

Rose Morgan

Happiness reflective journal

CST228, “Happiness: investigating its causes and conditions”

Autumn session, 2014

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 writing. In your diary, you can comment on the connection between what researchers 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 5 or more pieces of academic research (e.g. journal articles) that recommend your activity as enhancing happiness.

For more details see http://www.bmartin.cc/classes/CST_14outline.pdf

Rose Morgan's reflective journal starts on the next page.

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

Evidence Provided for the Benefits of Practicing Mindfulness

Throughout partaking in the five-week happiness activity, I chose to practice mindfulness. 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).

My Implementation

Before beginning the activity I was curious regarding my actual mindfulness level. I thought it would prove useful for my evaluation if I calculated my score before, and after, partaking in mindfulness activities. The mindfulness test I took was Berkeley University’s Mindfulness Quiz. On completion of the quiz I was given a mindfulness score of 63 out of 100.

I had planned to partake in mindfulness meditation in the morning, once daily. I obtained a mindfulness CD with five tracks on it, each ranging from four to nine minutes in duration. These tracks would compile the thirty minutes of meditation that I would undertake.

It soon became clear that due to various commitments, such as work, University and exercise, my plan to complete the mindfulness meditation every morning was not a realistic option. From this point I set myself three mornings per week, Saturday Sunday and Wednesday, as mornings in which I would complete the thirty minute

meditation exercise. I then committed to trying to partake in other mindfulness activities on every other day including savoring food, mindfulness thinking while performing everyday tasks, such as washing dishes and commuting and body scans.

My Experience and Evaluation

I am a person who experiences high stress levels, especially when it comes to my work and university life. I find myself worrying and dwelling about events or situations that are in the past and/or out of my control. I also have a tendency to look forward to things in the future at expense of experiences in the present, gliding over them and not taking full advantage.

Throughout the five weeks I saw positive changes in myself after doing mindfulness activities, however, I really saw these results when I cut down the amount of times that I did the 30-minute meditation sessions and changed them to shorter 20-minute time frames. I am definitely an 'on-the-go' person and while there are various websites and blogs that promote doing mindfulness meditation daily, I can say that I started to find it a chore. My mind would wonder causing me to not truly be present in the activity. By shortening the activity and only doing it 3 days a week it did not feel like a burden. I was able to truly focus on the meditation and found that my breathing improved and my anxiety and stress levels decreased.

I truly benefited from mindful thinking and was able appreciate moments while I was in them. I found myself thinking about my experiences as they happened and making the most out the experience. I did try to partake in mindfulness eating, however, this experience did not suit me and I found myself tending to not enjoy the meal as much because I was too concerned with being mindful while consuming it. Another positive benefit that I saw in the short five week period is the amount that my task focus improved, before starting mindfulness I found that I would procrastinate a lot and find other things to focus on rather than the task at hand, however, as research shows mindfulness activities help to focus the mind and think in the present, something that has really benefited me.

After making the changes to my mindfulness activity, tailoring it to suit my personality and lifestyle, I saw the benefits with like my overall feeling of wellbeing increasing, as much as can be expected in the small time frame. I completed the Berkeley University Mindfulness quiz again at the conclusion of the 5 weeks and saw my score increase by ten points to 73 out of 100, which still leaves room for improvement. I still have to sometimes consciously think to be mindful and it hasn't become second nature, but hopefully this will occur as I continue to practice mindfulness.

Word Count: 1089

References

Carmody, J, & Baer, RA 2008, 'Relationship between Mindfulness practice and levels of mindfulness, medical, psychological symptoms and well-being in a mindfulness-based stress reduction program', *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, Vol. 31, No. 1, pp. 23-33.

Everyday Mindfulness 2014, *The Benefits of Mindfulness*, Everyday Mindfulness, Viewed 10 April 2014, <http://www.everyday-mindfulness.org/the-benefits-of-mindfulness/>.

Harvard Health publications 2013, *Benefits of Mindfulness*, Helpguide.Org, Viewed 13 March 2014, <http://www.helpguide.org/harvard/mindfulness.htm>.

Kabat-Zinn, J 2003, 'Mindfulness-Based Interventions in Context: Past, Present, and Future', *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, Vol. 10, No. 2, pp. 144-156.

Ludwig, DS, & Kabat-Zinn, J 2008, ' Mindfulness in Medicine', *JAMA*, Vol. 300, No. 11, pp.1350-1352.

McComb, R, Tacon, JJ, Randolph, A, & Caldera, Y 2004, 'A pilot study to examine the effects of a mindfulness-based stress-reduction and relaxation program on levels of stress hormones, physical functioning, and submaximal exercise responses', *Journal of alternative and complementary medicine*, Vol. 10, No. 5, pp. 819-827.

Sharma, R 2006, 'Meditation and Mental Wellbeing', *Indian Journal Physiol Pharmacol*, Vol. 50, No. 3, pp.205-214.

Shapiro, SL, & Carlson, LE 2009, *The art and science of mindfulness, integrating mindfulness into psychology and the helping professions*, American Psychological Association, Washington DC.

University of California, Berkeley 2013, *Mindfulness Quiz*, GreaterGood – The Science of a Meaningful Life, Viewed 13 March 2014, http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/quizzes/take_quiz/4.

Weiss, M, Nordlie, J, & Siegel, EP 2005, 'Mindfulness-based stress reduction as an adjunct to outpatient psychotherapy', *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics*, Vol. 74, No. 2, pp.108-112.