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Happiness consultancy report

CST228, “Happiness: investigating its causes and conditions”

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Cultural Studies, University of Wollongong

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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_15outline.pdf

Brandon Cleal's consultancy report starts on the next page.

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

Evidence for the benefits of mindfulness

Happiness levels of an individual are considered to be dependent on three elements: the individual's predisposed 'set point', their personal circumstances, and the intentional activities they undertake (Lyubomirsky, 2006). For my chosen five-week 'intentional activity', I chose to practice mindfulness.

Perhaps one of my favorite descriptions of mindfulness comes from the book 'Happiness: Essential Mindfulness Practices', written by Thich Hanh (2009, p. 2), which describes mindfulness as "the energy of being aware and awake to the present. It is the continuous practice of touching life deeply in every moment". The goal of mindfulness is to allow a person to maintain awareness from moment to moment, distance oneself from beliefs and emotions to enable an individual to see things objectively and ultimately foster clear thinking and open heartedness. Therefore, it enables an individual to become more centered and balanced (Ludwig & Kabat-Zinn 2008).

There is a plethora of evidence on the positive benefits an individual can gain by practicing mindfulness. This evidence can be summarized under three general categories. These includes an increase in mental health, an improvement in physical health, and overall, an increase in an individual's total wellbeing (University of Exeter 2014).

In a pair of studies conducted by Brown and Ryan (2008), a pattern of correlations was discovered, consistent with rumination partially mediating a causal link between mindfulness and hostility, anger, and verbal aggression. These correlations support the idea that mindfulness could reduce rumination which, in turn, could reduce anger and increase overall well-being. Other mental health benefits that correlate mindfulness with increased well-being is Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) which aims to change suffering associated with mental disorders, stress, and chronic diseases (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Essentially, MBSR can assist individuals to develop awareness for their own thoughts and feelings. This is established without judgment, thus allowing an individual to find a

greater level of acceptance for themselves. MBSR has also been proven to help patients reduce the tendency to constantly replay negative thoughts and experiences in their head (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). It is implemented using a structured program that combines meditation practices, such as sitting and walking meditation, and yoga.

In addition to its significant benefits towards mental health, mindfulness has demonstrated substantial benefits for physical health. For example, stress is a well-known contributor to immune suppression (Miller 2004, p.601). In a study one year prior to this (Carlson et al. 2003, p. 577), mindfulness was shown to lead to enhanced quality of life and decreased stress symptoms in breast and prostate cancer patients. The study was the first to show changes in cancer-related cytokine production as a result of increased mindfulness through the MBSR program, thereby strengthening patient immune responses. In addition, mental relaxation has been shown to result in physical health improvements. For example, there is empirical evidence to suggest that, on average, individuals who meditate for over five years are twelve biological years younger than other people of the same age (Sharma 2006, p.208).

My experience

At the end of the five weeks, I realized that the mindfulness practices I engaged in caused me to bring up a lot of suppressed memories in my past. This was because I slowly became more aware of how I was feeling in certain situations. Although I now realize that, in those moments, I should have acknowledged the particular feelings, accepted it as a way of life, and been content in knowing that the feelings would pass, I began to wonder why I was feeling these emotions. As a result, I decided to consult a psychologist that specializes in MBSR. In our conversations, she listened to the difficulties I was experiencing and suggested some techniques that would guide my mind in the right direction, that is, to prevent mind wandering. These strategies included breathing and sitting meditation for 10 minutes every day, as well as body scans. What I found most helpful was that the

psychologist coached me through what I should be concentrating and focusing on and what I should be avoiding. She would use phrases like, “focus on your ears. If your mind wanders off, that’s ok, don’t get frustrated, just bring your attention back to my voice and back to what I am saying”. After realizing that this technique worked for me in the sixth week, I decided that the body scan approach was the best method to work on mindfulness. It also allowed me to set aside some time just for myself, and therefore, I began to really look forward to my meditation time. Over these last five weeks, I have felt much more content with my assignments, my relationships, and with myself. Using the techniques I learnt from the psychologist, I was able to focus on the activities that would benefit me most and in the long term. My mindfulness score (Berkeley Quiz) improved from 72% after week 5 to 73% in week 10. Similarly, my happiness score (Oxford Quiz) increased from 4.2 out of 6 to 4.5 out of 6, placing me in the ‘rather happy’ category of happiness at the end of the ten weeks.

Consultancy

For the five-week consultancy, I decided to select two clients who I knew to be reliable and contactable, my friend, Bridget, and girlfriend, Kelly. Bridget works as a Primary school teacher in Wollongong and Kelly is in her third year of a Bachelor of Science/ Bachelor of Commerce at the University of Wollongong. I also decided to run the activity with a client who was less reliable, but who I knew would benefit most from partaking in mindfulness activities, Thom. These three participants were chosen to partake in mindfulness activities in order to improve their overall well-being. Bridget, Kelly and Thom had expressed an interest when I was practicing mindfulness activities in the first five weeks, and as such, the recruitment process was quite easy. I chose to approach Bridget and Kelly as they are both relatively happy people, however, experience high degrees of stress when certain situations present themselves. I chose Thom as we live together in university accommodation, and I am aware that he frequently experiences low mood and a general lack of motivation. As these clients have differing life circumstances, I was intrigued to find out if they would have as much success as I did, or to see if their symptoms would improve.

I started the five-week program with an interview. After realizing how long it took me to figure out what mindfulness was, I wanted to make sure the clients were correctly informed, as well as aware of resources that they could access to teach them correct mindfulness techniques. After each interview, I presented the participant with an information pack. The first page presented a brief summary of the benefits of mindfulness and the second page described several options on how to practice it. I also gave each client a diary and pencil so that they could each track their progress across the five weeks. In knowing that walking and eating meditation were not as beneficial for me as body scans, I wanted to give the clients some flexibility in their chosen mindfulness practice, in order to suit their needs better.

It was relatively easy to monitor client involvement during their activity as I live with two of the clients, Kelly and Thom, and am in contact with Bridget quite regularly (at least two times per week). As I am reasonably close with all of the participants, I was confident that the clients would feel comfortable enough to talk to me about issues that they may have been experiencing with the activities. However, as an added measure, I left an envelope outside my door for clients to ask questions anonymously if needed. The answer, or links to possible answers, would then be posted in a Facebook group with all clients. During the first interview, I made it clear that I was happy for clients to contact me with any concerns they may have, or in the event that a significant change in their routine or happiness levels had occurred. I encouraged them to write in their diary at least once a week to identify any changes that may have occurred, and during the third week of their mindfulness practice, I attended one meditation session to view their progress. The consultation concluded with a final interview with each participant to summarize their progress and possible changes they may have experienced, whether they were positive or negative.

My Client's Experience and Outcomes

Client One – *Kelly*

Kelly is 22 years of age and is currently studying a Bachelor of Science / Bachelor of Commerce majoring in Psychology and Marketing. Like most university students, learning to balance work, university commitments, money and relationships is quite demanding and, at times, overwhelming. At the beginning of this activity, Kelly's main aims were to have a greater sense of focus when completing tasks and to reduce stress by limiting mind wandering and over-thinking. Kelly completed the Oxford happiness quiz and Berkeley Mindfulness quiz at the beginning of the activity, achieving 4.5 and 54% respectively.

Kelly decided to practice mindfulness by meditating and performing body scans in the morning and before going to bed, for 5 minutes. Learning from my mistakes, Kelly wanted to make sure that the activities she performed could be managed in-between her busy work and academic schedule. She also wanted to make sure that the activities did not become boring and seem to be a commitment; rather, she hoped it could be something to look forward to. For this reason, Kelly decided to perform meditation in different areas, which she felt gave her a reason to get up early in the morning. Body scans were performed before bed, and Kelly believes this helped her get to bed quicker and have a more restful sleep.

During the fourth week into the activity, Kelly spoke to me about some of the benefits she seemed to be experiencing. Kelly felt less stressed in the lead up to exams and assignments and also believed she became more aware of the thoughts in her head that would lead to her feeling stressed. Kelly also felt she was able to increase her focus and experienced a greater sense of flow when studying, which she felt led to an increase in productivity and positivity when studying. Kelly reported that a change in her perception about balancing life commitments, due to being a bit more mindful from task to task, led to a decrease in stress level and increased feelings of relaxation.

Similar to the experiences I had with mindfulness, Kelly tried to expand her practice to walking meditation and savoring food during dinner in her fifth week. Kelly felt that, in addition to these added activities, keeping a written journal to keep track of her progress made the activity feel less natural and more like work. In retrospect, Kelly stated this may also have occurred as she previously used walking and eating as a time to socialize, and this made mindfulness difficult at times. At the conclusion of the five-week activity, Kelly received a happiness score of 4.75 and mindfulness score of 62%.

Client Two – *Bridget*

Bridget is a 22 year old primary school teacher who has recently left university. As a primary school teacher, Bridget wanted to reduce feelings of stress and frustration in the classroom, as she felt it was hindering her ability to teach. Bridget also occasionally experienced anxiety and tended to dwell on past experiences, as well as worry about upcoming events in her personal life. After hearing about the activities I performed and listening to the benefits mindfulness practice has, Bridget decided she wanted to participate in an effort to reduce her worry levels and be able to stop feeling anxious about the situations she had no control over. Bridget also wanted to reduce her stress level so she was better able to engage her students in a more positive manner. Bridget completed the Oxford Happiness quiz and Berkeley Mindfulness quiz at the beginning of the activity, achieving 4.2 and 58% respectively.

In contrast to Kelly and I, Bridget felt her life was well organized and had a set routine for each day. For this reason, Bridget found it easy to structure mindfulness activities around her busy schedule. Bridget decided to meditate for 15 minutes in the morning and at night, with 5 minutes in the day devoted to body scans and/or savoring food at lunch time. She decided on this meditation structure as she felt she was most anxious and frustrated towards the end of her working day. In week 3, Bridget explained that she started to feel less anxious and frustrated at work as she started to view

her emotions from a third perspective when teaching. She also felt more tolerant towards her students in the later part of the working day as she was more aware of how she was feeling.

Similarly to Kelly and I, Bridget didn't enjoy food savoring as she felt this took away from her social interactions with work colleges. Instead, Bridget decided to take five minutes to practice body scans after lunch, which she reported to be quite beneficial in boosting her mood in the later part of the day. Unlike Kelly and I, Bridget admitted that towards the end of the fourth week of the activity, she began to feel the activity was quite monotonous and didn't appear to be as useful. This could be because mindfulness is a practice that can't be learnt in just four weeks, but can take years to master.

At the conclusion of the activity, Bridget received a happiness score of 4.84 and mindfulness score of 65%. Bridget experienced an increase in happiness and mindfulness of 0.64 and 7% respectively. Despite feeling that the activity was no longer working, the evidence shows that benefits in mental wellbeing still occurred, but may have been less noticeable due to Bridget's increased workload. Bridget's scores also represent a larger increase in mindfulness than that of myself or Kelly. This could possibly be attributed to the larger amount of time that Bridget put aside to complete the weekly activities.

Client Three – *Thom*

Unfortunately, Thom did not complete the exercises as planned. When consulted, Thom explained that he struggled to find the motivation to engage in the activity. This suggests that practicing mindfulness is a conscious choice that may require at least a foundation of motivation to improve awareness and overall well-being.

Experiences relating to academic research

Mindfulness is a skill that takes time and patience. Researchers suggest that it takes at least 28 days of practicing mindfulness for at least half an hour every day, to achieve some form of well-being benefit (Miller 2004, p. 602). This is in contrast to the benefits experienced by all participants in this consultancy. As seen here, as little as 10 minutes per day, 3 times a week was sufficient enough to cause some form of benefit to individuals. After conducting this consultancy, I believe that as long as an individual wants to see some form of improvement in happiness, and commits to practicing, a well-being benefit will be observed. Similar to other academic research, the more time practicing mindfulness activities led to a greater well-being benefit (Alidina 2010), as can be observed when comparing Kelly and Bridget's results. As stated in a different essay (Martin 2014), 'There is a paradox between mindfulness and stress. Mindfulness is proven to decrease stress but people feel too busy and stressed to partake in mindfulness'.

Another benefit that was discovered through the consultancy was a reduction in perceived anxiety and stress levels through MBSR techniques (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Both Kelly and I felt a reduction in stress, due to feelings of increased productivity, and reduced mind wandering when completing different tasks, while Bridget felt reduced levels of anxiety and frustration at work as she learnt to view her emotions from a third perspective. The ability to increase our attention and awareness towards the task at hand allowed us to become more productive and less stressed, enhancing our overall happiness levels.

The theme of productivity has also been shown to correlate with benefits of attention and awareness, also known as flow (Lyubomirsky 2010). All participating clients felt an increase in flow states as a result of the mindfulness exercises we participated in. For Kelly and I, we noticed improved focus and attention on university work. However, there was no perceived increase in productivity experienced by Bridget, which may be attributed to a change in her workload.

At the beginning of this 10-week mindfulness activity, I had doubts as to the reliability of the results of mindfulness. Through research, analysis physically living through the experience, and seeing the benefits for myself, I am pleased to report that I believe mindfulness does in fact increase overall well-being and happiness. All clients experienced increases in mindfulness (Kelly 54% to 62%, Bridget 58% to 65%, Brandon 68% to 73%), with positively correlated happiness levels (Kelly 4.5 to 4.75, Bridget 4.2 to 4.84, Brandon 4.2 to 4.5). Although Bridget believed her perceived well-being benefit started to decline, these quantitative results show that an overall well-being benefit occurred for all clients that took part. Although mindfulness may not be for everyone, I believe that mindfulness practice allows me to have better control of my feelings, thoughts and emotions. As such, I plan to continue mindfulness activities.

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