



MINDFULNESS TRAINING OFFERS STRESS REDUCTION POSSIBILITIES FOR COUNTRY MEDICAL STUDENTS

A pilot mindfulness training program delivered online for medical students at the WA Rural Clinical School and funded by the Lishman Health Foundation is showing positive results around the reduction of students' stress levels and increased self-compassion levels.

The pilot program led by Dr Sarah Moore and a team of researchers aimed to determine the feasibility and effectiveness of an eight-week online training program delivered to third-year medical students in 2016 (University of WA and Notre Dame University).

Participant 1

Mindfulness assists me in maintaining presence, enabling me to deal with what is happening in this moment and reduce my stress and anxiety about all the things I may need to deal with tomorrow, next week, any time in the future.

It is well documented that medical students experience high levels of stress during their medical training^{1,2} and continue to experience stress in their junior doctor training.³ The consequences of high stress may manifest as depression and anxiety, alcohol and drug abuse, burnout and suicide.³

These mental health issues put medical students at increased risk of poor professional behaviour, including impaired decision-making, reduced attention and concentration,⁴ and impaired ability to develop rapport with patients,⁵ all of which have the potential to affect the health and safety of the communities that they serve.

Mindfulness involves 'paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally'.⁶ It can be practised formally through meditation, and informally by consciously bringing awareness to each moment of each day.⁶

There is growing evidence that mindfulness training during medical school can be a useful and effective tool for reducing stress levels and consequently minimising the side effects of stress on medical students; however the small number of controlled studies published indicates a need for more rigorously conducted research to confirm this evidence.^{7,8}

Methods

Using quantitative-qualitative mixed-methods approach, the team measured the frequency and duration of the participants' mindfulness meditation practice, and assessed changes in their perceived stress, self-compassion and compassion levels, as well as personal and professional attitudes and behaviours.

Results

A total of 47 students were recruited to the study. Fifty per cent of participants were practising at least weekly by the end of the eight-week program, and 32 per cent students reported practising at least weekly four months following the intervention.

There was a statistically significant reduction in participants' perceived stress levels and a significant increase in self-compassion at four-month follow-up. Participants reported qualitative insights about the personal and professional impact of mindfulness meditation training as well as barriers to practice.

Participant 2

I really enjoyed the 'body scan', 'awareness of breathing' and 'tuning in to your surroundings' meditations...I enjoyed all the teaching videos and found them very eye opening.

Participant 11

The Mindfulness Program helped me to look at my situation objectively and to think about how I would judge someone else in the same circumstances. This made me more forgiving of how I was performing.

Participant 5

As the program fell within a very busy time during our medical course, I found it quite difficult to keep up with the daily mindfulness practice as well as watch the various teaching videos as they were released.

Participant 8

The loving kindness meditation has helped me to consciously try to identify my personal judgement towards patients and in situations where a patient is perhaps difficult, ensuring I am conscious of maintaining compassion towards that patient.

Conclusions

The results provide preliminary evidence that online training in mindfulness meditation can be associated with reduced stress and increased self-compassion in rural medical students. More rigorous research is required to establish concrete measures of feasibility of a mindfulness meditation program.

A research paper on the RCSWA Mindfulness Project will be published soon and will be uploaded to the Lishman Health Foundation website.



The Lishman Health Foundation welcomes research proposals and partnerships.

Please contact us at admin@vlfoundation.com or phone 0475 705 417 if you have a research idea you would like to pursue with us.

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