

# **Leonie Noble**

## **Happiness reflective journal**

**CST228, “Happiness: investigating its causes and conditions”**

**Autumn session, 2013**

**Cultural Studies, University of Wollongong**

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

### ***Assignment***

Choose an activity that research says increases personal happiness, such as expressing gratitude, helping others, being optimistic or practising mindfulness. (See Lyubomirsky for ideas.) Undertake this activity for at least 5 weeks, keeping a personal diary of your observations about your experience, with entries once a week or more. You can keep the diary on a blog or as typed or handwritten notes.

During the time you undertake the activity, you should also read academic and popular writing (such as news stories) about it. In your diary, you can comment on the connection between what researchers and popular writers say about the activity and your experience of it.

Your submission is in two parts:

1. A 1000-word reflective journal
2. Your diary.

In the reflective journal, you should report on 3 or more pieces of academic research (e.g. journal articles) and 3 or more pieces of popular writing (newspapers, magazines, websites, etc.) that recommend your activity as enhancing happiness.

For more details see [http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/CST\\_13outline.pdf](http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/CST_13outline.pdf)

*Leonie Noble's* reflective journal starts on the next page.

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

Course: CST228

Assignment: Reflective Journal

Activity: Meditation

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

Meditation involves the deliberate regulation of attention. Mindful meditation aims to increase awareness while eliminating cognitive analysis and fantasy.<sup>1</sup> This is achieved by allowing thoughts to flow freely, and accepting them without judgement as an impartial observer.<sup>2</sup>

It has been found that practicing mindful meditation positively impacts upon an individual's physical and mental well-being. Increasing awareness and practicing impartiality has been shown to improve emotional processing and coping methods which is beneficial to the wellbeing of those experiencing stress and or illnesses such as chronic pain or cancer.<sup>3</sup> Regular practice improves inner strength, sense of peace,<sup>4</sup> and self-compassion while reducing anxiety.<sup>5</sup> Studies have also indicated that long term mindful meditation can increase energy, decrease high blood pressure, improve the immune system, aid in normalising weight<sup>6</sup> and reduce pain sensitivity.<sup>7</sup> All of these benefits have been determined by practical studies which were critiqued by academic sources.

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<sup>1</sup> Alberto Perez-De-Albeniz, 'Meditation: Concepts, effects and uses in therapy', *International Journal of Psychotherapy*, Volume 5, No. 1, March 2000, p.49 (via ProQuest 15/4/2013).

<sup>2</sup> Sandra Sebelis, 'Your Meditation Practice', *Journal of the Australian Traditional-Medicine Society*, Volume 17, No. 3, September 2011, p.151, (via Informit 15/4/2013).

<sup>3</sup> [openground.com.au/articles/MBSR\\_MA\\_JPR\\_2004.pdf](http://openground.com.au/articles/MBSR_MA_JPR_2004.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Sebelis, 'Your Meditation...', p.151.

<sup>5</sup> Sala Horowitz, 'Health Benefits of Meditation: What the Newest Research Shows', *Alternative and Complementary Therapies*, Volume 16, No. 4, August 2010, p. 225, <http://online.liebertpub.com.ezproxy.uow.edu.au/doi/pdf/10.1089/act.2010.16402>, (accessed 15/4/2013).

<sup>6</sup> Sebelis, 'Your Meditation...', p.151.

<sup>7</sup> Horowitz, 'Health Benefits...', p.226.

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

The approaches taken by academic and popular reporting on the benefits of meditation differed greatly. The popular sources assumed that the benefits of meditation were sufficiently proven and widely accepted as fact. After making this assumption they focused on providing information on how to practice mindful meditation. In stark contrast, the academic sources attempted to determine if there were benefits of a meditation practice by critiquing studies.

The three popular sources which I used were taken from three of my favourite wellness blogs which I follow on a daily basis. I found that the writing of these articles was very informal and conversational. The authors all assumed that meditation was highly beneficial to well-being and assumed that this was widely accepted as common knowledge. They did not question the validity of these assumptions and none of them provided any evidence to support these claims. All three articles chose instead to provide guides on how to perform mindful meditation and how to incorporate it into a contemporary, busy lifestyle.

The academic sources approached meditation from a completely different angle. They instead attempted to gauge what benefits, if any, and to what degree, meditation has on well-being. They did this by analysing the results of practical studies. All three of the sources which I used determined that meditation did provide benefits such as stress-relief,<sup>8</sup> improved methods of coping with hardships,<sup>9</sup> and developing a non-judgmental attitude.<sup>10</sup> However, they all also stated that the studies they analysed were methodologically flawed and that further research was required into the area.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.225.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Grossman, Ludger Niemann, Stefan Schmidt, and Harald Walach, 'Mindfulness-based stress reduction and health benefits A meta-analysis', *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, Volume 57, No. 1, July 2004, p. 39, [openground.com.au/articles/MBSR\\_MA\\_JPR\\_2004.pdf](http://openground.com.au/articles/MBSR_MA_JPR_2004.pdf), (accessed 15/4/2013).

<sup>10</sup> Perez-De-Albeniz, 'Meditation...', p.50.

It was interesting to see that the academic sources focused on determining if benefits were attained from a meditation practice and if so, how much benefit. They were still somewhat questioning the validity of claims that meditation did improve wellbeing whereas the popular sources took it for granted and instead focused on providing a 'how to' to gain these assumed benefits.

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

I began this project with the intention of practicing mindful meditation every day. By the third week it became clear that practicing every day was in fact decreasing my happiness and well-being so I reduced my expectations and instead practiced meditation 3 times per week. Over this 5 week period I attempted several mindful meditation strategies such as focussing on breath, repeating a mantra and meditating whilst performing a simple exercise. The strategy which I found most suited to me was practicing mindful meditation whilst jogging. Whilst performing this rhythmic movement, I focused on timing my breathing with my foot strikes and clearing my mind. I attempted to allow thoughts to come and go freely without judging or analysing them; simply acknowledging their presence.

**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?***

I found mindful meditation a challenge. By the second week of this activity I was resenting what I perceived to be a chore and an unpleasant part of my day. After completing Sonja Lyubomirsky's 'Person-Activity Fit' Diagnostic test<sup>11</sup> I realised that meditation was a happiness improving technique which was a poor fit for me. However, I persisted while making a few minor adjustments. I

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<sup>11</sup> Sonja Lyubomirsky, *The How of Happiness: A practical guide to getting the life you want*, Paitkus, London, 2007, pp.73-76.

reduced the number of times I practiced from every day to three times per week and I began to meditate whilst running instead of whilst sitting in a dark room. These changes allowed a regular meditation practice to be easily incorporated into my lifestyle, and instead of feeling like a chore, meditation began to feel like a release.

During the last week and a half of this activity I believe that I began to reap the benefits of meditation. I noticed a decreased level of stress and anxiety post meditation. This is consistent with the benefits indicated by the academic sources. This feeling did not last for an extended period of time, however I believe that with further practice this feeling would last for longer periods.

I came across all of the popular sources whilst I was undertaking this 5 week long activity. At the time when I read each I felt inspired to renew my commitment to a regular meditation practice. However on reflection the articles are too simplistic. They indicate that a meditation practice is simple and easy to incorporate into one's life. When I found practicing more complicated than that, I felt a sense of failure which negatively impacted upon my happiness.

On completion of this activity I accept that meditation positively impacts upon well-being. I do, however, believe that meditation is not an activity which is suited to me, and that I would reap better results by pursuing another activity.

*Word count: 966*

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