

Annie Timmins

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

Annie Timmin's reflective journal starts on the next page.

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

CST228: Happiness

Investigating its causes and conditions

Reflective Journal

Activity:
Practicing Mindfulness

Student No. 3664478
Tutorial Group: Thursday 1:30
Word Count: 1 090

The Advantages of Mindfulness

The activity that I have been trialing in order to increase happiness is mindfulness practice. This normally refers to meditation, which over the past few decades has spread beyond the realms of religion and spirituality.

The following definition describes mindfulness in its finest form,

“the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding experience moment by moment”.

(Kabat-Zinn 2003, p.144)

This description is based on Jon Kabat-zinn’s comprehensive research, which was released with the establishment of the Stress Reduction Clinic and Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program at the University of Massachusetts Medical centre in 1979 (Bauer-Wu 2010).

Kabat-Zinn’s program is essential for discussion in any report based on psychological well being, because it is the most commonly referenced method in modern health care settings (Wilhelm 2011). Research is mounting significantly, and the vast majority of healthcare professionals worldwide are required to train in MBSR and related mindfulness-based clinical interventions (Bauer-Wu 2010).

Typical mindfulness-based practices rely heavily on meditation and are increasing in number and popularity following their recent integration into modern healthcare with the ‘mindfulness movement’ in the Western sphere (Bauer-Wu

2010). Substantial evidence has proved the success of mindfulness as a powerful therapeutic technique for a broad range of mental and physical health problems (Harvard 2011).

Some studies have established for example, that mindfulness programs can not only prevent relapse in patients who suffer depression, but also have the power to alleviate anxiety and control physical pain (Harvard 2011). A growing number of studies are also based on neurological research that demonstrates how these techniques create new structures in the brain, which develop the way the brain processes information (Jha, Krompinger, & Baime, 2007; Siegel, 2007; Stanley & Jha, 2009; Tang et al., 2007 in Heydenfelt et al. 2011). A recent review of these studies by Jeffrey Greeson (2009) verified that mindfulness positively manipulates the brain, the automatic nervous system, stress hormones, and the immune system, as well as health behaviours such as eating, sleeping and substance abuse (Heydenfelt et al. 2011).

In a healthy population (the group in which I have included myself) MBSR has been shown to decrease perceptions of daily annoyances, psychological stresses and nonspecific symptoms. Other psychological effects include increased empathy for one’s self and others, an improved sense of well being, and a greater sense of self-actualisation, self-responsibility and direction (Lawson 2011).

Most popular media focused on mindfulness report the benefits of meditation in every day life and in the corporate sphere, with occasional references

to new findings in neurological studies that support the article's legitimacy.

These core implementations of the MBSR program include the body scan (systematic awareness of different body sensations), mindful movement (gentle yoga), and sitting meditation (focused attention and open monitoring) (Bauer-Wu 2010).

The mainstream media also tend to report similar methods to those of Kabat-Zinn or adaptations of these, though they do not directly reference the program.

Another tendency is to glorify the effects of spiritual meditation in ladies magazines such as *Woman's Weekly*, *Cleo*, *Marie Claire* and *Cosmo*, while in academia; the focus tends to be scientific. Some of these methods I trialled during the 5 week period and did not find beneficial.

My approach

Following an online test sourced from Berkley University that gave me a mindfulness score of 53 out of 100, I began by researching which methods could assist my shortcomings. These included having trouble with a moment-to-moment awareness of my thoughts, feelings and environment as well as feeling judgmental towards myself, defensive, anxious or sad (Cardaciotto et al. 2008).

Initially, I meditated according to instructions from the *Cleo* website, with the intention of beginning at 20 minutes. After a few days of tuning out and no results I tried mindful eating and walking, which I

found therapeutic.

Following further research, I sourced some more comprehensive instructions on how to meditate, which contained solutions to some of the problems I had focusing and letting go of stress or emotion, improving my technique significantly.

Each issue I encountered, I managed to resolve through research and trial and error. By the third week I was both enjoying the sessions and noticing the long-term benefits.

I also tried different ways of meditating, with the same MBSR principles, but adding or taking away components such as music, outdoor setting or instructional recordings. These made minimal difference once I had reached my comfortable zone, though the change was welcome and prevented tedium.

I managed to do a 20 minute to 30 minute meditation most days and occasionally achieved a 45 minute meditation on the weekends. I took the same Berkeley test at the end of the 5 week period and received a score of 73 out of 100, which means I have improved by 20 points.

My experience

While I had never considered myself a spiritual or unhappy person, I was aware of the scientific research and evidence in favour of mindfulness and have struggled with stress and anxiety for a long time and was interested to see if I could change.

Initially I had significant difficulties focusing for a lengthy period. I continued however, because my research informed me that results take time. Once I had researched more thoroughly and was practicing for longer times each day, I improved to the point where time was not a factor.

Some other difficulties I had include restlessness, uncomfortable posture, impossible expectations and trouble facing deep emotions.

I resolved these by lying down, remembering to live in the moment rather than concentrating on future benefits and past issues, and trialling different exercises for dealing with specific psychological complications.

I found the longer meditations the most successful in completely relaxing me, and lasting throughout the day and night. I also feel that meditation gives the feeling of having more time in the day, rather than taking it away.

While it may sound cliché, I had the most success when I 'let go' and trusted the natural flow of life.

Evaluation

Despite the fact that the majority of mindfulness publications estimate it takes at least 6 weeks for someone to begin noticing the benefits of mindfulness, I can truly say that as a sceptic, I was surprised by the positive results I encountered.

The chief improvements I observed as a result

of my new routine were a reduction in stress and anxiousness while attempting to sleep and at university and an increase in my ability to focus on one thing at a time, which benefited my productivity. I also developed the ability to take things in my stride and was less bothered by small annoyances.

These results are in accordance with both popular and academic material, which claim that mindfulness meditation reduces stress, promotes optimal health, improves attention control, mental agility, emotional intelligence and situational awareness.

References

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