

Development, Acceptability, Feasibility, and Immediate Responses to a Mindfulness and Acceptance-Based Behavioral Stress/Anxiety Management Workshop for University Students



Elizabeth H. Eustis, BA¹, Lucas Morgan, MA¹, Jessica Graham, MA¹, Sarah K. Williston, MA¹, Sarah Hayes-Skelton, Ph.D.¹, Lizabeth Roemer, Ph.D.¹

¹University of Massachusetts Boston

Introduction

College campuses are seeing increasingly complex, chronic, and severe mental health issues among their students (Sieben, 2011).

Short-term prevention focused cognitive-behavioral interventions have been shown to reduce symptoms of anxiety, stress, and depression in college student samples (Steinhardt & Dolbier, 2008; Higgins, 2007).

Mindfulness and acceptance-based treatments that have been shown to be effective at reducing anxiety, stress, and comorbid depression symptoms among individuals with higher levels of anxiety (e.g., Hayes-Skelton, Roemer, & Orsillo, 2013; Hofmann et al., 2010; Roemer, Orsillo, & Salters-Pedneault, 2008) may be adaptable to on campus short-term group psychoeducation and discussion formats.

These forms of delivery may be stigma-reducing and more accessible for students struggling with a broad range of stressors including significant anxiety and depression.

Methods

Workshop Content:

•90 minute interactive and experiential workshop, based on an acceptance-based behavior therapy (Roemer & Orsillo, 2002), which has demonstrated efficacy in treating generalized anxiety disorder (Hayes-Skelton, Roemer, & Orsillo, 2013; Roemer, Orsillo, & Salters-Pedneault, 2008).

•3 main components:

•**Psychoeducation about anxiety/stress:** Students are asked various ways they experience stress/anxiety in their thoughts, body, and behavior, and various ways they try to cope with stress. Psychoeducation about anxiety/stress is provided to highlight that anxiety is a natural human response that we learn and is adaptive in certain situations. Information is provided on the impact of thoughts on feelings and behavior and the ways that trying to control our internal experiences (i.e., experiential avoidance) can increase the frequency and distress associated with internal experiences, as well as the ways that anxiety can cause behavioral avoidance, and therefore lead us to live narrow lives that are inconsistent with our values. Mindfulness and valued action are introduced as two new skills to practice in response to stress/anxiety.

•**Mindfulness:** Mindfulness is introduced as a skill that can be practiced both formally and informally, and can help to increase awareness and acceptance of internal experiences. The co-facilitators lead the group in a mindfulness of breath exercise and discuss reactions and experiences. Students are provided with a link to free online formal mindfulness exercises.

•**Valued action:** Values are introduced as related, yet different from goals, with the metaphor that if goals are the destination, values are the compass. Valued action is defined as actions that are consistent with an individual's values. Students complete a values clarification writing exercise in one area of their life, and then set a valued action to carry out in that domain over the next week. Internal and external barriers, such as discrimination across various identities, are discussed. Values are discussed as one way for individuals to remember that these inequities and injustices are external in society, and not inside them. Mindfulness and values are discussed together at the end of the workshop, as a way for students to engage in behaviors that are important to them while being present.

Recruitment:

•Workshops were open to undergraduate and graduate students at a diverse urban public university
 •Email blasts were sent to all students, flyers were posted around campus, and Psych 101 students were able to participate for course credit

Procedure:

•Students completed a questionnaire packet before and after the workshop
 •Post workshop questionnaires assess overall reactions to the workshop, helpfulness ratings for various workshop components, and open ended questions about students' experiences including what they found most helpful and any changes they would make
 •Post workshop responses will be described in this poster

Method Continued

Table 1. Demographic Information (n=76)

Self Identified Race Frequencies		Sexual Orientation	
Individuals were able to endorse multiple categories, therefore sum does not equal 76		Gay, Lesbian, or Bisexual	7 (9.21%)
White	30	Other (e.g., Questioning, Queer)	1 (1.32%)
Asian	14	Heterosexual	66 (86.84%)
Black	9	Missing	2 (2.63%)
Latino/a	11	Gender Identity	
Pacific Islander	1	Female	53 (69.74%)
Multiracial	3	Male	22 (28.95%)
Other	4	Missing	1 (1.32%)
<i>Note: demographic data missing for one participant, sexual orientation data missing for one additional participant</i>		Age	Mean = 25.12 SD = 9.12

Results

Table 2. Workshop Reactions

Question	Mean	S.D.
Overall how helpful have you found this workshop?	7.18	1.61
At this point how successful do you think this workshop was in teaching you about anxiety?	7.47	1.31
At this point how successful do you think this workshop will be at reducing your anxiety?	6.48	1.72
At this point, how successful do you think this workshop was in teaching you about mindfulness?	7.22	1.31
How likely are you to continue practicing mindfulness in the future?	7.66	1.30

** Scale ranges from 1 (very poor match/ not at all successful) to 9 (very good match/very successful), with 5 indicating "somewhat of a match"/"somewhat"*

Sample open ended responses about which aspects of the workshop were most helpful:

- “That trying to control my anxiety can make it worse because that is always frustrating for me; feeling like I have no control of my thoughts. Not controlling my anxiety doesn't make me crazy or weird, it's normal.”
- “The values aspect because it can help me with reaching my personal goals. Not avoiding negative memories because I see it will only make it worse.”
- “Being aware of the present and doing what is most important to us. It is important because we have the choice to start living.”
- “The mindfulness part because I am now thinking about doing it more often.”
- “The mindfulness was very good. It helps me to separate my thoughts and actually think about them and its importance.”

Discussion

Results suggest that students at a diverse urban university found this mindfulness and acceptance-based behavior therapy workshop acceptable, and on average, helpful, in terms of their stress and anxiety. Even after a brief 90-minute workshop students indicated that they were likely to continue practicing mindfulness. Feasibility results indicate that there is a demand for services like this on campus in group-based formats, which might be particularly appealing and accessible for students.

Analyses examining follow-up data at one week and one month post workshop to examine levels of anxiety, mindfulness, quality of life, and related variables are being presented by a colleague (Morgan et al., this session).

Preliminary evidence suggests that mindfulness and acceptance-based behavior therapy workshops are feasible to conduct in a university setting, and that students find them acceptable and helpful. Educational settings should continue to be explored as opportunities for interventions and preventions.