or mindfulness, is meant to help people manage their lives more effectively. **Cathy Theaker** reports on her experience



Running a mindfu

Mindfulness is a type of awareness that entails being fully conscious of present-moment experience and attending to thoughts, emotions and sensations as they arise, without judgment and with equanimity... intentionally cultivating awareness and acceptance of each moment, typically through meditative or contemplative disciplines.¹

Why run a mindfulness group for students?

I have had a personal interest in meditation and yoga for the past 18 years and currently cultivate Dru yoga and meditation practice into my life.

Attending a workshop run by Grayrock², and a mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) course³ offered by Keyline Coaching⁴, made me consider utilising mindfulness in my work with students at Leeds Metropolitan University. I had previously attended a successful meditation group at the University of Leeds and was aware that mindfulness groups had run at Oxford University and the University of Liverpool. Mooney's⁵ eight-week mindfulness course for students at Portsmouth University had reported many benefits⁶.

The Mental Health Foundation's⁷ report on clinical research into various mindfulness therapies stated benefits

such as 70 per cent reduction in anxiety, better quality sleep, greater self-esteem, reduction in anger, tension, depression, neuroticism, and less dependence on alcohol/caffeine/prescription medication/illegal drugs. Almost three-quarters of GPs think mindfulness meditation skills would be beneficial to patients.

At Leeds Met there are increasing numbers of students accessing counselling, in line with the national picture, with a six per cent increase in 2009/10. The most common reasons for attending counselling in that academic year were anxiety or depression, with over 20 per cent in each category⁸.

wellbeing of trainees, teaching strategies of self-care, helping prevent burnout, compassion fatigue and vicarious traumatisation¹. Remarkably, mindfulness training for psychotherapy trainees impacted on their *clients*, who reported feeling more secure about socialising, less obsessive, reduced anger and anxiety, fewer phobias, more optimistic about their own progress¹².

The group at Leeds Met

A six-week mindfulness group was advertised on the Leeds Met counselling service website, student portal, Leeds Met Facebook and posters around campus. An email was sent to lecturers on counselling and psychology courses, quoting the benefits of practice for students in terms of self-care and impact on their work with clients^{1,12}. The group was also mentioned to students attending open door drop-in sessions. Interestingly, all participants attended from seeing posters or by word of mouth. The group was intentionally advertised without reference to any philosophical or religious base, but as teaching mindfulness as a skill, in the hope of attracting a wider audience.

JASON THEAKER

ness group

Nationally, AUCC⁹ found that nearly 50 per cent of student counselling services stated the time devoted to clients with severe mental health problems had increased over the past year. AUCC¹⁰ found 12 per cent of male and 14.8 per cent of female students had measurable levels of depression, ranging from mild to severe.

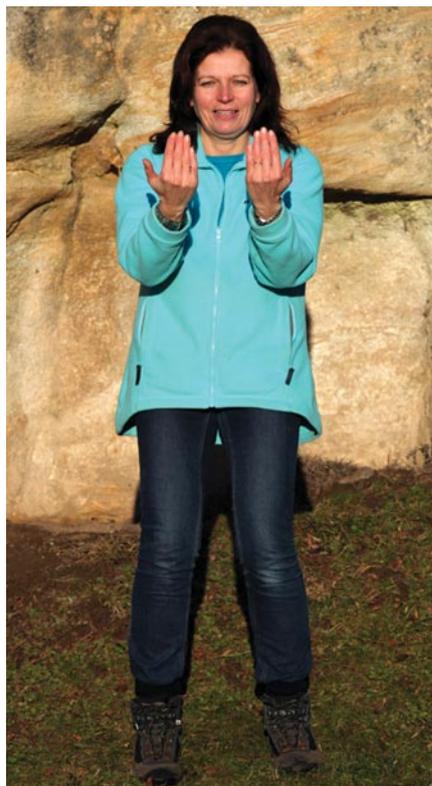
Within the current economic climate and higher education (HE) institutions are facing massive cuts, increased pressures from the national student survey, performance indicators and a need for an evidence base; and there are pressures on services to find innovative and cheaper ways to respond to diverse student need.

Research findings

Of particular relevance to students, research has demonstrated the benefits of mindfulness in terms of increased mental clarity, concentration, focus, attention, confidence, competence in relationships; with reductions in anxiety, depression, fears of inadequacy and incompetence¹. Shapiro and colleagues¹¹ found that MBSR training with students resulted in reductions in anxiety and depression and them spending less time dwelling on the past or anticipating the future.

Of interest to trainee mental health practitioners, mindfulness training can enhance the physical and psychological

Research has demonstrated the benefits of mindfulness in terms of increased mental clarity, concentration, focus, attention, confidence, competence in relationships; with reductions in anxiety, depression, fears of inadequacy and incompetence



Cathy demonstrates Dru yoga: 'ones' (left) and 'sixes'

The aims were to provide students with an understanding of the benefits of mindfulness practice and a range of techniques to utilise.

Nineteen students overall attended the group, which was offered as an open group, with places allocated on a first come, first served basis. Participants consisted of international, EU and home students, some mature students and a male to female ratio of 4:15. A few had practised mindfulness before and their enthusiasm and sharing of experiences assisted the newcomers.

In the initial session, participants were asked to share their reasons for attending the group and any goals they might have (eg to be less stressed). It was later explained that during the practice they needed to try and let go of their goals and pay attention to, and accept, whatever was happening for them in the moment, even if they were feeling agitated.

At the start and end of each hourly session, participants did a silent check-in with themselves about how stressed/calm they felt on a scale of one to 10. Then followed a series of mindful

movements (from Dru yoga¹³ or Thich Nhat Hahn¹⁴), meditations (eg mindfulness of an object, mindful eating, mindfulness of breathing, body scan or mindful walking) with discussion and feedback on their practice.

Applications to the student experience

Each session had a different theme: the first explored mindfulness and the benefits of practice, involving sharing some of the research findings. It was explained how, when practising mindfulness, we are not trying to change anything (ie to stop the mind wandering, make ourselves more positive or relaxed). This addressed some misconceptions that students had to try to stop the flow of thoughts altogether.

'Whatever the present moment contains, accept it as if you had chosen it. Always work with it, not against it. Make it your friend and ally, not your enemy. This will miraculously transform your whole life.'¹⁵

Participants were taught two mindfulness skills: to notice that their mind had wandered, then bring it back

to the focus of the practice; and to notice the content of the mind as a passing event.

One session explored how we tend to identify with our thoughts, seeing them as facts, rather than as actions of the mind. When mindful, we see them as passing mental events, not true reflections of reality. We discussed how labelling thoughts (eg as 'worry thoughts', 'self-critical thoughts' etc) could help us stand back from them and observe them, without getting caught up in a negative spiral of destructive thinking.

'We tend to be particularly unaware that we are thinking virtually all the time. The incessant stream of thoughts flowing through our minds leaves us very little respite for inner quiet... Meditation means learning how to get out of this current, sit by its bank and listen to it, learn from it, and then use its energies to guide us rather than to tyrannise us.'¹⁶

In their research with students, Christopher and Maris¹ noted a cognitive change: 'a new ability to disidentify from the internal dialogue...', also how mindfulness can help 'shift from automatic negative self-evaluation to a stance of compassionate witnessing.' We are changing our relationship with the thoughts, not the thoughts themselves.

Another theme explored dealing with uncomfortable feelings and thoughts, such as anxiety, with practice to try to stay with the discomfort, accepting the

Participants were taught two mindfulness skills: to notice that their mind had wandered, then bring it back to the focus of the practice; and to notice the content of the mind as a passing event

experiencing without trying to change it, avoid it, push it away or get drawn in to any content of thoughts, but observe the experience, holding it in a kind and compassionate awareness. I used a personal example here of when I used mindfulness to deal with my anxiety regarding a medical procedure, by breaking the event down into moment by moment experiencing: 'I am on the operating table and I am OK in the now, nothing has started yet, just breathe,' rather than following worrying thoughts about what might go wrong in the operation. We discussed how developing a daily practice of walking meditation, mindful exercises or yoga, helps build the 'mental muscle' needed to help pull our attention back when we really need to, for example when feeling anxiety, fear or panic.

In addition to formal meditations we explored the use of informal practice of mindfulness. As Thich Nhat Hahn¹⁴ reminds us, mindfulness can be integrated into everyday life activities. We discussed how we could choose to bring our focus back to the present moment in whatever we were doing, whether waiting at a bus stop or in a supermarket queue, walking outside, or washing up.

'The moment you realise you are not present, you are present. Whenever you are able to observe your mind, you are no longer trapped in it. Another factor has come in, something that is not of the mind: the witnessing presence.'¹⁷

Of increasing relevance to students, within the wider context of how 'we are living in the most intensely stimulating period in the history of the earth, being besieged with information and calls to our attention from every platform – computers, iphones, advertising, 100s of TV channels¹⁸, one session explored dealing with distractions and urges to go on social networking sites/check emails/comfort eat/impulse buy/use alcohol/drugs. We discussed how urges to do these things, whilst trying to study, could be used as an object of mindfulness. Rather than going with the urge, we could try to observe it non-judgementally and with curiosity, stepping out of it, into a more metacognitive stance, recognising the difficulty of overcoming entrenched habits, but with

practice, hopefully being more able to consciously step out of the urge rather than passively going with it. For example, whilst at the computer getting bored, 'I notice the urge to go on Facebook and I bring my attention back to the breath'. Participants commented how they thought this was an interesting way of trying to get back more control over some of their habits.

Over the weeks, participants increasingly reported how they were becoming more mindful in their everyday activities and many were making time for a three-minute breathing practice or even a 20-minute meditation during the day.

Feedback

Students completed a brief evaluation form post sessions, to tailor the content more fully to their interests. A more comprehensive one was completed during the final session, which revealed the following information:

What were the most helpful aspects of the group sessions?

'Noticing how your thoughts can run away and you don't enjoy the moment.'

'Not judging yourself and your thoughts.'

'The movement meditation.'

'Handouts and references of books.'

'Meeting other people.'

'Exercise and practices.'

'Being able to have that time to focus.'

'Range of different activities.'

'To stop thinking for a while about the daily stuff.'

What were the least helpful aspects?

'Mindfulness with food – usually because I was hungry!'

'A bit cold in the room.'

'None of it.'

Have these sessions impacted on your self-awareness and self-understanding?

'Yes, definitely more aware of my thinking and judgements.'

'I have become a lot calmer compared to how I felt when I first came.'

'Now I understand that my mind is preoccupied with a lot of thoughts which are not useful at all.'

Students reported that the mindfulness practice had impacted on their studies, work lives and personal lives.

Anything else you want to say?

'Really beneficial – would be brilliant to see it running again.'

'Excellent facilitator – discussions all non-judgemental. Enjoyed the variety of different techniques.'

'Thank you for a very enjoyable course. Facilitator is very approachable, understanding, friendly.'

'Been very helpful, would come again if there were more sessions.'

Other benefits of running the group are:

- A cost-effective use of resources: one facilitator with a group of up to 12 participants.
- Accessible and free from perceived stigma associated with counselling, so may be attractive to male students generally more reluctant to seek help.
- Helps break isolation and encourages mutual support.
- As well as responding to students' current stress levels, the skills have a preventative, self-care-type purpose.
- Rather than being a specific topic-based psycho-educational group, mindfulness practice can impact widely on wellbeing in ways that may not be anticipated.

However, because groups can also act as a gateway for some students initially reluctant to seek counselling, this increases self-referrals, impacting on resources further. Being an open group probably impacted on commitment for some students. Clearly this group was not for everyone, since some attended only once. A follow-up email requesting feedback as to why they did not continue was unproductive.

Can we change our brain?

Is there any evidence for how mindfulness practice impacts on the brain?

Neuroscientists tell us how experience sculpts the brain through neural plasticity – the ability of neurons to change the way they behave and relate to one another as the brain adapts to the environment through time¹⁹.

Interestingly, the right hemisphere is involved in appraising safety and danger²⁰ and is biased toward anxiety, suspiciousness, pessimism and negativity, keeping us alert to danger. However, the left hemisphere is biased toward positive and prosocial emotions²¹. A balance between the two results in experiencing a healthy mixture of positive and negative emotions and anxiety regulation. During stress, anxiety and fear states, there is activation in the right hemisphere and subcortical structures¹⁹.

In a randomised controlled study using an eight-week mindfulness meditation programme, Davidson and colleagues²² found significant increases in left-sided activation in the motor cortex with mindfulness meditation; changes being associated with positive affect. Davidson²³ hypothesises that plasticity in the central circuitry of emotion can be shaped by training experiences that might promote a more resilient, positive affective style.

During meditation on compassion, activity in brain regions involved in monitoring emotions and positive emotions increased; with decreases in areas responsible for negative emotions. Furthermore, meditators with more years of practice had stronger connections from the frontal regions to the emotion regions; the frontal cortex being involved in processing and inhibiting emotions generated by the limbic system²⁴.



‘The mindfulness group is a cost-effective, evidence-based method of teaching students valuable skills to assist mental health and manage anxiety’

Students taught compassion meditation for a week showed significant increases in gamma waves; however, Buddhist monks showed much larger increases, the scale of some never having been reported before. Davidson²⁵ stated his research provides evidence of ‘the power of mental training to produce

a heightened brain state associated with perception, problem-solving and consciousness ...even when meditators are not meditating’.

‘The idea that we are constantly changing means there is no intrinsic nature to the self or the mind, which is what Buddhism teaches. Instead, both self and mind are extremely plastic. Our activities inform who we are; as we act so we shall become. We are products of the past, but because of our inherent empty nature, we always have the opportunity to reshape ourselves.’²⁴

Conclusion

Despite limitations in the findings presented from this initial group, the overall benefits to students have been demonstrated in their feedback. Another group is being planned in the second semester. In the current climate, more students may present to us with anxiety and the mindfulness group is a



JASON THEAKER

cost-effective, evidence-based method of teaching students valuable skills to assist mental health and manage anxiety, capacities they will need in our increasingly fast-paced society. ■

Cathy Theaker is a counsellor and supervisor at the student counselling service, Leeds Metropolitan University.

References

- 1 Christopher JC, Maris JA. Integrating mindfulness as self-care into counselling and psychotherapy training. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*. June 2010; 10(2):114-125.
- 2 Grayrock and Stanton Psychological Services. www.grayrock.co.uk
- 3 Kabat-Zinn J. *Full catastrophe living*. New York: Delta; 1990.
- 4 Keyline Coaching & Consultancy, York Stress and Trauma Centre. www.YorkMBSR.co.uk
- 5 Mooney L. Mindfulness groups – stress reduction skills for students. *AUCC*. Autumn 2005; 35-37.
- 6 Brantley J. *Calming your anxious mind*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications Inc; 2003.
- 7 Mental Health Foundation. www.bemindful.co.uk
- 8 Leeds Metropolitan University Counselling Service Annual Report 2009/10.
- 9 AUCC annual survey of counselling in UK colleges and universities. BACP; 2004.
- 10 AUCC 1999. In: AUCC annual survey of counselling in UK colleges and universities. BACP; 2004.
- 11 Shapiro S, Schwartz G, Bonner G. Effects of mindfulness-based stress reduction on medical and premedical students. In: Christopher JC, Maris JA. Integrating mindfulness as self-care into counselling and psychotherapy training. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*. June 2010; 10(2):114-125.
- 12 Grepmaire L, Mitterlehner F, Loew T, Bachler E, Rother W, Nickel M. Promoting mindfulness in psychotherapists in training influences the treatment results of their patients: a randomized, double-blind, controlled study. In: Christopher JC, Maris JA. Integrating mindfulness as self-care into counselling and psychotherapy training. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*. June 2010; 10(2):114-125.
- 15 Tolle E. *The power of now*. Vancouver: Namaste Publishing; 1999.
- 13 McIntyre P, Waters H. *Dru Yoga for all seasons*. Bangor: Surya Publishing; 2003.
- 14 Thich Nhat Hahn. *Peace is every step*. London: Rider; 1991.
- 16 Kabat-Zinn J. *Mindfulness meditation for everyday life*. London: Piatkus; 1994.
- 17 Tolle E. *Practising the power of now*. London: Hodder Mobius; 2001.
- 18 Robinson K. 2010 RSA Animate – changing educational paradigms. www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDZFcdGpL4U (Accessed 8/11/10)
- 19 Cozolino LJ. *The neuroscience of psychotherapy*. New York: Norton; 2002.
- 20 Devinsky O. Right cerebral hemisphere dominance for a sense of corporeal and emotional self. In: Cozolino LJ. *The neuroscience of psychotherapy*. New York: Norton; 2002.
- 21 Silberman EK, Wiengartner H. Hemispheric lateralisation of functions related to emotion. In: Cozolino LJ. *The neuroscience of psychotherapy*. New York: Norton; 2002.
- 22 Davidson RJ et al. Alterations in brain and immune function produced by mindfulness meditation. *Psychosomatic Medicine*. 2003; 65:564-570.
- 23 Davidson RJ. Affective neuroscience and psychophysiology: toward a synthesis. *Psychophysiology*. 2003; 40:655-665.
- 24 Begley S. *The plastic mind*. London: Constable; 2009.
- 25 Davidson R. The role of attention in meditation and hypnosis: a psychobiological perspective on transformations of consciousness. In: Begley S. *The plastic mind*. London: Constable; 2009.