

Maneesha Todd

Happiness consultancy report

CST228, “Happiness: investigating its causes and conditions”

Autumn session, 2015

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_15outline.pdf

Maneesha Todd's consultancy report starts on the next page.

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

Mindful Meditation: A Consultancy in Happiness

Student: 4275475

Choosing Mindful Meditation

Mindfulness is understood as the “intentional, accepting and non-judgmental focus of one’s attention on the emotions, thoughts and sensations occurring in the present moment” (Zgierska et al., 2009) and is a core teaching of the Buddhist faith. Mindfulness emphasizes clearing one’s mind and grounding oneself in the present moment, and it has been found that those high in mindfulness are more likely to be happy, optimistic, self-confident and satisfied with their lives, and less likely to be depressed, angry, anxious, hostile, self-conscious, impulsive or neurotic.

Buddhism encourages meditation as an effective way to practice mindfulness. Mindful meditation uses a conscious direction of an individuals’ awareness to increase levels of subjective wellbeing (SWB), aiming to obtain greater cognitive awareness and more control by focussing on choice and regulation of conscious cognitive processes. The popular technique of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) emphasises the reduction of stress through meditation, among other activities. Research shows that meditation consistently produces relaxing results that lead to an increase in happiness. The increased awareness that meditation encourages can also lead to insights into the individual mind, and create more possibilities for choices of behaviour.

I chose mindful meditation for this consultancy because I am interested in exploring meditation as a happiness-improving activity and de-stresser, particularly due to positive personal experiences. Meditation is also rapidly increasing in popularity in Western society, so I believe this added appeal to participants. I particularly wanted to focus on the relaxing effects of meditation; while a reduction of stress is not all that is needed for happiness, it does lead to a greater sense of wellbeing by promoting a happier and healthier lifestyle.

Recruiting Participants

In recruiting participants, I balanced convenience and quality by choosing those whose accessibility would be high yet also met client criteria. I believe that those with busier lives would have higher stress levels, and would thus see greater benefits from meditation than others. It was also crucial that the activity fit the participant's personality, as this would increase chances of success. Finally, I sought those who were enthusiastic to participate.

I decided to recruit participants already known to me, as this would maximise opportunity to effectively observe, monitor and evaluate the process. I contacted five people via email who I believed fit the client criteria, explaining the activity process and providing a copy of Lyubomirsky's Person-Activity Fit Diagnostic and a consent form. I required that the respondent have at least two of the following in their top three answers: 'Savouring life's joys', 'Doing more activities that engage you', and 'Taking care of your body'. This reduced the number of participants to three. One respondent informed me of an existing mental health disorder, so to avoid potential harm I excluded them from the activity.

This left me with two participants, my sister Jess and my cousin Nathaniel. Jess is 18 years old and completing her HSC. She is finding balancing her commitments of study, work, family and friends quite stressful. Jess is open-minded and enjoys trying new things. She was excited at the opportunity to potentially relax, free her mind of any overwhelming anxieties, and learn to better control her focus.

Nathaniel is 29 years old and works fulltime as an accountant. He is single, and does not particularly enjoy his job. Nathaniel is very interested in taking care of his body, working out regularly, and enjoys being in control and practicing discipline. I believed mindful meditation would strongly suit his personality, and he agreed, believing a soul-benefiting exercise like meditation would complement his routine greatly, and hopefully improve his overall life satisfaction.

Introducing the Activity

In the first email after participant confirmation, I provided a clear outline of the 5-week mindful meditation activity design:

- Meditate at least three times a week for a minimum of 10 minutes each time (meeting not included)
- Attempt to practice mindfulness in everyday life
- Once a week meeting to meditate together
- Keep a mindful meditation journal reflecting on their experience (one entry per week minimum)

I also supplied a brief description of the practice of meditation and mindfulness, and a link to an exemplar CST228 happiness journal report (found on Brian Martin's website), which provided the benefits and science behind mindful meditation, as well as a personal example of the activity in practice.

In our introductory meeting I provided a follow-up information handout that detailed the background of meditation, examples of different forms of meditation, the purpose and benefits of meditation and an overview of the technique: *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). We also watched part of the documentary 'Meditation and the Power of the Mind', and I addressed any outstanding questions. Finally, we practiced the specific technique I wanted them to use, which is focusing on the breath, noticing when attention drifts and bringing it back to the breath. Each week I joined my clients in practicing meditation for 20 minutes.

Monitoring Activity Involvement

I monitored my clients experience in a number of ways. In the first email, I provided them with the Subjective Happiness Scale by Lyubomirsky (2007) to garner an initial estimation of their happiness level before commencement of the activity. I asked them to complete this before reading the information, as I thought this may influence their results by being 'too informed', and I sought to eliminate any biases.

At the weekly meet-ups they completed a simple happiness estimate (*How happy do you feel right now on scale of 1-5?*) immediately pre- and post-meditation. This was to obtain data on the immediate, short-term effects of mindful meditation. The Subjective Happiness Scale was administered again after meditation in the last weekly session. This was to monitor the longer-term effects of meditation by comparing their changing happiness over an extended time frame. These tests allowed me to effectively quantitatively monitor results.

Participants were also required to keep a reflective journal documenting their thoughts and experience of the activity. This provided key qualitative insights into their progress. I further supported this with a one-on-one interview in the last meeting. I asked direct questions about their thoughts on the activity, their progress, if they thought it affected their happiness and if they felt they would continue the exercise. We also talked casually to bring up any issues the questions hadn't covered. To record their answers in written form, they also completed a short survey, to eliminate the possibility that they modified their answers due to my presence.

I believe quantitative research needs to be supported by qualitative research in order to gain deeper understanding. I found that as I knew both my clients well, they communicated openly with me and I was able to garner information from them that might have been challenging with lesser-known clients. Allowing my clients to freely communicate their experiences greatly improved my understanding of their thoughts and involvement as they could offer information I had not considered.

Evaluating Experience

I evaluated my clients experiences by analysing the quantitative data collected through:

- The Subjective Happiness Scale scores administered at the start and end of the consultancy
- The weekly pre- and post-meditation results reflected by the Simple Happiness Score

And the qualitative data collected through:

- The weekly observations I made in our meditation sessions
- The progress monitored in their personal journal
- The structured and non-structured interview conversations
- The answers provided in the survey.

Jess's experience and evaluation

Initially, Jess was very excited to participate, believing meditation would greatly alleviate her school-related stress. I observed that during the first session she seemed very engaged, enthusiastic and happy. I believe this was due to the novelty and excitement of experiencing something new with friends. She struggled to meditate effectively yet experienced some benefits and was keen to starting improving.

Over the next few weeks I believe the novelty wore off; these sessions coincided with her trial exams and she became frustrated with meditation as she still found it difficult, which negatively affected her self-esteem. This was particularly apparent in Week 3 when she experienced a drop in wellbeing. During this week her journal reflects that she actually found meditation a stressful experience. Previously, under stressful circumstances she would distract herself by keeping busy, however meditation gave her time to think about her stressors and negative emotions surfaced. She felt “frustrated, disappointed, guilty, sad, stressed, and a failure.”

Jess had much more success practicing everyday mindfulness separate from meditation, which she chose to do on the bus on the way to school and she said made her feel better about the day ahead and prepared her mind for school. I believe this daily routine helped her achieve better success with mindfulness, compared to meditation which she did randomly.

Through observations, close monitoring and our conversations I believe that what Jess has experienced is due to unrealistic expectations. Jess envisioned meditation as the panacea of her problems when this was not the case. She realised and accepted this after her low point in Week 3, and after this mediating of expectations she got a lot more out of meditation both independently and in our sessions, and actually started improving. Her journal documents her

new positive experiences, such as a focussing the mind, less anxiety, feeling relaxed, refreshed and energised. These effects also led to a massive leap in confidence.

In our final session she told me that she now believes “meditation complements life”, and can be effectively employed alongside a range of other happiness-inducing and anxiety-reducing activities. She hopes to continue mindful meditation, particularly during her HSC period where she believes it will help calm her nerves and focus her mind.

Nathaniel's experience and evaluation

Nathaniel had great success in implementing and benefiting from mindful meditation. He decided to practice mindfulness whilst he exercised as part of his fitness routine, and meditate for 10 minutes after his workout. I also observed an increase in Nathaniel's confidence with meditation over the course of the consultancy due to his improvements, as at first he was unsure of his capability but found it came naturally to him.

In his journal Nathaniel focussed on his emotional experience of the activity. Practicing mindfulness actually resulted in him exercising for longer periods, as he learned to better discipline his mind, and by extension body. He found this the most challenging aspect of the consultancy, but also the most rewarding. Further, by meditating immediately after exercise he found that this helped to relax him, reconfigure and refocus his mind and energy, and amplified the positive effects of exercise. He also found he wanted to exercise outside more, rather than at the gym, which suggests developing inter-consciousness.

Nathaniel saw a steady increase in subjective well-being, yet admitted he did experience some slight hedonic adaption after the first week or two of consistent application. His results (Appendix E) do suggest that the benefits of mindful meditation increase over time. He found the most enjoyment from the weekly sessions where he could also connect with others. In our interview he said that the activity integrated so well into his workout routine that he will continue meditation after the consultancy's end, and will strongly recommend it to his friends. I think that much of Nathaniel's success can be attributed to his thriving from structure and discipline, and he enjoys being in control in all aspects of his life, thus he receives great satisfaction from the ability to focus his mind.

Academic Research and Advantages/Disadvantages

The goal of mindfulness is to foster clear thinking and open heartedness; allow a person to maintain awareness moment to moment; and step back and view beliefs and emotions objectively, thus allowing an individual to become more centred and balanced (Ludwig & Kabat-Zinn, 2008). It has been correlated to increased physical health, mental health, and overall wellbeing (Everyday Mindfulness, 2014). Meditation is seen to promote mindfulness and encourage a sense of connection to one's own consciousness (intra-consciousness) and the external world (inter-consciousness), ultimately forging a deeper relationship with the self and the world (Siegel, 2007). It is thought that the act of bringing the mind under conscious observation works to heighten the performance of the brain (Walsh, 1983). Both mindfulness and meditation are strongly correlated to a reduction of anxiety and stress by focussing on one experience at a time and limiting a wandering mind (Smith, Compton & West, 1995). This leads to an increase in individual wellbeing as it allows a heightened ability to enjoy life's pleasures, fully engage in activities, and cope with adverse situations (Harvard Health Publications, 2013).

These are the many benefits linked to the mindful meditation, and were experienced to at least some degree by my clients, particularly as both participants admitted to feeling less stressed, more focussed, and more at peace with themselves and the world around them as a direct result. Nathaniel's positive combination of exercise and mindfulness is also reflected by the literature which suggests mindfulness during exercise leads to better results, a stronger connection to your body, and more satisfaction (Waehner, 2014).

Jess, however, also experienced some of the negative effects of meditation. There is emerging scientific evidence that demonstrates meditation can be associated with stress, negative effects, and mental health problems. One study has linked meditation to increased cortisol, a biological marker of stress (Creswell, Pacilio, Lindsay, & Brown, 2014). There have also been cases of 'depersonalisation', where people disconnect and feel as though they are watching themselves in a film; these occur following prolonged periods of meditation, such as during courses and retreats. These courses also present the risk of focussing too much on your thinking and behaviour that if not handled well can be overwhelming, leading to self-criticism and a sense of failure (Booth, 2014). This was the case with Jess, as due to the stressful nature of the HSC year, at times she found it very difficult to focus her mind away from her study. This led to frustration, a loss of confidence, and a host of negative emotions. However through perseverance and a change of attitude Jess then began to experience many of the positive effects of mindful meditation, and came to thoroughly enjoy the experience.

The more positive research also related to my personal experience, most prominently a reduction in stress levels, also mirrored by my clients. This ultimately led to an increase in our level of wellbeing and life satisfaction as we felt more in control of our lives and connected to our selves and the world around us.

Recommendations

Mindful meditation brings with it many advantages, as myself and my clients have experienced throughout this consultancy. Yet it also has some specific disadvantages, and can be a challenge to commence. In order to address these issues, I would recommend complementing mindful meditation with other happiness-inducing activities, such as social participation and exercise which proved very effective for my clients. It is also important to be aware of the purpose of meditation, and to remain a realistic conception of the outcomes. Having a daily or weekly structure to one's meditation routine also appears to be highly beneficial in achieving success. Similarly, creating a personal support system in which the new practitioner is accountable to others who encourage their progress.

I acknowledge that this consultancy is flawed in some key aspects:

- This is a relatively short study at only five weeks and thus offers limited information on the prolonged effects of mindful meditation;
- I am a biased observer, having previously known my clients and being invested in their success and happiness;
- The methodology used does not effectively eliminate variables that could moderate results.

However the results of my clients experience reflect those of my own and a large body of scientific literature. Due to their ultimately positive experience I have strongly encouraged the participants to continue their progress, incorporating it into their lifestyle long-term. I believe mindful meditation has the potential to be an incredibly potent activity that can transform lives, and would recommend everyone to try it.

Word Count: 2665

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APPENDICES**Appendix Figure A – A Copy of the Consent Form**

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

Consent to participate in the research project 'Happiness: causes and conditions'**Being conducted by Maneesha Todd**

Your participation is sought in a research project being undertaken by students of the University of Wollongong under the supervision of Professor Brian Martin and Associate Professor Chris Barker. You will be asked to carry out an activity that research suggests can increase happiness. The researchers will monitor and evaluate your engagement with the activity on a regular basis (at least weekly) through observations and interviews.

In particular: Mindful Meditation

The project will involve carrying out semi-structured interviews, or conversations, with consenting adult participants lasting approximately 15 minutes. The conversations may be tape-recorded with your consent but no one other than the student researcher (Maneesha Todd) and Professor Brian Martin and Associate Professor Chris Barker will hear them notwithstanding the legal right of a court to subpoena transcripts in relation to criminal offences. It is not the intention to publish any of the material. However, should we later wish to do so, your further agreement will be sought. The tapes will be held in a secure cabinet for five years and then destroyed.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You are free to refuse to participate and you are free to withdraw from the research at any time. Your refusal to participate or withdrawal of consent will not affect your relationship with the University of Wollongong in any way. If you would like to discuss this research further please contact Professor Brian Martin on (02) 4221 3763 or A/Prof Chris Barker on (02) 42213671. If you have any enquiries regarding the ethical conduct of the research please contact the Secretary of the University of Wollongong Human Research Ethics Committee on (02) 4221 4457.

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Research Title: Happiness: causes and conditions

I, consent to participate in the research conducted by Maneesha Todd of the University of Wollongong (under the supervision of Professor B Martin and A/ Professor C Barker as it has been described to me in the information sheet. I understand that the data collected will be used to analyse the causes of happiness among the individuals participating and to write a research report for the purposes of university assessment. I understand that the material would not be published without my giving further explicit consent. I consent for the data to be used for these purposes.

Signed _____

Date/...../2013

Appendix Figure B – Subjective Happiness Scale

Subjective Happiness Scale

Permission is granted for all non-commercial use.

A PDF of the scale can be downloaded [here](#).

To score the scale, reverse code the 4th item (i.e., turn a 7 into a 1, a 6 into a 2, a 5 into a 3, a 3 into a 5, a 2 into a 6, and a 1 into a 7), and compute the mean of the 4 items. Norms are available in the reference below, as well as in many other publications that have used the scale (see PsycInfo).

Lyubomirsky, S., & Lepper, H. (1999). A measure of subjective happiness: Preliminary reliability and construct validation. *Social Indicators Research*, 46, 137-155. The original publication is available at www.springerlink.com.

For each of the following statements and/or questions, please circle the point on the scale that you feel is most appropriate in describing you.

1. In general, I consider myself:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not a very happy person						a very happy person

2. Compared to most of my peers, I consider myself:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
less happy						more happy

3. Some people are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterization describe you?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not at all						a great deal

4. Some people are generally not very happy. Although they are not depressed, they never seem as happy as they might be. To what extent does this characterization describe you?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
not at all						a great deal

Note: Item #4 is reverse coded.

APPENDIX Figure C – Survey Questions**REFLECTING ON THE EFFECT OF YOUR HAPPINESS RESULTS**

1. Did you find the information you were given about happiness, mindfulness and meditation helpful in any way? How so?
2. What did you enjoy the most about the activity you undertook?
3. What did you enjoy the least about the activity you undertook?
4. Have you changed your thinking or behaviour as a result of the activity?
5. Over time, has it become easier or more difficult to carry out the activity?
6. What factors helped you to continue the activity?
7. What factors made it difficult for you to continue the activity?
8. If you continued the activity what would you do to increase the likelihood of continuing with it?

APPENDIX Figure D – Interview Questions

1. Have you consciously been practicing mindfulness and mindful meditation over the past five weeks? How?
2. Do you feel practicing mindfulness has affected your overall happiness and wellbeing? How so?
3. Do you feel practicing mindful meditation has affected your overall happiness and wellbeing? How so?
4. Would you recommend the activity to others? If so, why would you try to encourage them to undertake it? How? Any recommendations?
5. How could this consultancy have been improved?

APPENDIX Figure E – Summary of Quantitative Client Data**Client 1: Jess****Age:** 18 **Gender:** F**Occupation:** Student**Initial Happiness Score:** 3.75**Final Happiness Score:** 4.5*Simple Happiness/Mood Scale Test Scores from each weekly session*

	Wk1	Wk2	Wk3	Wk4	Wk5
Pre-meditation	3	3	3	3	4
Post-meditation	5	4	2	4	5

Client 2: Nathaniel**Age:** 29 **Gender:** M**Occupation:** Accountant**Initial Happiness Score:** 5**Final Happiness Score:** 5.5*Simple Happiness/Mood Scale Test Scores from each weekly session*

	Wk1	Wk2	Wk3	Wk4	Wk5
Pre-meditation	3	3	4	4	4
Post-meditation	4	4	4	4	5