

The Potential of Promoting Mindfulness in a University Physical Activity and Wellness Course

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ABSTRACT

Due to its well documented benefits, it has been recommended to integrate mindfulness into health promotion programming. The purpose of this study was to determine if mindfulness was impacted by demographic variables and/or the completion of a stress management unit including mindfulness and application activities focused on paying attention and living in the present. Students completed (n=225) the 15-item Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) at the beginning and end of a 15-week semester. Student completion of a stress management unit including mindfulness and application activities focused on paying attention and living in the present did not result in improved mindfulness. The extent that instructors covered mindfulness in the lab portion of the course, as well as potentially higher stress levels at the end of the semester, may be factors associated with lower post-course mindfulness. These results, combined with previous research showing mindfulness-based programs to be effective in stress reduction, support the need to directly educate students about mindfulness. It may be advantageous to increase the focus on mindfulness in university lifetime wellness curricula, in addition to improving instructor training and monitoring course fidelity among large multiple-section courses.

KEYWORDS

Curriculum, Mindfulness, University Students, Wellness

INTRODUCTION

Health educators and instructors are responsible for promoting lifelong positive health behaviors in various populations and environments. In university settings, physical activity and wellness courses are an opportunity to instill long-term health habits in student populations. Such required university studies' courses typically focus on behavior change primarily in the priority areas of physical activity, nutrition, and stress management. With exponential gains in research about the practice of mindfulness, such knowledge and skills seem relevant for inclusion in this type of educational setting. According to Black (2014), mindfulness-based interventions may be an effective approach to reducing or eliminating unhealthy behaviors. In fact, D'Abundo, Sidman, and Heller (2014) have identified mindfulness-based practices as a way to promote physical, spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and social aspects of

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wellbeing in health education and health promotion. Teaching and assessing mindfulness may be a beneficial strategy for health educators and instructors to help students manage contemporary issues like stress, depression, and substance abuse among the university student population. Consequently, mindfulness can be a key factor in promoting well-being in college population.

Few behaviors or practices can positively influence all aspects of well-being, i.e., physical, spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and social. Teaching the multifaceted construct of mindfulness, and its associated meditation skills, as a positive, cognitive strategy may increase the effectiveness of health promotion practices while assisting health educator and instructors in negotiating the complications of the high-stress and ever-changing field of public health. Mindfulness, and consistently practiced mindfulness-based skills, exemplifies a holistic approach to health education and promotion, worthy of careful consideration for teaching and curriculum development of physical activity and wellness courses at the university level.

DEFINING MINDFULNESS

The concept of mindfulness has become increasingly popular, yet there is no functional definition commonly accepted by all researchers and practitioners. The definition by Jon Kabat-Zinn, a leader and catalyst to the mindfulness movement, is often cited that includes the following: “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p.4). Kabat-Zinn more recently proposed the following operational working definition, “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145). In other words, mindfulness is listening, and being present without judgment of yourself or others.

Another mindfulness definition provides further clarification regarding its components, “mindfulness can refer to any one or a combination of three things: 1) a form of awareness, 2) the practice that elevates that form of awareness, and 3) the application of that awareness for specific perceptual and behavioral goals” (Young, 2013, p. 14). Further contributing to the definition of mindfulness, Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, Freedman (2006) posited a theory that mindfulness contains three axioms, intention, attitude, and attention, or “observing one’s moment-to-moment, internal and external experience...in the here and now” (Shapiro et al., 2006, p. 4).

While several definitions of mindfulness exist, two common concepts are that of being in the present moment and paying attention. In addition to providing an explanation of how mindfulness is defined, Shapiro et al. (2006) explained how mindfulness works in affecting positive change, worthy of discussion since we are proposing mindfulness-based practices and/or interventions in health promotion and education. According to their theory, the three components of mindfulness are intention, attention, and attitude (IAA), which all occur simultaneously and cyclically to represent the moment-to-moment process of mindfulness. The inclusion of “intention” as part of mindfulness is unique, as it is the only theory that includes the aspect of “why” one is practicing mindfulness. In other words, the reason an individual decides to practice mindfulness is important as it seems to determine the outcome. Lastly, the quality an individual brings to attention is important to mindfulness is considered attitude, which includes openness, kindness, curiosity, compassion, acceptance, nonstriving, and affection (Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006; Bishop et al., 2004).

Shapiro et al. (2006) built on the three foundations of mindfulness, intention, attention, and attitude (IAA), and proposed a model to explain the mechanisms of mindfulness. Their model suggests that the result of nonjudgmentally and intentionally paying attention with openness is a shift in perspective called *reperceiving*. The concept of *reperceiving* means witnessing experiences in the moment without becoming caught up in the drama. In other words, through mindfulness practice, an individual can gain objectivity to internal and external experiences, and therefore develop the ability to detach from identifying with the negative thoughts, emotions, or experiences. According to Shapiro et al., (2006,

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