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A Study of Mindfulness and Self-Care: 
A Path to Self-Compassion for Female Therapists in Training

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Research has shown the prevalence of burnout and “compassion fatigue” in women mental health professionals. Mindfulness training addresses these potential problems, building strategies for both prevention and coping. Training in mindfulness can benefit women psychotherapists-in-training as they handle the stresses of graduate school, and as therapists, in addition to benefiting their future therapy clients. This study explores the impact of a course on mindfulness for psychotherapists-in-training, evaluating outcomes of a 10-week elective course offered at California School of Professional Psychology at Alliant International University in San Diego, CA.

KEYWORDS clinical training, mindfulness, self-compassion, self-care, women therapists

Many societies have trained women to be caregivers, so it is no surprise that psychology and counseling training programs are populated with female students. Yet graduate school can be a time of stress with little training in self-care for the future caregiver. Compassion fatigue and burnout are common among psychotherapists and mental health care providers (Gockle, 2010). With the tendency of women to be other-oriented (Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988), these are important considerations for women psychotherapists in particular.

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BENEFITS OF MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness is described as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). Mindfulness training has been shown to bring many benefits—to therapists, therapy clients, and to graduate students. It reduces stress and elevates well-being (Baer, 2003); raises levels of self-compassion (McCollum & Gehart, 2010; Shapiro, Brown, & Biegel, 2007; Shapiro et al., 2005; Shapiro et al., 2007), increases awareness, empathy, compassion, therapeutic presence, and the ability to self-observe (Germer, 2005); reduces psychological distress, anxiety and depression (Baer 2003; Brown Ryan, & Creswell, 2007; Greeson 2009; Grossman et al., 2004; Shapiro, Shapiro, & Schwartz, 2000); provides cognitive and behavioral flexibility (Shapiro 2009); and enhances the therapeutic alliance (Gockle, 2010).

SELF-CARE AND SELF-COMPASSION WITH PSYCHOTHERAPISTS-IN-TRAINING

Studies of mindfulness training as a means of self-care for students and therapists in training find increased tolerance of physical and emotional pain, higher levels of energy, feelings of centeredness, relaxation, renewal and mental clarity, and increases in positive affect and self-compassion (Christopher, Christopher, Dunnagan, & Schure, 2006; Shapiro et al., 2007; Schure, Christopher, & Christopher, 2008; Chrisman, Christopher, & Lichtenstein, 2009; Maris, 2009), and decreases in perceived stress, negative affect, state and trait anxiety, and rumination. Self-compassion, in particular, provides the emotional resources needed to nurture others, a necessary foundation for psychotherapists. Practices that restore awareness, calm, compassion and acceptance of oneself can counteract and possibly prevent some of the caregiver burden and burnout that many women face as therapists. Neff points out that self-criticism is common in our society, but even more amongst women (2011) Self-compassion is crucial for self-care (Neff. 2009), and a necessary quality in the healing relationship (Hick & Bien, 2008), and has been linked to psychological well-being, optimism, curiosity, and connectedness in addition to decreased anxiety, depression, rumination, and fear of failure (Neff, 2009), essential qualities to engender in the woman psychotherapist-in-training.

In light of all these findings about the value of mindfulness for women therapists, we decided to offer a course in our program—in the form of a 10-week seminar—and evaluate it to see whether we could bring some of these benefits to our own students.
MINDFULNESS AS SELF-CARE: A STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF A 10-WEEK COURSE

Methods

PARTICIPANTS

Participants are graduate students at CSPP (19 females and 2 males, aged 22 to 41 years) who registered for this course. Most students were Caucasian (14), others being Latino (2), African American (1), Asian (2), or of mixed ethnicity (2). Students’ religious affiliations were Christian (7), Buddhist (2), Jewish (1), and other or none specified (11). Sixteen participants had no or little prior experience with mindfulness; two had much or daily experience, and three had moderate/some experience.

THE INTERVENTION

A 10-week, seminar-sized course was offered at the California School of Professional Psychology, San Diego campus in the summers of 2010 and 2011. The mindfulness training course incorporates theory, research and practice, with the goals of developing mindfulness skills and providing knowledge and basic competence in mindfulness-based interventions. Weekly classes were approximately four hours in length and began with a 30-minute mindfulness practice. In addition, the course required students to commit to a minimum of 30 minutes of mindfulness practice daily for at least 5 days a week. The class also includes readings, lecture and discussion on the theory, research, neuroscience, techniques of interventions, and an introduction to relevant concepts and related traditions. Students receive course credit, but no grade for this course.

MEASURES AND PROCEDURES

An exploratory and emergent design was chosen, as it is not assumptive and narrow. Data, in the form of one-page journal papers, due weekly, were collected during the course. The journal papers provide qualitative feedback on participants’ experiences, theoretical understanding, and on the presented material (both experiential and educational). They were required to address their personal understanding/reflections of mindfulness as it came up for them during the week. In addition a final, 8- to 10-page paper addressed how they have assimilated mindfulness into their own theoretical understanding and how/if they plan to incorporate mindfulness into their own personal and psychotherapy practice.

DATA ANALYSIS

The Constant Comparative Method of analysis (Glaser, 1965) was used in conjunction with the Dedoose™ software program to examine the content
of all journals. This was an inductive approach, which means that the analysis occurred without pre-determined categories or a hypothesis to guide results. Emergent patterns were analyzed to formulate a systematic organization. Rules of inclusion were used to delineate themes and sub-themes (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). All units of meaning eventually fell into broader categories of coherent. Two other raters participated in the analysis process.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

There are a number of potential limitations to this study that should be considered. Students who signed up for this course, and then opted to volunteer for the study, may have had a preliminary interest in mindfulness. If compared to a group of participants who were neutrally interested beforehand, we might have found differing results due to motivational effects and biases. Additionally, students writing in their journals might have felt pressure to write about what they thought they should be experiencing.

Results

The students described a rich set of experiences with their mindfulness practice including both positive effects of practice as well as challenges. In short, most students stated that the mindfulness practice helped them gain acceptance (willingness to see things as they are), compassion for self and others (letting go of negative judgments), and increased their capacity for attention and awareness. Students noticed decreased suffering in their day-to-day lives and experienced changes in perception of events. Several positive effects were noted, including slowing down and greater connection, relaxation, enjoyment, gratitude, and clarity. Students also described challenges such as difficulty staying in the present moment.

Here are examples of students’ responses to the various themes:

Acceptance. Participants established an ability to receive the moment without assessing judgment or estimation when being mindful.

During this challenge, I practiced becoming aware of the judgments and letting them go. It felt so good to not engage in the same judgmental thought processes as I did before because it made me feel free of negative emotions such as jealousy, anger and irritation.

Compassion. This theme covers a range of qualities that allow participants an understanding of self or other in a thoughtful way. It also touches on the Buddhist concept of “loving-kindness,” which centers on sensitive and benevolent contemplation.
After my emotions and anxiety subsided, I took a breath and began to practice informal mindfulness by trying to understand my friend’s situation and asked myself the questions from the book, “What is the intent? Is it to relieve suffering? Is it revenge? Does it feel like an exercise of real choice in the context of abiding feelings of powerlessness?” After questioning my friend’s motives, I realized something within myself, I realized I was hurting, I felt pain for my friend, I wanted to be there for her and give her what she feels she is lacking and that is love. I became aware that she is feeling lonely and that she is reaching out for help. I became aware that my anger towards her turned into compassion and a deeper love.

Attention and awareness. The ability to attend to inner and outer experience appears elemental in the mindfulness process.

I am more conscious of when I am being mindful and when I am not being mindful. When I realize that I am focusing on other things, I have been able to bring myself back to the present moment.

I began to feel moderate to mild sensations in my body, such as slight pain and sweat, such as in my hands and my feet. It was strange for me to feel my heartbeat and to feel my skull and crown. My whole body felt as one and I realized that I was feeling pains in other areas of my body, which I have not recognized before.

I’ve become aware of trying to focus on the now. For instance, when I was at the gym the other day, my mind kept wanting to focus on other things, such as how many more minutes left, however, I became conscious of those thoughts and brought my focus and effort onto the exercise. I was practicing being attentive and focusing in the moment.

I remember that walk on the beach better than I remember any walk I’ve ever taken because I was paying such close attention.

It was quite powerful to realize many moments of my life I am not present for, when I’m watching TV. I am thinking about homework, when I’m doing homework I am eating without realizing it, when I am even on a walk my mind is on past regrets and future worries.

Decreased suffering and improved coping. Participants reported that mindfulness was related to the increased ability to deal with the more aversive situations that came up in their lives.

I have experienced a shift in recent weeks, in that I am much more accepting of negative states as temporary, normal to human experience, and often necessary. I attribute this to the mindfulness practice and the readings I have done related to it. I’m not as afraid of my own pain or sadness as I have been previously.
I easily could have gotten into an argument but averted escalation by taking a few deep breaths before responding, reacting in a calm manner. I was aware of my actions and language in that moment. I knew the situation could go in any direction based on my behavior.

I realized in that moment that the experience wasn’t so bad and that the feeling of sadness was only brief, and didn’t last forever.

*Changes in perception and relating.* Participants began experiencing, reacting, processing, and seeing situations, relationships and themselves differently. Participants often reported these shifts during more stressful times

While I can’t say that I was a rock standing still in the river, I believe that I did react differently to certain situations because of the work we have been doing in class.

Recently, I notice that I am not as afraid of my own pain or sadness as I have been previously. I do not feel like I did a great deal, but the change has been largely noticed by myself and close others.

*Positive effects of mindfulness practice.* Participants’ mindfulness has been associated with several positive changes, including slowing down, greater connection, enjoyment, peace and calm, increased health and well-being, gratitude, freedom and empowerment clarity, feeling alert and energized, centered and grounded.

Since beginning meditation on my own, I have begun to complete activities more carefully instead of rushing through them to move on to the next thing.

Since beginning the walking meditation, I have found myself being more mindful during my walks at home. I have also found a stronger sense of connection to nature and the universe in general.

The experience was rewarding and I found myself enjoying the flavors of my food so much more. The nectarine tasted much sweeter and juicier; its flesh stringy and soft.

I’ve been continuing doing my body scan every morning and I’m continuing to notice great improvements with the arthritis in my knees.

I direct my attention to whatever task predominates at that moment and experience my feelings without judging them, I feel as though I could be liberated.

I think the meditation practices gave me a clearer mind to help me quickly reanalyze situations when I feel things are not going right.

Benefits varied widely, and appeared in many areas of life—whether it was increased enjoyment of food, bringing family closer, or finding patience. One
woman reported that her partner and friends began seeing a long awaited shift she was unsure would ever happen.

Challenges of mindfulness practice. Participants had some difficulty with the act of practice (doing exercises/techniques). They also struggled with feeling confident to use mindfulness in session, this may be due to the course being so short -- only 10 weeks. The experience of mindfulness brought challenges as well.

Constant judging thoughts found their way in, such as thinking “I hate doing this” “this doesn’t feel good,” and “this feels bad.” There’s a reason I distract myself … while doing those activities, they are not relaxing or enjoyable! They cause my body to feel tired and I could not look past those thoughts.

I will admit that I struggle with staying in the present moment, and am constantly thinking of the future. I wonder what will happen next, and will I get to do all of the things I need to do.

Most reported that practice got easier over time, especially when they discovered a practice that resonated with them. Almost all 21 participants acknowledged the importance of practice for the comprehension of mindfulness. Most plan to continue practicing mindfulness beyond the class for personal benefits.

CONSIDERING THESE FINDINGS

This study has shown that the course does bring benefits and can be integrated into clinical training as a way to decrease stress, and give a personal meaning to growth and education. The findings reveal a plethora of positive effects of mindfulness practice. Not one participant failed to report at least half of the themes. Regardless of their attitude about the practice or how often they practiced, every participant reported increased attention and awareness—mindfulness was present. Shared by similar mindfulness research (Shapiro et al., 2007; Schure et al., 2008; McCollum & Gehart, 2010), the results of this study confirm the many cognitive, emotional, physical and attitudinal benefits. While much of participants’ experience was found to be common with other research, some themes were unique. Gratitude and a sense of impermanence are absent in the studies that most resemble this study.

As research continues to demonstrate its legitimacy and psychotherapists utilize mindfulness-based interventions, studies exploring the process of training psychologists become increasingly useful. Considering the proliferation of mindfulness work in the last decade (Brown et al., 2007), the field of psychology cannot afford to ignore this need for training (Allen, Chambers,
& Knight, 2006), especially experiential training. Since Moore (2008) was able to get rich results from 10-minute sessions in-between classes, perhaps there is merit in looking more closely at the time allotment for practice. It may increase openness to the approach if exposure happens less rapidly.

Through direct experience with the practice of mindfulness, students may be able to gain insight that can provide scaffolding to clients that intellectual understanding alone may not be able to provide. In addition, mindfulness is part of a personal growth process for the woman therapist that may include academic gain, self-care, personal enhancement, and professional expansion. It is surprising mindfulness training is not more widely implemented in counseling programs as a part of curricula given the focus on personal growth and development (Christopher et al., 2006). In addition, a mindful lifestyle and skills that increase coping may bring greater quality of life while in graduate school; one of the benefits to training programs may be retention of students.

There are challenges in learning mindfulness, as it cannot be approached as another “piece” of knowledge to be “known.” It takes a certain change in the way we are in the world; it alters our humanness and expands our experience of others and ourselves. This study supports an experiential approach to “teaching” mindfulness.

REFERENCES


