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Seizing Opportunities Moment by Moment: The Effects of an 8-Week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Course on Personal Epistemological Beliefs and Implications for Academic Program Administration

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Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) courses that teach individuals to “live in the present moment” have been shown to improve health and well-being; however, there seems to be very little research into how MBSR may affect the way we think about the nature of knowledge, also known as epistemology. The researchers developed this study in an effort to determine if MBSR techniques would have an impact on personal epistemological beliefs and the implications for academic program administration. Though this study is currently a pilot study, early results seem to indicate a statistically significant change in the area of “Quick Learning.” This suggests that MBSR practices may play a role in allowing an individual to let go of more primitive and superficial forms of knowledge in favor of more sophisticated ones. Based on these results, it is possible that the use of MBSR practices will be beneficial to students and faculty alike.

Mindfulness can be defined as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). It is direct experience without the clutter of extraneous thoughts about what will happen in the future or what has happened in the past. It is a way of seeing the world that has been shown to reduce stress and illness. It requires one to be fully present and engaged in whatever activity is at hand, and it is a characteristic that instructors and administrators find particularly important. In fact, mindfulness may affect an individual’s conscious and unconscious beliefs about learning. These specific, personally held views about what knowledge is and how we learn it are also known as epistemological beliefs.

Eight-Week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Course

The original Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course was designed and implemented in 1979 by Jon Kabat-Zinn. Today, MBSR courses are offered all over the world by those who have undergone teacher certification with the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society (University of Massachusetts Medical School, 2010). The MBSR courses teach participants how to apply systematically mindfulness approaches to manage stress and health problems. The MBSR courses have proven to be highly effective in diminishing anxiety and depression, lessening the ill effects of stress on heart disease, cancer, chronic pain, skin ailments, asthma, and many other conditions (Stress Reduction at Work, 2010).

The MBSR courses last for approximately two and a half hours and are offered weekly over an eight-week time period. The class periods consist of body scans, guided meditations, gentle yoga, lectures, and group discussions. The eight-week program generally also includes one all-day session. Between classes, students complete approximately 40 minutes a day of mindfulness activities that include optional readings, as well as completing exercises and meditations from a CD.
Background

Research into the efficacy of mindfulness-based practices was pioneered in the medical field. Administrators, on the other hand, use Mindfulness-Based practices to enhance productivity and to reduce health cost that is associated with work stress and work violence. In 2008, the Complementary Health Practice Review published “Mindfulness Research Update: 2008.” In this article, the author studied the effect of mindfulness practice on the mental and physical well-being of the participants. A total 52 articles associated mindfulness practice with less emotional distress, more acceptance toward others, more positive outlook, and better quality of life. In addition, findings indicate that there is a positive relationship between how much people practice mediation and how much more mindful they become (Greeson, 2009).

In Klatt, Buckworth, & Malarkey (2009), participants were enrolled in an on-campus MBSR program for 60 minutes, once per week for six weeks. Pre and post measurements were taken for perceived stress, sleep quality, attention awareness, and salivary cortisol to assess the feasibility of the program. The results showed statically significant improvement on mindfulness, perceived stress, and quality of sleep. However, with salivary cortisol the result indicated no significant difference. Mindfulness Meditation training can also be used to improve studying and working skills. Three groups of human resources personnel were tested on their ability to concentrate on one task and the ability to memorize it afterward. Participants that underwent the meditation training courses were found to be more focused (Levy, Wobbrock, Kasziak, & Ostergren, 2008). A more recent study was designed to assess the effectiveness and outcomes of each of two different stress programs on stress. Two hundred and thirty nine employees of a national insurance company were divided into three different groups a control group and mindfulness group and finally a yoga group. Compared with the control group, the mind-body interventions showed significantly greater improvements on perceived stress and sleep quality (Wolever, McCabe, Fekete, Bobinet, Mackenzie, & Kusnick, 2012). In conclusion, the literature is both replete with evidence on mindfulness and further affirms that mindfulness practices may be useful to students and faculty alike.

Method

Participants

Participants (N=11) were adults enrolled in one of the eight-week Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MSRB) courses offered through The Mindfulness Center for Healthy Living, a non-sectarian organization in Arkansas which promotes healthy living and offers a supportive community for those seeking to reduce stress and live more mindfully. The courses were offered in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Data Collection Procedure

The researchers proposed the study to Institutional Review Board at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, and the protocol was approved and the study was deemed exempt. Participants in the MBSR course were contacted during the orientation session. The researchers described the study, and participants were given an Informed Consent form explaining the study and stating that participants could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Those who chose to participate in the study signed two informed consent forms, one for the records of the participant and one for our records. As an incentive for completing both the pretest and the posttest, participants were entered into a drawing for certificates for yoga classes and a Visa gift card.

Prior to the first class session, participants completed a pretest composed of a short educational and demographic questionnaire and the Schommer Epistemological Questionnaire (SEQ), an instrument that measures four dimensions of epistemological beliefs. Participants returned the questionnaire to the course facilitator, and the researchers picked up the questionnaires from the facilitator. At the conclusion of the MBSR course, participants were given a posttest packet that included the SEQ and a self-addressed stamped envelope. Participants completed the SEQ and mailed it back to our office. A drawing was completed, and the gift certificates and card were mailed to the five drawing winners.
Measures

The Schommer Epistemological Questionnaire (SEQ) is designed to measure dimensions of epistemological beliefs (Schommer, 1990). It is a 63-item instrument composed of statements that participants rate on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). There are twelve subsets of items used as variables in factor analysis. These subsets have consistently produced four significant factors including beliefs in Fixed Ability, Simple Knowledge, Quick Learning, and Certain Knowledge. For college students, the test-retest score is .74 while the inter-item correlations for items within each belief factor range from .63 to .85 (Duell, & Schommer Aikins, 2001). The framework of the questionnaire is based on characteristics of a naïve view of knowledge and learning in areas such as the speed of learning and the value of integration. About half of the items are worded in such a way that a person who had a naïve view of knowledge and learning would disagree. Consequently, these items need to be recoded so that the higher the score on the item, the more naïve the individual’s view of knowledge and learning.

Data Analysis Procedure

The pretest and posttest raw scores were recoded so that a high number equaled a naïve perspective. Items were added together for the each subset. A descriptive analysis was run to obtain the mean and standard deviation of each subset. Then, using the mean and standard deviations, z scores were calculated for each subset. The subsets that have consistently loaded for each factor were added together. The pretest and posttest scores for each factor were compared using a paired sample T-Test and the effect size was determined using Pearson Product Moment Correlations.

Results

The return rate for the sample was 55%. Results from the Demographic and Educational Questionnaires and the SEQ pretests and posttests were examined for measures of central tendency and dispersion. Descriptive statistics were used to characterize how the sample was distributed across the demographic variables. SEQ total and factor scores were also examined. The next stage of the statistical analysis, the pretest and posttest scores for each factor were compared using a paired sample T-Test and Pearson Product Moment Correlations.

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

The sample (N=11) was 100% white, middle class, and female. The ages of participants ranged from 24 to 69, and 6 were married, 4 were divorced, and 1 widow. The majority of the sample lived in cities; 3 reported living in rural areas. A large percentage of the sample (40%) worked in the mental health field. Other fields represented including nursing, administration, law, management, accounting, and ministry. See Figure 1.
Schommer Epistemological Questionnaire

The findings indicate that an 8-Week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course had a measurable impact on participants’ epistemological beliefs. There was a statistically significant difference between pretest and posttest scores on the “Quick Learning” variable at the ≥ .001 level, t(9)= - 4.44. The effect size r(9)=.36 was small to medium according to Cohen’s (1988) guidelines. Although they were not statistically significant, there were trends in the data to suggest that other factors, such as “Fixed Ability,” “Simple Knowledge,” and “Certain Knowledge” were also impacted.

Discussion

The results indicate that an 8-Week MBSR course could have a significant impact on the epistemological beliefs of participants. As previous research indicates, greater epistemological sophistication can have an impact on adult development (Haynes, 2009; Schommer, 1998). As an individual’s beliefs become more sophisticated, the ability to comprehend information (Schommer, 1990), be self-directed (Boden, 2005; Boden, Smartt, Franklin Guy, & Scudder, 2006), and think critically (Boden, Gibson, Franklin Guy, Lasker-Scott, Scudder, & Smartt, 2008) is increased. Likewise, the research on mindfulness demonstrates mindfulness practices may reduce impulsive behavior (Margolin, et al., 2007), assist individuals coping with illness (Knight, 2009; Smith, Richardson, Hoffman, & Pilkington, 2004; Tacon & McComb, 2009), and contribute to a higher quality of life (Cuellar, 2008; Lewis, 2006; Oken, et al., 2006). The results of this study indicate that mindful approaches may very well affect one’s belief in ‘quick learning,’ which is crucial as the quick learning belief is linked to one’s ability to solve problems and think critically. Mitigating the belief in quick learning, which is constantly reinforced in today’s high technology, fast-paced society, may be a key to bringing adults back to living in the present, moment-by-moment and breath-by-breath. As Schoeberlein and Sheth (2009) point out, this is a “win-win” situation for individuals and for society.

Conclusion

While the results of this study alone do not wholly demonstrate the idea that the study of mindfulness will impact epistemological change, there is sufficient evidence that it could. The literature also consistently supports positive impacts when practiced in conjunction with other standardized approaches to medicine (Gazella & Snyder, 2006; Rosenzweig, Reibel, Greeson, Brainard,& Hojat, 2003), education (Lantieri, 2008; Tucker, Sloan, Vance, & Brownson, 2008), and overall quality of life (Carmody & Baer, 2007; Greeson, 2009; Klatt, Buckworth, & Malarkey, 2009; Levy et al., 2008; Marcus, et al., 2009; Praissman, 2008; Robert-McComb et al., 2004; Smith, et al., 2008; Wolever et al., 2012). The study of mindfulness does not refer to a single path of achievement, but provides a practitioner the opportunity to experience the intriguing, compelling, and multidimensional aspects of living life one moment at a time. The implications for academic program administration indicate that mindfulness practice may benefit student learning as well as the work environment for faculty and staff. In effect, if individuals can focus on the learning experience currently taking place, there is greater potential that the individual will retain and be willing and able to use the subject matter presented. Moreover, among the implications for academic administrator is that he or she could see a more focused faculty and staff during the hours in the day devoted to providing either instruction or support.
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