

# **Sakura Watanuki**

## **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](http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/CST_14outline.pdf)

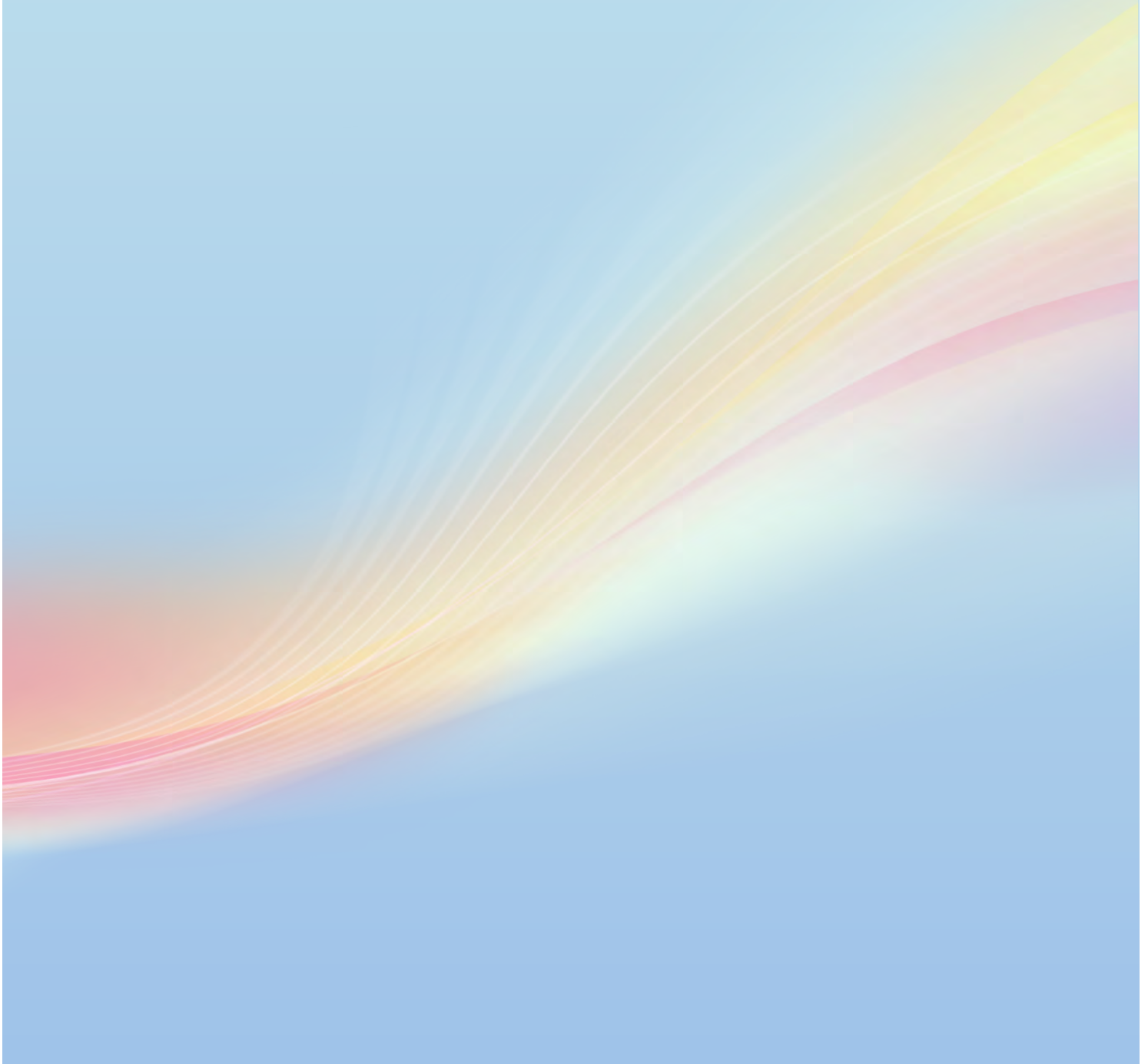
*Sakura Watanuki's* consultancy report starts on the next page.

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

# **CST 228: Happiness Consultancy**

**Student number: 4650955**

Activity: Mindful Meditation



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## Background

As a university student, I found that the biggest obstacle that prevented me from being happy was stress. Stress came in all different shapes and sizes from several aspects of my life; these included but were not limited to: schoolwork, being homesick, and social pressure. It was always difficult to effectively manage my time while balancing my responsibilities. I felt that I was always busy and constantly overthinking, which was both physically and mentally exhausting. This led me to believe that if I learned how to focus my attention to my priorities, I would become happier and more energetic.

After taking Sonja Lyubomirsky's 'Person-Activity Fit' Diagnostic<sup>1</sup>, I was recommended a number of activities that could potentially increase my happiness; among them, I was ecstatic to see that practicing mindfulness was one of them. The combination of this activity with meditation seemed like a good fit for me, since I already had interest in it. By being involved in this activity for five weeks, I found myself proving true to a lot of the research of benefits of mindful meditation, such as mental resilience, having a better focus, and enhanced mood (Jonathan, Shahrestani & Andrew 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> Lyubomirsky, S 2010, *The How of Happiness*, Piatkus, London, United Kingdom 73-76

Overall, I had an extremely positive outcome even after a mere 5 weeks.

For this particular project, we were recommended to continue the activity that we had already done in order to be able to reflect and understand our clients on a better level. By having prior knowledge of the activity based on research and experience, I felt that I would be able to offer tangible advice and information as needed.

## **Client Recruitment**

Through methods such as Facebook and e-mail, I reached out to several individuals who I deemed fit for this assignment; they included friends, family members, friends of friends, etc. The most important factor that I considered through this recruitment process was finding individuals who would have the least biased views; thus, I wanted my clients to have no prior experience of this activity. I also looked for clients with dedication and commitment skills, which would be supportive to the success of my project.

I introduced the activity to my potential clients via Skype while giving them a handout electronically. In the handout, general information

about meditation was included such as the benefits of the activity and difficulties that I faced in my own time. I emphasized the need for time commitment in my discussion by explaining to them what I did personally. By being honest about this topic, I was able to decide who would be the best clients by analyzing how open-minded and dedicated each person seemed to be. In the end, I chose one of my friends from my hometown and my older sister because they were the most willing to participate, and they were both unexposed to the activity.

*Client 1: Ryan*

Ryan is one of my friends from my hometown. He is almost 20 years old and is currently a second-year student at DePaul University. He has a girlfriend of two years, a job, and an internship as well. He commutes to school five days a week, but he has several hobbies that he enjoys doing in his free time, such as photography and playing video games.

*Client 2: Jane*

Jane is my older sister who recently graduated from Waseda University with a liberal arts degree. Her aspirations include traveling and becoming a tattoo artist. She hopes to live in Europe in the

future. She currently works part-time as a translator, and she enjoys spending time with her friends and family. Ever since she was young, she was naturally drawn to and became talented in art – specifically, drawing. If she is not out with her friends, she likes to have a smoke while painting, sketching, or drawing.

### Client Progress

I was able to monitor my clients' activity quite easily with the use of media technology such as Facebook, E-mail, and Skype. For every week, I gave my clients a "log sheet<sup>2</sup>," which was created in order to see that my clients were actually participating.

To assess their changes in attitude, behavior, or happiness, I also conducted a Skype session at the end of every week where I asked the same set of prepared questions as a weekly survey<sup>3</sup>. This was used to complement the log sheet, allowing my clients to reflect and analyze their own attitudes and emotions. I also made sure to discuss any difficulties they were having or any questions that had for me.

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<sup>2</sup> See appendix 1

<sup>3</sup> See appendix 2

## *Week 1*

The reaction to the activity from both Ryan and Jane were extremely similar the first week. One of the biggest difficulties that they faced the first few sessions was trying to focus on nothing, which is a problem that I also had when I started the activity. Jane told me that she believed that her mind could never be at rest unless she was sleeping because she is an active thinker. Ryan also found it difficult to concentrate, especially when he could not find a completely silent location to meditate.

However, there was a difference between the two when it came to the attitude toward the activity. Ryan was more eager and enjoyed meditating right away, claiming that the activity helped him relax at night and sleep better. Jane, on the other hand, expressed her feelings of disinterest; she stated that she had life stressors from family, school, and relationships, which made it almost impossible for her to not have any thoughts. She exclusively stated, also, that she is not in the best state of mind and wouldn't consider herself a very happy person at this time.

Jane also claimed to have a "sense of guilt and frustration" when she tried to concentrate but couldn't for more than a couple seconds.



This reveals one of the disadvantages of mindful meditation – the feeling of obligation. This could potentially discourage her from participating altogether, and it may end up having a negative impact on her instead. Although there is an overwhelming amount of research proven of how this activity could be beneficial, it is also important to keep in mind each individual's feelings toward the activity, since it could cause some emotional harm.

## *Week 2*

The second week evidently showed how my clients started to experience the activity differently. Although Ryan claimed to have liked the activity less this week, he found that after making it into a routine, meditation became more beneficial to him. He became "more into the mindset for it," and started to figure out how to incorporate mindful meditation into his life – he also has trialed different locations, times, and durations.

Ryan found that mindful meditation at the end of the day helped him "relax at the end of the day and de-stress for the next day," which is one of the many benefits that have been proven by research: reduction in stress and enhancing the ability to clear one's mind (Ramirez 2012).

Jane still had difficulty trying to detach herself from her thoughts, saying, “even if my body is relaxed, my mind is constantly running.” In addition, she believed that since she had previously dealt with stress and problems in different ways, meditation didn’t seem to be helping as much as she hoped.

An interesting observation I made was when Jane stated: “The more I think of meditation as a relaxation tactic, the more I think it depends on the person.” This statement holds true to what Sonya Lyubomirsky said of how happiness-enhancing activities need to be personalized; they need to fit the individual’s personality in order for it to work (Lyubomirsky 2010). This exemplifies another disadvantage of meditation – if it is not enjoyable for the individual, it could cause negative results. While Jane indicated that she was happier as a whole at this time, she doesn’t believe that it was because of the meditation itself.

### *Week 3*

This week went a different direction for Jane; while she expressed her frustration toward the activity during the first few weeks, she had a different opinion this time. She stated, “Once you make it into a

habit, I found that it isn't as difficult anymore." This is an experience that both my clients and I related to. This notion relates to the idea of mindfulness as a 'muscle' (Jonathan, Shahrestani & Andrew 2012) – the more it is utilized and practiced, the easier it becomes to do so. This is one of the biggest benefits of mindful meditation, as it builds self-confidence and a better sense of consciousness as mindfulness starts to be a natural state of mind instead of a forced action.

Ryan also experienced a slight change in attitude, but in the opposite direction; while he found it easier to partake in the activity by making it a daily routine, he began to build a slight indifference toward it. This may be due to the fact that he has gotten too comfortable with it, and he is no longer experiencing "flow<sup>4</sup>" since it is becoming less challenging and possibly less engaging as it first was when he began.

## Research and Experience Evaluation

As mentioned before, I conducted weekly Skype sessions with each of my clients to discuss their attitudes and feelings toward the activity. I had them answer the same set of questions that I had made into an evaluation survey so that I could compare and contrast the

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<sup>4</sup> a concept by Csikszentmihalyi describing optimal experience by being "absorbed" in what one does. Citation: Nakamura, J & Csikszentmihalyi, M 2002, 'The concept of flow', in CR Snyder & SJ Lopez (eds.), *Handbook of Positive Psychology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp89-105.

feedback on a weekly basis. After I had asked the questions, I also offered advice about the activity when necessary and conversed with them afterward about their general lifestyle, stresses, and well-being. Overall, on a scale of 1-10 (1 being extremely unhappy and 10 being extremely happy), Ryan improved from a 5 to a 7, and Jane improved from a 3 to a 7.

By discussing with my clients every week, I was able to compare and contrast my own experience with them; they gave me insight to some of the hardships that I personally did not face, and they also showed me a broader range of benefits that could come from the activity.

Most of what my clients and I experienced supports the research of how this activity has positive effects on the body and mind, but it also investigates the negative aspects as well. Practicing mindful meditation requires a few key components that are expressed well in an article in *The Psychiatric News*; the components include “a noncompetitive, nonjudgmental meditative component, mental focus on muscular movement and proprioceptive awareness combined with a low to moderate level of muscular activity, centered breathing, a focus on anatomic alignment, and energy-centric awareness of individual flow of intrinsic body energy” (Jeste 2013).

Ryan, who was able to achieve these key points while practicing, received the physiological benefits. He discussed how meditating before going to bed actually helped him to sleep better and to reflect back on his day – his experience as well as my own prove true of mindful meditation being “an immediate source of relaxation and mental quiescence” (Jeste 2013).

It is apparent, however, that Jane was not as successful at getting some of the benefits due to her attitude and indifference toward the activity in the first few weeks. Mindful meditation can come in a large variety and have an unknown depth. It is not only about relaxing the body but also about focusing the mind, as stated in the *Calgary Herald* (26 January 2006). While Jane was able to find peace with her body, she could not stop her mind from constant thoughts and distractions.

Jane’s approach, however, is not completely uncommon in research. Mindful meditation is part of a program called “Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction<sup>5</sup>,” and there have been cases where the clients of

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<sup>5</sup> A model used in clinical practices involving mindfulness and meditation. Citation: Kabat-Zinn, J 2003, ‘Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)’, *Constructivism in the Human Sciences*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp73-83.

the program have not enjoyed nor received good results from the activity (Hickey 2010). The article, *Meditation as Medicine: A Critique* is an important piece of writing that critiques the popular ideas and assumptions of mindful meditation. The author expresses his concern of how the scope of the benefits of this activity is not concrete due to the vague defining of what meditation exactly is, and also the ambiguity of the interpretations of data in meditation research (Hickey 2010).

However, Jane's case may reflect on more of what Lyubomirsky has said about personalizing activities; Jane expressed that meditation was not particularly working for her and thus, it may have created negative results. Mindful meditation in research shows the numerous benefits that it can have, but it seems to be mostly in patients who are willing to go through with the program. For Ryan and I, we both found meditation as a way to reflect, and it has made us hyperaware of our own consciousness. This also reflects one of the broadly accepted effects in research of how the activity can increase attentiveness and cognitive flexibility (Moore & Malinowski 2009).

Much of Ryan and Jane's stress seemed to derive from relationships or future-orientated issues; they were concerned about maintaining

their emotional health and trying not to worry too much about the future. An interesting observation of all three of our experiences is that, even if Jane didn't enjoy the activities as Ryan and I did, we all discussed how meditation became easier as we practiced more often, and our patience with other aspects of our lives became stronger; this supports the research where practicing selective attention with mindfulness can help aid in both self-control and self-confidence (Frieze, Messner & Schaffner, 2012).

In fact, through practicing mindful meditation, we were able to experience "living in the present" which had an effect on how we appreciated and experienced time; mindfulness in every day life can essentially help "slow down time." One experiment was conducted analyzing the perception of time duration after practicing mindfulness, and this became an important framework for a completely new aspect of mindful meditation (Kramer, Weger & Sharma, 2013). This gives us just the glimpse of how vast mindful meditation research can be.

In the end, Jane, Ryan and I did not experience all of the same benefits and negative outcomes, but we shared some core effects that is supported by research. The disparity of our attitudes and

feelings may derive from the fact that I had delved deeper into the activity by partaking in it for longer, and Ryan and Jane have both only have scratched the surface in comparison. As mindful meditation is being continually examined in the scientific world and is being more incorporated into contemporary medicine practices (Salmon 2004), it is important to note that looking at all perspectives – such as the ones exemplified through Jane and Ryan – will help contribute to prove more concrete evidence of the effects of the activity.

My recommendation for continuing this activity would be to alter the attitude toward the activity. One of the most important factors that I personally think is essential in enjoying meditation while still keeping it as a routine is reminding myself that doing this activity is my own decision, and I do it for the benefits; I remind myself of the first time that I ever tried it to understand how far I've come. Now I can identify my own thoughts and combat them when needed, which is a skill that I've learned from practicing mindfulness. Keeping it a part of a routine is also important as well, so I would also recommend adding variety while being consistently active; this could mean trialing different durations and locations – it is essential to find the “best fit” in order for the activity to enhance happiness.



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# Appendix – 1

## **Meditation: Log Sheet**

Week \_\_\_\_

**Date:**

**Duration:**

**Description of setting/change in setting:**

**General comments about experience/Reflection:**

**Date:**

**Duration:**

**Description of setting/change in setting:**

**General comments about experience/Reflection:**

**Date:**

**Duration:**

**Description of setting/change in setting:**

**General comments about experience/Reflection:**

(free to add/subtract number of logs necessary)

## Appendix – 2

### **Weekly Evaluation Survey**

1. How many times did you meditate this week?
2. On a scale of 1 – 10, rate:
3. How much do you enjoy this activity?  
1 being extremely dislike, 10 being extremely like
4. Do you find meditation helpful or beneficial in any way?  
1 being none at all, 10 being extremely helpful/beneficial
5. Overall, how happy are you?  
1 being extremely unhappy, 10 being extremely happy
6. Any difficulties with this activity?
7. Additional comments?