

Rose Morgan

Happiness consultancy report

CST228, “Happiness: investigating its causes and conditions”

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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

Rose Morgan's consultancy report starts on the next page.

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

Mindfulness and its Benefits

Mindfulness is one of the core teachings of the Buddhist faith and centers around helping individuals to enhance both their attention and awareness (Kabat-Zinn 2003). 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 the person to become a more centered and balanced individual (Ludwig & Kabat-Zinn 2008).

Various studies have highlighted the benefits of mindfulness. These benefits have been shown to feature an improvement in three broad segments including an increase in physical health, an improvement in mental health and finally, an increase in an individual's overall wellbeing (Everyday Mindfulness 2014).

Perhaps the most popular mindfulness intervention technique, used in studies aimed at determining the correlation between mindfulness and increased well-being, is Kabat-Zinn's theory of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) which was developed in 1979 (Kabat-Zinn 2003). MBSR's main aim is to decrease suffering and increase overall wellbeing. Studies have shown that through the use of mindfulness meditation levels of perceived stress and physiological wellbeing can be decreased and increased, respectively (Carmody & Baer 2008). These results were achieved in a study using mindfulness meditation, yoga and body scans (Carmody & Baer 2008). Studies have also been conducted (Weiss et al. 2005) that indicate that practicing mindfulness can also have a positive effect on anxiety reduction amongst sufferers (Shapiro & Carlson 2003).

Mindfulness also has positive benefits regarding physical health as well as mental. There have been various studies concerning the effects that practicing mindfulness has on cardiovascular disease, diabetes and other chronic illnesses that are both caused and enhanced due to lifestyle factors (Ludwig & Kabat-Zinn 2008). Mindfulness involves lifestyle modification, causing a person to modify and critically evaluate their lifestyle. Physical and mental relaxation, achieved throughout meditation, causes an increase in EEG alpha activity, a reduction in respiratory rate and increased oxygen consumption (Sharma 2006) (McComb et al. 2003). Sharma states that there are major physical health benefits of practicing

mindfulness outlining that people who “meditate for more than 5 years are, on average, biologically 12 years younger than people their age in the general population” (Sharma 2006, p.208).

Mindfulness meditation allows an individual to slow their mind down, focus on one activity or experience at a time and limit the amount of time the mind wanders. Because of this an individual’s level of wellbeing and health will be increased giving them the ability to enjoy life’s pleasures; fully engage in activities; be well equipped to handle hardship and adverse situations; and experience less anxiety and stress over situations (Harvard Health Publications 2013).

One benefit of mindfulness, highlighted by academics, is the increased level of attention and awareness that results from cognitive training (Siegel 2007). With this increase in attention and awareness a person can partake in flow experiences. Flow experiences are defined by Lyubomirsky (2010) as a “state of intense absorption and involvement with the present moment” (p 185). The benefits of flow are numerous, including, increased productivity, increased fulfillment, and a greater sense of accomplishment and productivity (Heydenfeldt et al. 2011). Mindfulness promotes flow experiences as it allows a person to focus purely on the present, enjoying the moment and the task at hand.

Mindfulness meditation techniques such as body scans also hold various benefits for the individual. Body scans involve getting in touch with one’s body, letting go of feelings of needing to get tasks done and releasing pent-up emotions (Alidina 2010). Body scans involve becoming aware of one’s body and focusing attention on various body parts and the body as a whole. Alidina (2010) states that body scans have the ability to train one’s mind to be able to move from detailed attention to a wider and more spacious awareness of one moment to the next. The body scan technique has also been attributed to increased relaxation and decreased chronic pain, both of which are likely to cause an overall increase in a person’s wellbeing and happiness (Ussher et al. 2012).

My experience

At the conclusion of the first five weeks of the program I was thoroughly pleased with the progress that I had made. I felt more productive and was appreciating my everyday life more. I found that meditation and mindful thinking were really helping me to achieve this and allowing me to become happier. I was excited to commence the next five-week program and evaluate further progressions. Throughout the program I coupled my previous routine with new activities such as body scans. I already knew what worked for me from completing the first five weeks. This knowledge allowed me to focus on, and complete, key activities that I knew would benefit me in the long run. My mindfulness continued to improve with my score increasing a further 6 points (79) at the conclusion of the 10 weeks.

Consultancy

For the purpose of this five-week consultancy I selected two individuals to partake in mindfulness meditation activities in an aid to improve their overall happiness. My two clients included my mother, Sharon, and friend, Tahlia. The two participants were chosen as they both expressed an interest in the benefits of mindfulness when approached. Another reason these women were selected was due to their differences in circumstances and lifestyles, I thought it would be interesting to evaluate the different impact on each woman that mindfulness meditation and activities had. My own circumstances differ to that of the participants. I was also interested to observe if Sharon and Tahlia reaped the same benefits from the five-week program as I did.

Before the clients commenced the mindfulness activity I provided them with a copy of the mindfulness CD that I used, and am continuing to use, throughout my implementation. I also provided them with basic guidelines on how often to perform mindfulness meditation as well as information on other mindfulness activities that each could conduct at their disposal, including savouring food, mindfulness thinking, and body scanning. By completing the activity myself I knew that it didn't work for me to lock into a specific schedule and some mindfulness activities, such as savouring food, were not beneficial. For this reason, I wanted to make sure that my clients were not forced to do something that did not enjoy but instead could find, and concentrate on, the mindfulness activities that best suited them.

In order to stay informed regarding the client's progress and experiences, I wanted to foster open dialogue with each woman. This was not a difficult task as I currently speak to them on average 3 times per week. In order to keep up to date I contacted them, by phone, around twice a week making sure they were aware that they could contact me any time with queries and concerns. I also asked them to report to me if there was any substantial change in their routine or happiness levels.

By keeping communication open and informal it was easy to foster meaningful discussion around the positive and negative experiences of mindfulness experienced by each client, promoting an honest interpretation of the activity.

My Client's Experience and Outcomes

Client One- Tahlia

Tahlia is a 22-year-old friend, she recently graduated from university and is now employed full time at an interior design and event company in Sydney. Tahlia's schedule is highly demanding with her working for around 14 hours per day. At the commencement of the activity Tahlia's main aim was to increase mindfulness when completing tasks, with the hope of promoting productivity and flow. Tahlia completed the Berkeley mindfulness Quiz, receiving a score of 62 out of 100.

Tahlia aimed to listen to the 30-minute meditation CD four times a week before bed. She also aimed to complete body scans at the conclusion of each of these sessions. While this routine worked for Tahlia when her work life was slow she found it hard to motivate herself to do these activities at night after a full day at work. At around the two-week mark she told me that she was finding it tedious to do the activity and was starting to resent doing it, due to this I advised her that she could shorten the meditation lengths to suit her schedule.

Tahlia then decided to do 15-minute meditation sessions, three times per week in the morning and conduct body scans at night before bed. Tahlia identified that by conducting body scans she was able to relax fully and obtain a more restful sleep, leading to an overall increase in her happiness and mood.

Tahlia partook in mindfulness thinking and meditation, focusing on the current moment and experience. When I spoke to her she said that by focusing on the situation at hand she was able to increase her focus and experienced greater instances of flow, as well as an increase in her productivity. With this increase in productivity Tahlia was able to gain from, and complete more in, her day. Tahlia stated that this led to a decrease in her stress level and an increased amount of relaxation.

Similar to my experiences with mindfulness Tahlia told me that savouring food did not benefit her. This could be attributed to Tahlia's on the go personality and busy lifestyle. She felt that by savouring food she was wasting time. Tahlia benefitted more from mindfulness activities that she could do when completing everyday tasks. At the conclusion of the consultancy Tahlia scored 70 out of 100 on the mindfulness quiz.

Client Two- Sharon

Sharon is my 58-year-old mother. She has recently retired from a career in the primary education industry. Since retiring Sharon expressed that she has more free time thus having the opportunity to focus on meditation and mindfulness. The main reason Sharon expressed for wanting to participate in the program was to become more aware of the events around her and to make the most of situations and experiences. Similarly to myself, Sharon experienced moderate levels of anxiety and tended to dwell upon past situations and worry about upcoming ones. Another reason for Sharon's willingness to participate was that she wanted to decrease her worry levels and be able to stop feeling anxious about situations that she had little control over. Before the commencement of the program Sharon took the Berkeley University Mindfulness Quiz. She received a score of 69 out of 100.

Unlike Tahlia, Sharon had ample time on her hands now that she does not have a full time career, for this reason she took to the 30 minute meditation sessions easily, setting aside half an hour after waking to partake in them. Through my communication with Sharon it became clear that she really valued her meditation sessions as they allowed her to take time out of the day to focus on her own happiness and wellbeing. Sharon stated that by partaking in meditation in the mornings it helped to set a positive tone for the day, and she did not have any problem sticking to her goal of completing the activity four days per week.

Sharon also conducted mindfulness thinking and savouring food. Sharon stated that once she was familiar with the concept of mindfulness thinking she was able to assess situations objectively and accept the outcomes of situations more easily. This led to Sharon's worry levels decreasing and her overall feeling of wellbeing increasing. Unlike Tahlia, Sharon enjoyed the concept of savouring food. Sharon stated that by thinking about what she was eating she truly enjoyed her meals and appreciated them, and the experience, much more than she had previously done.

When interviewed at the conclusion of the five-week period, Sharon said that the mindfulness program had benefitted her happiness levels immensely. She felt that she had become more aware in her day-to-day life and was able to experience and appreciate situations she was put in more than before. Sharon also told me that she was able to look at situations objectively.

Sharon took the Berkeley mindfulness quiz again, at the completion of five weeks, to measure her improvement; her final mindfulness score was 81 out of 100. This is an increase of 12 points, and represents a larger increase than that experienced by Tahlia and more improvement than I experienced within the first five weeks of the activity. This could be attributed to the greater amount of time that Sharon had to complete the mindfulness meditation exercises and her decreased workload and stress levels giving her a greater opportunity to fully participate in the mindfulness course.

Correlation between client's experiences and theoretical frameworks.

Throughout the program I formulated various conclusions regarding how mindfulness can be used to positively influence an individual's overall wellbeing and happiness levels. These conclusions were supported by the practical results of the program mirroring the theories and ideas put forward by academic writing. My links and conclusions are outlined below.

The first conclusion that I came to after conducting the consultancy was the benefits of mindfulness in improving productivity, attention and awareness. As stated by Lyubomirsky (2010), flow states are defined by attention and awareness to a task. This is supported

through the consultancy, where Tahlia, and myself, both experienced more flow states when completing work. This ability to be aware of the task at hand and increase our attention towards it allowed us to become more productive and less stressed, enhancing our overall happiness levels.

Another benefit of mindfulness emphasised through the consultancy was its positive benefits on stress reduction and improvements in anxiety levels (Carmody & Baer 2008, Shapiro & Carlson 2003). My mother, Sharon, and I experienced decreased levels of stress and feelings of anxiety after completing the course. Tahlia also experienced decreased stress levels although, for her, this was attributed to the increase in her productivity. Everyone that completed the activity found it easier to look at events objectively and gained a greater sense of enjoyment within their day-to-day activities.

I concluded from the consultancy that one does not have to dedicate huge amounts of time to mindfulness meditation in order to see results. I read various articles on websites stating that in order for meditation to have lasting effects one should meditate for around 20 minutes, twice daily (Guided meditation, 2014). By conducting the mindfulness consultancy I feel that as long as you are fully present when you meditate you can achieve results, regardless of the length of the session. 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.

At the start of this course I was very skeptical about the benefits of mindfulness, however through completing the 10-week course and watching my clients complete the consultancy, the benefits of mindfulness in increasing wellbeing and happiness became clear. Each person's mindfulness scores increased (Tahlia 62 to 70, Sharon 69 to 81, 68 Rose to 79), reporting that they felt happier at the conclusion of the consultancy and would continue to partake in mindfulness activities.

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