

College Students' Perceived Benefits of Mindfulness Practices in Managing Stress: A Concept Paper

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Abstract: Students are exposed to different sources of stress, especially during their college years. Stress can be detrimental to both the physical and psychological well-being of students. They are also at risk of experiencing mental health issues when exposed to prolonged periods of stress, especially those with limited coping strategies and poor support systems. With the increasing studies on the efficiency of mindfulness programs in improving individuals' mental health, this study aims to determine the college students' perceived benefits of mindfulness practices in managing stress. Participants in this study will be upperclassmen from the College of Science who will enroll in a non-academic course under Student Affairs Services. They will be asked to attend a 2-hour learning session mindfulness and will complete a reflection questionnaire, which will be the main source of the data collection. This research intends to employ a qualitative approach in examining the participants' responses by analyzing recurring ideas in the data sets, generating initial codes, and identifying common themes. The result of this study aims to help school administrators and counselors design comprehensive and responsive mental health programs and services that will help students develop skills and effective strategies for managing stress and promoting mental health and well-being.

Keywords: college students, stress, mental health, mindfulness practices.

I. INTRODUCTION

Stress is an inevitable part of an individual's life. However, there are specific periods when one has higher exposure to possible triggers that might contribute to more significant pressure. One of these is being in college, where an individual transitioned to a more complex role, responsibilities, and challenges to meet the expectations for self and others. Numerous studies have identified this stage as one of the most stressful stages in one's developmental tasks (Bland, Melton, Welle, & Bigham, 2012). College students must adjust to their new environment, facing unfamiliar people on campus, such as new classmates and teachers with diverse cultural backgrounds and personalities. Others struggle to manage finances, given the higher tuition fees, allowance, and family expenses. (Bulo & Sanchez, 2014). Some must learn how to navigate living away from their families and practice independence. Likewise, managing deadlines, examinations, individual reports, and group work are among the academic tasks that college students are expected to deliver, which also causes academic stress for those who cannot keep up (Misra & McKean, 2000). Often, students are overwhelmed by these changes, which may lead to maladjustment and psychological impairment, especially for those with limited support and coping strategies (Palai & Kumar, 2016). According to the American Psychological Association, stress is an individual's normal reaction to the pressure they experience daily. It affects how people behave and feel, which can become unhealthy when it affects day-to-day functioning (APA, 2018). When stress becomes persistent and prolonged, it can cause mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety (WHO, 2023).

The study conducted by Asif, Mudassar, Shahzad, Raouf, and Pervaiz (2020) among 500 college students in three universities in Pakistan showed that the frequency of depression, anxiety, and stress was found to be 75%, 88.4%, and 84.4%, respectively. The study also revealed that the symptoms of anxiety and stress are more prevalent in university students. Another study was conducted among university students in India, and the responses of 100 young adults to the College Adjustment Test and Perceived Stress Scale were scored and analyzed. The results suggest that stress and adjustment are critical factors in college students' lives. Although they found that stress and adjustment have a negative relationship, the researchers highlighted that it is essential for an individual to develop skills in stress management to cope effectively with pressures (Palai & Kumar, 2016). Related to this study was the research conducted by Buló and Sanchez (2014) in the Philippines, who investigated the sources of stress among college students. Using the Student Life Stress Inventory, 150 students participated, and the results reported that interpersonal stressors were the primary source of stress among college students. This includes working with people they are unfamiliar with, relationships with parents, and the opposite sex. Furthermore, Saleh, Camart, and Romo (2017) evaluated the model of vulnerability to stress among 483 French college students. Participants were asked to complete a battery of scales for three months, and results revealed that 72.9 suffered from psychological distress, 86.3 experienced anxiety, and 79.3 displayed depressive symptoms. Likewise, the researchers concluded that critical predictors of stress were life satisfaction, self-esteem, optimism, self-efficacy, and psychological distress.

Consequently, universities must also prioritize providing services that will aid students in their transition and offer programs and services that can promote student mental health and well-being. One of the emerging interventions schools and universities adopt to help students effectively cope with stress and pressures is a mindfulness program offered to students. Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of mindfulness as a therapeutic intervention, defines it as paying attention to the present moment, bringing awareness on purpose and non-judgmentally with openness, acceptance, and compassion (Siegel, Germer, & Olendzki, 2009). Likewise, harmonizing with this definition is mindfulness, which is the awareness of one's inner state at the present moment (APA, 2024). Being mindful allows an individual to pause and observe his thoughts, feelings, and behavior without making any judgment or reaction. Mindfulness has been widely used in therapeutic interventions like mindfulness-based cognitive behavior therapy and mindfulness-based stress reduction for those with mental health conditions and suffering from psychological distress.

The study conducted by Caldwell, Harrison, Adams, Quin, and Greeson (2010) on the effects of mindfulness movement based on self-efficacy, mood, stress, and sleep quality among 166 college students showed that the 15-week mindfulness intervention helped the participants improve their mood and perceived stress which greatly affected their quality of sleep at the end of the semester. A similar study was implemented in 2015 to investigate the effects of 6-week-adapted mindfulness-based stress reduction on college students. The participants' symptoms of psychological distress, emotional awareness, self-control, and day-to-day mindfulness activities were measured. Results showed a significant increase in self-reported mindful awareness, self-control, and subjective vitality, while meta-mood was not affected; however, the researcher concludes that MBSR positively affects students' psychological health and well-being. It has also proven effective for stress reduction and can be used as an intervention. In addition, the result of the study on the relationship between mindfulness and stress in college students at a public university revealed an inverse correlation between mindfulness and stress. A high score in overall mindfulness among students was related to low scores in stress. This indicates that students who practiced mindfulness were equipped with skills in managing stress and could effectively cope with it (von der Heyde, 2017).

As the literature opines, the student population is at risk for psychological challenges due to the rigor of academic demands and other pressures they must face in their college years. Establishing a strong support system and effective strategies for coping with difficult situations is very important. In this regard, this study aims to describe college students' perceptions of the benefits of mindfulness practices, specifically in managing stress. Results could be useful for school administrators and counselors in planning mental health and well-being programs to boost students' coping skills in managing their daily lives in the university and beyond.

II. PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

This study aims to explore the perceived benefits of mindfulness in managing stress among college students; this will employ a qualitative research design. Qualitative research is focused on understanding the subjects and their lived experiences rather than predicting the outcomes (Tomaszewski, Zarestky, & Gonzalez, 2020).

According to Choudhuri, Glauser, and Peregoy (2004), four major parts of qualitative research need to be discussed in writing the research manuscripts. First is the background; this includes the statement of purpose of the research questions, a review of related literature, and the research approach. Second is the methodology, where the data gathering procedure should be clearly stated. Third will be the data analysis, which includes information on how the data was organized, coded, and synthesized. Lastly, the findings, where the interpretations and conclusions based on the data gathered, will be presented.

Participants and Setting

Participants of this research will be college students who are enrolled in a non-academic course under the Student Affairs Services. They are upperclassmen who will participate in a 2-hour mindfulness learning session. This research study will include students practicing mindfulness activities for six months or more. Participation in the research is voluntary and will not affect their standing in the non-academic course.

Procedures and Data Collection

An informed consent form will be distributed to the students through email. The researcher will emphasize that participants' data will be protected and that participation in this study is voluntary. Only those with complete and signed forms will be included in the study.

Once students have agreed to participate in the study, they will be asked to complete an online pre-work form. Then, on the agreed schedule, participants will attend a 2-hour learning session on mindfulness practices. After completing the sessions, they will be requested to complete a reflection questionnaire, which will be the main data source for this study.

Coding Procedure

Participants' responses will be analyzed to identify common themes following the qualitative approach. Using thematic analysis, the researcher will examine the recurring ideas in the data set, and initial codes will be generated to search for potential themes. Identified themes will be reviewed and defined to understand the participants' responses (Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016).

Trustworthiness

Triangulation will be implemented to ensure that there will be no researcher bias in interpreting the participants' responses. The research will invite three other experts (not connected to the study) who will read and analyze the collected data, codes, and themes formulated from the responses.

III. IMPLICATIONS TO SCHOOL'S MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAM

Everyone can experience stress at different points in their lives and degree levels. Students are not exempted from this. In fact, due to the different changes in their environment, social interaction, academic responsibilities, and expectations that they must deal with, they often become at risk of a higher degree of stress and tension. Prolonged exposure to this might lead to psychological problems that could affect their daily functioning as students and the quality of their lives. In this regard, this research intends to explore the students' perceived benefits of mindfulness practices in managing stress. The findings of the study will help administrators and school counselors design a comprehensive mental health program in the university that promotes students' well-being through proactive activities such as mindfulness learning sessions, provides early interventions to students experiencing high levels of stress and mental health concerns, and nurture a supportive and inclusive school environment that will encourage everyone to seek help when necessary. This follows Republic Act No. 11036, also known as the Mental Health Act, which states that all educational systems should promote mental health awareness among students and school personnel and provide support and services to at-risk individuals (Senate of the Philippines, 2017).

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