

# **Kayla D'Alessandri**

## **Happiness reflective journal**

**MACS325, "Happiness: investigating its causes and conditions"**

**Autumn session, 2012**

**Media and Cultural Studies, University of Wollongong**

**Subject coordinators: Chris Barker and Brian Martin**

Assignment: You should find and report on 3 pieces of academic research (e.g. journal articles) and 3 pieces of popular writing (newspapers, magazines, websites, etc.) that recommend a particular activity as enhancing happiness. You should undertake this activity for 5 weeks and report on your experience. In a reflective journal you aim to search out evidence and analyse it; draw conclusions based on the evidence; and reflect on and evaluate the evidence and experience in order to make a pronouncement about its value (in order to improve our lives).

For more details see [http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/MACS325\\_12outline.pdf](http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/MACS325_12outline.pdf)

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

MACS325 – Happiness

*Reflective Journal*

**Activity – Meditation**

Kayla D'Alessandri

Tutorial Time - Tuesday 8:30am

Tutor – Chris Barker

Word Count – 1,064

## **1. The evidence provided by academic sources for the benefits of the nominated activity**

The concept of mental well-being refers to more than just an absence of psychiatric illness. Mental well-being refers to optimal psychological functioning and experience (Sharma, 2006). It has been found that by minimising the destructive state of mind and enhancing the constructive states of mind mental well-being may be promoted. So how can we better balance negative and positive emotions and hence improve mental well-being? Meditation has been found as an important method for training the mind (Sharma, 2006).

Meditation is the intentional self-regulation of attention, in the service of self-inquiry, in the here and now. Most descriptions of meditation are expressed in behavioural terms, including the following components: relaxation, concentration, altered state of awareness, suspension of logical thought processes and maintenance of self-observing attitude (Perez-De-Albeniz & Holmes, 2000). For the purpose of this assignment I focused on mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness involved intentionally bringing one's complete attention to the present moment's experiences in a non-judgemental or accepting way (Lykins & Baer, 2009). Shapiro (1992, as cited by Perez-De-Albeniz & Holmes, 2000) found that 88% of the subjects of her research reported greater happiness and joy, positive thinking, increased self-confidence, effectiveness (getting things done) and better problem solving skills after participating in mindfulness meditation for five weeks. Other reported beneficial effects include enhanced acceptance, compassion and tolerance to self and others, more relaxation, resilience and better ability to control feelings (Perez-De-Albeniz & Holmes, 2000).

Physical and mental relaxation, as achieved through meditation, has reproducible physiological effects as well such as an increase in EEG alpha activity and skin resistance, and reduction in respiratory rate, oxygen consumption, arterial lactate levels and sympathetic activity. It has been reported that those who have been meditating for more than five years are, on an average, biologically 12 years younger than people their age in the general population (Sharma, 2006).

Lykins and Baer (2009) found that even when controlling for age, education and work in the mental health field, long term meditators report being more mindful in daily life and score higher of several adaptive characteristics (reflection, self-compassion, well being) and lower on several maladaptive variables (symptoms, cognitive failures, rumination, thought suppression, difficulties in emotion regulation) than demographically similar non-meditators (Lykins & Baer, 2009).

## **2. The similarities and differences between academic and popular reporting of the evidence**

Traditionally meditation has been practiced within a religious context. Only in modern times have the techniques of meditation been extracted from their spiritual and philosophical context and applied to the promotion of individual well-being (Perez-De-Albeniz & Holmes, 2000). Popular reporting focused on the benefits of meditation for people in everyday life, particular in the corporate sector.

A well-known study conducted by the University of Wisconsin and headed by neuroscientist Professor Richard Davidson compared the brain activity of novice meditators with that of Buddhist monks who had spent more than 10,000 hours in meditation. Brain scans carried out while the monks were meditating found activity in the left prefrontal cortex (the area associated with positive emotions, such as happiness, and control and regulation of attention) far outweighed activity in the right prefrontal cortex (site of negative emotions and anxiety) ('Clear, calm, collected', 2011 & 'Human nature: the colour of happiness', 2003).

This study has led to meditation becoming a regular occurrence in human resources programs across the country. In a 2009 study, Dr Ramesh Manocha, a Sydney GP and researchers found that after eight weeks of silent meditation, occupational stress was reduced by 26 percent ('The business of meditation', 2010). Popular articles also focused on the fact that meditation is shedding its hippie image and is establishing a loyal mainstream

following as more people discover its significant recuperative powers ('Keeping peace and happiness in mind', 2011).

### **3. Your implementation of the activity**

My meditation journey began with a weekend meditation retreat at the Nan Tien Buddhist Temple where I learnt mindfulness meditation. Following that weekend I engaged in mindfulness meditation every morning for about 15 minutes before starting my day. I would sit crossed leg on a cushion on the floor and focus on my breathing, trying to block out any other thoughts and being present in the moment.

### **4. Your reflections (observations and assessments) about your experience and (5) your evaluation of the evidence for the activity based on the sources and your experience. For example, does your experience reinforce or contradict the academic evidence and popular reporting?**

In the beginning I found mindfulness meditation extremely difficult, and to be perfectly honest a little silly and a waste of time. I found it so hard to block out my thoughts and to solely focus on my breathing. Within minutes I would notice that my brain had switched to thinking about other things, such as what I had to do that day. To overcome this I started counting my breaths silently to myself and I found this helped me a great deal to stay present in the moment. After about two weeks of meditating every day I found it started to become easier and I began to feel the positive effects. I became more relaxed and I found that by taking those 15 minutes before rushing into my day to just stop and focus, I also became more productive.

Being aware of the concept of mindfulness has made me throughout the course of the day to stop and bring my focus to the present and just to be in the moment as I am living it as opposed to be constantly thinking about things that have happened or things I need to do. I continue to remind myself that it is not possible to be happy in the past, or in the future but only in the present. I still find myself worrying about the future and overanalysing things from the past but I have only been trying to practice mindfulness for about six weeks. I fully

plan on continuing to meditate each day and will continue to work on being mindful every day as I have noticed a difference in my life after only a short time.

Overall my experience reinforces the academic evidence and popular reporting. I experienced some of the positive effects of meditation, even after only engaging in the practice for six weeks. I full believe that with continued practice that these benefits will be heightened and it will continue to contribute to my overall well-being.

## REFERENCES

### Journal Articles

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Perez-De-Albeniz, A., & Holmes, J. (2000) 'Meditation: concepts, effects and uses in therapy', *International Journal of Psychotherapy*, vol. 5 (1), pp. 49-58.

Sharma, R. (2006) 'Meditation and mental well being', *Indian J Physiol Pharmacol*, vol. 50 (3), pp. 205-214.

### Newspaper Articles

Bowden, T. (2011) 'Keeping peace and happiness in mind', *The Advertiser*, 19 December, online

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