Incorporating Mindfulness Meditation in Higher Education

Kristen Esposito Brendel, LCSW, PhD
Aurora University
Mind Full, or Mindful?
An Epidemic of Stress Among College Students

This study of more than 200,000 incoming freshmen at four-year colleges conducted in the fall of 2010 found that the percentage of students who reported that their emotional health was above average fell to 52%, compared with 64% in 1985 (familiesandwork.org).

Stress is moving from college into the workforce…

The 2002 National Study of Changing Workforce found that physical health of the workforce is declining. Stress levels have reportedly risen over the past six years by 41% (familiesandwork.org).

And penetrates our physical, emotional health, degree of happiness.
“The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will. . . An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence.”

-William James, 1890
How do we educate students with chronic stress who may not have the skillset to recognize that there is even a problem?
Mindfulness Meditation

• Meditation usually refers to:
  – A state in which the body is consciously relaxed and the mind is allowed to become calm and focused (Epstein, 2008).

• Meditation often involves one-pointedness or the practice of focusing on a single stimulus.

• Stimuli of focus are often breaths, heartbeats, or single words or sounds. It can also include a phrase, idea of contemplation, or physical movement like walking, designing (mudras and art), and yoga.

• The goal (and motivation) for meditation will vary depending on the individual.

• Modern uses of meditation includes the development of self-awareness, self-acceptance, reducing mental health issues, increasing performance, mental and physical healing, and pain management (Epstein, 2008; Seigel, 2007).
Educational Implications for Mindfulness Meditation

1. Cognitive and Academic Performance
   
a. Improve ability to maintain preparedness and orient attention.
   
b. Improve ability to process information quickly and accurately.

Concentration-based meditation, practiced over a long-term, may have a positive impact on academic achievement.

(Cozolino, 2013; Hall, 1999; Jennings, 2015; Seigel, 2010)
Educational Implications

2. Mental Health and Psychological Well-Being

a. Decreases stress, anxiety, and depression.

b. Supports increased regulation of emotional reactions and the cultivation of positive psychological states.

(Cozolino, 2013; Deckro, 2002; Hick et al., 2010; Seigel, 2010; Zylowska et al., 2008)
Educational Implications

3. Development of the Whole Person

a. Meditation can support the development of creativity.
b. Meditation supports and enhances the development of skills needed for interpersonal relationships.
c. Empathetic responses are increased with meditation and mindfulness practices.
d. Meditation cultivates self-compassion.

How does it work?

• A large research base is being formed and demonstrates how mindfulness (and CBT) physically changes one’s brain functioning and cortical structure.

• Brain imaging techniques are being used that show evidence of changing structures resulting in:
  – Increases cortical thickness
  – Increased frontal lobes/ prefrontal cortex (part of brain in charge of executive functioning)
  – Decreased volume in the anterior insula (theories say that the size increases with PTSD)
  – Altered gray matter in the hippocampus (region partly responsible for memory) and brain stem (region responsible for breathing, heart rate, basic survival)
  – Increased attention and mental flexibility
  – Increased emotional regulation
  – Decreased stress (cortical) levels

(Creswell et al., 2007; Seigel, 2010)
"You should sit in meditation for 20 minutes a day, unless you’re too busy; then you should sit for an hour"

-Old Zen saying

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