

Charlie Rose

Happiness consultancy report

CST228, “Happiness: investigating its causes and conditions”

Autumn session, 2014

Cultural Studies, University of Wollongong

Subject coordinators: Chris Barker and Brian Martin

Assignment

The consultancy is a continuation of your reflective journal.

- You continue with the activity you used for your journal, or a different one, and/or an additional one.
- You recruit two or more individuals — called clients — to undertake an activity known to increase happiness, either the same activity as your own or a different one.
- You introduce your clients to the activity, for example through a presentation, talk, workshop and/or handout.
- You monitor their engagement with the activity on a regular basis (at least weekly) through observations, interviews, survey and/or other means.
- You evaluate the effect of the activity on yourself and your clients using questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and/or other techniques.

For more details see http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/CST_14outline.pdf

Charlie Rose's consultancy report starts on the next page.

This document is located at <http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/happiness-consultancy-tops/>.

Happiness: Investigating its causes and conditions

CST228

Assignment 3 Consultancy.

Mindful Meditation

Student number 4705099

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For this consultancy I have chosen to focus on mindful meditation, which uses a conscious direction of an individual's awareness, as a technique to increase happiness levels. I decided to experiment with the effects of meditation on happiness because I want to expand on my own previous experiences with this technique, and observe how my results would compare to those of my clients. I am focusing on how meditation can decrease stress in busy lives: this decrease was the most noticeable difference I found personally while practicing meditation. It is expected that a decrease in stress will lead to an increase in happiness. Although there is much more to happiness than simply an absence of stress, any reduction in stress will be subtracting any negative emotions from the individual's life and therefore promoting a happy and healthy lifestyle.

Meditation refers to a practice whereby the participant's aim is to obtain greater cognitive awareness, and hence more control in the form of choice and regulation of conscious cognitive processes. This regulation of attention has been said to heighten awareness and provide insight into the workings of the individual's mind (Walsh 2014). Simply stated, awareness is the practice of making the unconscious conscious. This increase in awareness may be linked to happiness through an increase in intra- and interpersonal awareness. This may enhance an individual's happiness by creating more possibilities for choices of behavior.

Recruitment:

In addition to finding two clients who had busy lives and potentially high stress levels, I wanted to find two people whose personalities would be complemented by meditating. Before choosing my clients, I thought about people in my life who I felt had characteristics of somebody that would benefit from this exercise.

The first subject that came to mind right away was my father Kevin. My dad has a busy work life and experiences high amounts of stress from deadlines and projects at work. I felt that it would be highly beneficial for him to be able to take time out of his day to devote to mindful meditation in an attempt to distress. There are many characteristics in Kevin's personality that are conducive to engendering a state of happiness. He is devoted to his family, practices gratitude and is already physically active. If he were able to reduce some stress caused by his working life I feel this would bring him much happiness, as well as allow him to reap more benefits of the happiness-causing activities in which he already participates.

Kevin majored in Religious Studies in university, which has enhanced the spiritual aspect of his personality. He defines spirituality as a willingness to experience deep connection with a universally nurturing presence. I feel as though Kevin's spirituality will allow him to meditate with more ease than some people. He is also very open-minded and open to trying new things, which will be extremely beneficial while beginning this new activity.

The second subject that I chose to work with was my friend Gemma. Gemma was slightly resistant at the beginning when I asked her to participate, claiming that she was too busy with her university degree as well as her part time job. This is the reason I asked her to participate. I proposed the argument that the stress in her life caused by school and work could be reduced by participating in this activity, and gave accounts of my own experience with meditation, as I was in a similar situation as her before I began this project. Eventually I convinced her that she could benefit from participating in mindful meditation.

Gemma is a very artistic individual. She is quite open-minded, and likes to experience things first hand rather than being told about them. I feel that having the ability to experiment with different forms of meditation, and find what works for her individually will be quite attractive to Gemma. Additionally, Gemma has a very curious personality. I believe that although she was reluctant to begin this activity, this curiosity will encourage her to continue with this activity once she has started it.

Both subjects were chosen primarily because I felt that their busy lives could benefit from many of the positive changes meditation could bring them: these benefits specifically include a reduction in stress, which has been repeatedly shown to be achievable through meditation techniques. (Kabat-Zin 1992, 2005, Young, 2011, Siegel, 2007).

Introduction to the activity:

Both clients were contacted via e-mail and asked to participate in this happiness-boosting activity. Once I had received confirmation of participation from both clients, they were sent a copy of the ethics form to fill out.

I introduced my clients to the practice of mindful meditation using a handout that I had created. This handout included some background on meditation, some examples of different forms of meditation, and some information on the benefits of meditation. This hand out also gave a general overview on the meditation technique, on what meditation was, and the purpose of meditation, stating that mindful meditation involves allowing thoughts to come and go, absent of judgment or attachment, in an attempt to obtain peace and happiness, while staying engaged in the present moment (Young, 2011).

In the handout, I included some information about common forms of meditation. As Walsh (2011) states, “these phenomena should be experienced and known directly by the individual rather than by what others say about them”. Keeping this in mind, I gave my clients some information about the practice I had been using, as well as other common practices, but encouraged them to experiment until they found what worked best for them individually.

The subjects were then given copies of the 'subjective happiness scale' (Lyubomirsky 2007). They were instructed to fill out these questionnaires in order to collect some baseline data of the client's current happiness levels. This happiness scale questionnaire was then conducted at the end of the five weeks, and the data was compared. The differences in happiness ratings will be discussed later on.

I asked my clients to keep a diary of their experience, and write in it at least 2 times a week. I felt the diary would be useful for the clients to use as a reference to their thoughts and feelings throughout the week, as well as to see any progress that they were making.

I felt that the close relationship that I have with my father was beneficial in allowing him to speak freely to me, absent of any insecurity. We already have a close bond, which allowed him to feel comfortable in speaking to me about his experience. Similarly, Gemma and I have a close relationship, which made it easier for her to open up to me.

Another advantage of choosing clients with whom I already have close relationships was ease of communication, irrespective of the fact that the clients were in a different country and time zone. I kept in contact with both clients via e-mail. I would check in twice a week through email to monitor the progress of the clients. At the end of the 5 weeks, each client was contacted via Skype for a final discussion on his or her progress and feelings towards the mindful meditation exercise.

Client #1 results—Kevin

After reading the handout on meditation, Kevin chose to start trying to meditate at night before going to sleep. His aim was to meditate for twenty minutes, however admitted to spending much less time (around 10 minutes) in the first week. For the first week Kevin reported having many difficulties in his diary. Issues arose regarding his ability to focus on the task of meditating and he claimed to have great trouble with becoming "extremely distracted by random, meaningless thoughts" while trying to meditate.

Due to long days at work, Kevin was finding he was having troubles remembering to meditate before bed. In the beginning of the second week, he decided to change his practice and meditate in the mornings after waking up instead. Kevin was attempting to meditate for twenty minutes every day, and half way into the second week he reported that he was "finally noticing the meditation becoming an easier task than it was in the first week".

During our Skype interview I asked Kevin to specify any changes that he had felt had been made to his happiness levels. He said specifically he felt as though he had much more control over his emotions, and was able to focus on what he felt was important at any given time, whether that be an assignment at work or spending time with his family. He said that a conscious direction of his thoughts made being in the present moment much more enjoyable for him, and that the self-efficacy that came along

with this was extremely rewarding. Kevin also stated towards the end of the 5 weeks that he felt he had more energy towards the end of the day.

Client #2 Gemma

As Gemma was hesitant to start meditating in the first place, she had some troubles in the first two weeks of this exercise. Although she reported throughout the weeks that she was “not seeing any benefits from the exercise”, she did persist and continued meditating once a day, for twenty minutes, lying down in bed before going to sleep at night.

The third week into her meditation Gemma reported that she was “finding meditation more enjoyable”, but she still didn’t feel as though she was seeing any changes in her happiness levels. She had begun meditating while laying in bed with a cup of tea and had stated that she was enjoying meditating much more now that she had individualized a meditation routine for herself.

Midway through the fourth week of meditation, Gemma had a breakthrough of sorts when her university exam period started. With the added stress of the upcoming weeks she stated that she was “looking forward to taking some time to [herself], and relaxing after such a stressful day at university”. I believe this is when Gemma started to see the benefits of her daily meditation. Throughout her email reports she spoke of how meditation was a nice break in her day to relax and forget about every stressful event that had occurred throughout the day. She also spoke of how she felt that meditation was giving her a clearer focus throughout the day. Whichever task she was working on, she was able to concentrate for longer, and regulate her emotions to a greater extent throughout the task.

When asked during our Skype meeting how meditation had impacted her, Gemma stated that she felt a deeper connection to whatever she was doing at the current moment, as well as a greater cognitive and affective control. She said that this greater control was greatly responsible for reducing stress throughout her days.

The results that both clients found were very similar to my own. I found a great deal of difficulty meditating in the first couple weeks. I believe this was because I was working on finding a certain meditation routine that worked for me. This routine ended up being a process of exercising first, and then lying in bed and meditating before falling asleep. Both my clients ended up making alterations to the original routines that they had decided upon.

Similarly to both clients, I had a difficult time focusing on meditation in the beginning. I would find my mind constantly distracted by random thoughts, and had a hard time regarding thoughts objectively and then letting them go. This however became easier over time, and eventually I was able to acknowledge a thought and then let it pass. The process of meditation helped me to become more objective about my subjective experience; I could experience a thought or feeling without

having an immediate unconscious reaction, and thus gained a sense of freedom and possibility for choice and options for courses of action in my life.

I feel as though myself and my two clients were all similar in the fact that meditation was useful for reduce distress because we had chosen a predetermined time in the day where we were did not have anything to do except sit with our thoughts: we had agreed to make some quiet time for ourselves. Gemma had stated in her diary that “mediation was the one time throughout the day that [she] had to herself”.

Questionnaires:

Prior to commencing the meditation activities, I asked my participants to fill out the ‘subjective happiness scale’ (Lyubomirsky 2007) to determine their current happiness levels. This same questionnaire was completed after 5 weeks of practicing mindful meditation. It was found that both participants’ happiness levels were increased after the 5-week period.

Kevin received a score of 4.5 on his first attempt at filling out the questionnaire. This is an average score according to Lubomirsky (2007), where an average score is between 4.5 and 5.5, with the highest possible score being 7. Following the five weeks of meditation, Kevin’s score reached a 5.75, which is a significant increase.

Gemma also saw exponential improvements in her score on this particular scale. Her beginning score of 4.75 increased to a score of 6 following her meditation practice. This score of 6 is only one point away from the maximum possible score.

These favorable scores on the ‘subjective happiness scale’ lead me to believe that I was correct in thinking that Kevin and Gemma has personalities and lifestyles that could benefit from a happiness increasing activity such as mindful meditation.

Academic research:

Meditation has been observed to promote mindfulness, a state in which the participant perceives more sense of connection to his/her own consciousness (intra-consciousness) and sense of connection to the external world (inter-consciousness); in essence, meditation helps forge a deeper relationship with the self and the world (Siegel, 2007). It is thought that the everyday state of mind is operating at suboptimal levels, and the act of bringing the mind under conscious observation works to heighten the performance of the human brain (Walsh, 2014). This performance may be operationally defined as increases in synaptic connectivity between areas of the brain; moreover the process is seen to enhance duration of concentration, sense of increased choices for behaviors, and possible increases in a sense of happiness or well-being (Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Siegel, 2007).

The results that were received by both clients were consistent with writings and academic research on this subject. Research in this area states that it has been shown that regular meditation brings with it numerous benefits for an individual's mental and physical well-being. Meditation can increase energy, reduce risk of disease, and decrease chances of developing anxiety, neuroticism and depression (Sebelis 2014). As Mark Young states, meditation attempts to decrease the occurrence of negative thoughts and feelings as it is also encouraging the development of positive emotions. This development of positive emotions increases internal locus of control, as well as self-actualization, which are key personality factors linked to happiness (Smith 1995).

The results experienced by both clients were in accordance with the academic findings in the field, most noticeably the fact that both participants experienced significant reductions in stress and anxiety. This was consistent with many readings on the topic, which state that one of the most prominent benefits of meditation is reduced stress levels (Smith 1995).

Stress reduction has been studied many times in relation to meditation. Research behind this states that meditation works to regard thoughts in a nonjudgmental manner. After practicing meditation, this should be able to transfer into every day life. After practicing meditation for an extended period of time, one should develop the ability to non-judgmentally observe their own thoughts, feelings and reactions in stressful situations, therefore reducing negative emotions that would usually arise in these situations. Kabat-Zinn conducted a study on reducing stress levels in the treatment of anxiety disorders. Patients who met the DSM II criteria for generalized anxiety or panic disorders were enrolled in a three month mindful meditation program. The results showed significant reduction in stress and anxiety levels, and the benefits persisted in patients who continued with meditation practices. Many similar studies have continually shown considerable reductions in stress levels following mindful meditation programs.

This did relate to the experiences of myself as well as those of my clients. All three of us had found that in addition to many benefits listed above (such as increase in energy, reduction of anxiety), the most pronounced benefit we felt was a reduction in stress levels. The increase in an internal locus of control had a great impact on all of our lives and brought with it more feelings of control and purpose throughout the day. This in turn lead to an increase in our happiness levels as we felt more connected to the world around us, as well as more connected to our own emotions.

Recommendations:

While meditation brings with it many advantages, it is quite a challenge to commence. There is a great deal of effort that must be put in to begin to receive some of the benefits that meditation has to offer. Perhaps it would be beneficial to

create a personal support system in which the new practitioner is accountable to others who actively encourage him or her to continue through obstacles.

While both clients indeed noticed changes in their happiness levels and noticed their meditation routines becoming easier and more fulfilling, five weeks is a relatively short period of time to expect to see any significant changes in their lives. I have strongly encouraged my clients to continue with their meditation routines and try to incorporate it into their lifestyles in a long-term fashion. Through my experience, both personally and from observing my clients, meditation is an excellent technique to increase life-long happiness.

Of course I am not an unbiased observer and this is not a controlled experiment that conclusively eliminates other variables that may have contributed to increases in happiness. However the results and descriptions of my participants' respective experiences are consistent with my own experience and a great body of peer-reviewed research on the subject.

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