

Review of the Effectiveness of Mindfulness Meditation on Performance and Anxiety in Social Workers

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ABSTRACT

Stress, characterized by physical and mental tension in response to perceived threats, can significantly impact academic performance, particularly among students. Excessive stress leads to issues like sleep disturbances and decreased academic outcomes, notably through mechanisms such as exam pressure and test anxiety, which affect mental health and performance metrics. Mindfulness and meditation are increasingly recognized as effective strategies for managing stress, enhancing emotional regulation, and improving cognitive functioning, including critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. Recent studies demonstrate that mindfulness interventions, whether short- or long-term, can reduce anxiety and stress levels in students, leading to improved academic performance and well-being. Despite the promising findings in various educational contexts, there is a notable lack of research focusing specifically on mindfulness applications within social work education. Given the high-stress nature of the profession and the pressure faced by social work students, further investigation into the effects of mindfulness and meditation on their academic performance and stress management is warranted. This research could inform educational practices and therapeutic approaches in social work, equipping future professionals with essential self-care strategies and tools for client interaction.

Stress and Academic Performance

Stress is defined as the condition typically characterized by symptoms of physical or mental tension, which can result from a reaction to a situation in which a person feels threatened or pressured. When the body is under stress, it perceives that it is under attack and switches to fight or flight mode. This releases a complex mix of hormones and chemicals like adrenaline and cortisol, which can result in many unnecessary bodily reactions and psychological problems (Maajida, et al. [1]). Optimal amounts of stress can enhance abilities, but too much can negatively impact one's mental state and areas of performance. One of these areas is academic performance.

Excessive stress in students may lead to sleeping disturbances and poorer academic performance (Hearn, et al. [2]). This can have negative implications on learning, memory, mood, health, and behavior (Maajida, et al. [1]). One specific area of stress comes from exam pressure, which many students experience. Test anxiety has been

found to impact one-fifth of college students, and it can worsen academic performance and retention (Prieve, et al. [3]). Exam pressure is likely to trigger depression and suicidal thoughts (Rosiek, 2016), and increases the risk of poor academic performance (Vanstone & Hicks, 2019). Students who say stress negatively affects their performance also report more stress, less effective coping skills, less resiliency, and less social support (Frazier et al. [4]). These factors are all related to lower grade point averages (GPAs). It is important to narrow down ways to reduce student stress to limit inhibitions on mental health and academic performance.

Mindfulness and Meditation

Mindfulness is an approach-focused strategy used to manage stress, involving non-judgmental awareness of the present moment as opposed to the avoidance of negative experiences (Hearn, et al. [2]). It is the idea of focusing one's attention on the present experience in an accepting way, and bringing an idea of curiosity to everything one ob-

serves. Mindfulness interventions include many different exercises, including meditation or less formal exercises that emphasize mindfulness like walking, eating, and bathing (Nagy, et al. [5]). Mindfulness and meditation are becoming increasingly popular as therapeutic interventions, as well, as they help individuals gain skills in emotion regulation and coping mechanisms. They have also been found to be beneficial in training social work professionals who plan to work in stressful environments (Notar, et al. [6]). Social work students are becoming increasingly more aware of mindfulness and meditation as it is more often incorporated in social work curriculum as a tool for future clients to utilize.

Benefits of Mindfulness and Meditation on Academic Performance

Student well-being can be improved through meditation practices to reduce stress levels and improve academic performance. Research has shown that meditation enhances metacognitive skills and helps foster critical, analytical, and creative thinking. It also helps to improve attention, problem-solving abilities, psychosocial strengths, and emotional intelligence (Kaplan-Rakowski, et al. [7]). Studies exploring mindfulness training with graduate students have reported outcomes like increases in self-compassion, self-awareness, and improved emotion regulation (Notar, et al. [6]). In mindfulness and social work education, studies have shown an increase in students' abilities to calm anxiety and be present (Thomas, et al. [8]). Mindfulness training and education for those entering helping professions, such as social work, can improve one's abilities to self-regulate, as well as enhance the ability to be present with clients. This helps in building strong therapeutic relationships in the future (Notar, et al. [6]).

Past Studies of Short-Term Mindfulness Meditation

One 2022 study compared perceived stress among 89 third-year undergraduate nursing students. 45 participants used mindfulness meditation prior to the end of term simulation, and 44 did not. The intervention group went to a room in which an audio recording was played and led them through breathing exercises and physical relaxation exercises such as rotating their heads and rolling their necks. The authors utilized the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) by Watson, Clark, and Tellegen to assess the perceived stress of participants, only using the negative affect scale and a Likert scale to measure students' self-reported feelings. Results indicated that students in the intervention group experienced significantly lower stress levels during simulation than those in the control group. They found that the transition to practice may help relieve anxiety, and that undergrad nursing curricula should introduce methods of stress-reduction to combat future stress, anxiety, and errors in work (Peter, et al. [9]). Another study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of short-term mindfulness interventions on anxiety, stress, and depression symptoms and inhibition of dominant responses and academic performance among university students. 50 volunteers with high levels

of depression, anxiety, or stress were randomly placed in the mindfulness practice group or the active control group, which involved listening to stories. The results indicated that students who underwent mindfulness practice had decreased levels of anxiety, stress, and depression compared to the control group, and the practice had a beneficial impact on their academic performance. This involved improved grades between two exam sessions more significantly than students in the active control group (Vorontsova Wenger, et al. [10]). Technology-delivered approaches have also become more common for content useful for meditation such as meditation videos, calming music, et cetera.

Users also benefit from more immersive experiences that can help with visualizations of stress-free settings such as forests or beaches. Previous research has shown that meditation can enhance metacognitive skills, attention, problem-solving abilities, self-regulation, and much more. They used videos and virtual reality (VR) in a 2021 study because college students are usually hesitant to seek professional help, and this is a more accessible intervention that may seem less intimidating than traditional help-seeking. The study was done on 61 adult, European based business students. It was incorporated into regular class time and involved voluntary participants. Students completed pretests and were randomly assigned to conditions, either VR or video meditation. After the intervention, students completed a posttest, follow-up survey, and demographic questionnaire. The scores and responses were compared between the pre- and post-tests and between the two groups. Results indicated that those exposed to VR meditation benefited more than students exposed to video-based meditation. The intervention resulted in reduced anxiety levels that allowed for better concentration, that can then translate into better exam performance (Kaplan Rakowski, et al. [7]).

Past Studies of Long-Term Mindfulness Meditation

A study was done with 71 undergraduate students to assess the efficacy of online mindfulness-based interventions at reducing anxiety. Students were randomly assigned to a 6-week mindfulness condition, 3-week mindfulness condition, or 6-week sham active control condition. Before the intervention took place, students completed a pre-program survey with measures of anxiety, mindfulness, and demographic questions. Participants in each condition were assigned five weekly meditations or exercises and written reflections. Results indicated an increase in mindfulness was associated with decreased reports of anxiety (Priebe, et al. [3]). Another study examined cortisol levels of 67 medical students before mindfulness work and after mindfulness work, immediately prior to exams. Students completed a 5-facet mindfulness questionnaire (FFMQ) and provided saliva samples that cortisol was then extracted from. The results indicated that exam-induced salivary cortisol concentration showed significant negative relation with exam performance and overall anxiety. The total FFMQ score showed significant positive relation with exam performance and significant negative relation with exam performance.

They found an important relationship between mindfulness and a physiological biomarker of stress, anxiety and cortisol, and this manifests into improved assessment outcomes potentially through healthier, more adaptive coping skills and stress management strategies (Hearn, et al. [2]).

A study was conducted to investigate the mindfulness meditation (MM) influence on short and long-term academic performance. The process involved 2 hours of teaching per week for 3 months and followed the same procedure. Students would practice MM for 10-20 minutes before teaching, the teacher taught a chapter, reviewed the chapter with students for 5 minutes, students took an online quiz on the chapter, and then received and reviewed results. For the control group, the procedure was the same except instead of practicing MM for 10-20 minutes, they self-reviewed the chapter from the previous week. The authors used a modified version of the Cognitive and Affective Mindfulness Scale-Revised (CAMS-R) which used a Likert scale with questions regarding concentration, focusing on the present moment, etc. Results from the questionnaires and test scores indicated that students with high meditation depth achieved better short-term academic performance than those with low meditation depth. MM helped with learning disturbances and sustaining attention. The questionnaire results showed that most students found MM easy to practice, enjoyed the process, agreed an MM intervention can help in-class learning, and were willing to continue practicing in the future (Lin & Mai, 2018).

Implementation for Social Work Practice

Research has shown benefits in utilizing mindfulness and meditation prior to exams as well as high stress work tasks, such as presentations, to reduce stress and improve performance. Despite this research on the success of mindfulness and meditation utilization among individuals to improve test scores, little to no studies have specifically looked at the benefits of these interventions with social work students or professionals. There are implications, however, that it would serve this population well. Students of a variety of academic majors and careers have shown benefits when utilizing short- and long-term mindfulness interventions, especially those in helping professions like nursing and medical professions. These interventions can be helpful to introduce to social work professionals and students for many reasons. Social workers are in unique positions as they undergo the stress of being in a high burnout rate profession. Furthermore, social work college students face exam pressure, and anticipate the stress of entering careers in a helping profession. It is important for these professionals and students to understand the techniques and benefits of mindfulness and meditation to implement in their own lives as self-care strategies to improve emotion-regulation and reduce academic stress, which then helps to improve academic performance. These tools can also be utilized in their future work with

clients to help improve interpersonal skills, and strengthen therapeutic relationships. Understanding these techniques are helpful to teach future clients that these students have as mindfulness-based interventions become more common in the therapeutic field.

Implications for Future Research

There are many studies examining the benefits of mindfulness meditation on exam performance, but there is a major gap in this utilization with the social work profession. Future studies should focus on these techniques specifically with social work students prior to exams to identify if there are improvements in test performance. Social work students may significantly benefit from this utilization as they may reap the benefits of mindfulness and meditation in their own academic performance and self-care, as well as be able to familiarize themselves with how to utilize it when working with clients in the future. This makes the gap in research crucial in beginning to examine the effects of mindfulness and meditation with social work students prior to exams.

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