

Teaching for Well-Being? Introducing Mindfulness in an Undergraduate Course

Carly Ingram¹, Andrea V. Breen², & Tricia van Rhijn²

¹Pacific Community Resources Society

²Department of Family Relations & Applied Nutrition, University of Guelph

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Abstract

Student mental health and well-being are increasing concerns in higher education. This exploratory study examined students' learning in a mindfulness program incorporated into an undergraduate class. Six brief mindfulness-based practices were introduced: mindfulness meditation, walking meditation, body scan, mindful eating, loving-kindness, and Tonglen meditation. Fourteen students were interviewed after completion of the course to explore their conceptions and use of mindfulness and other self-care practices. Results of thematic analyses suggest that there were variations in students' adoption of mindfulness-based practices and students' preferred mindfulness techniques. Most participants reported that mindfulness instruction and practice were beneficial but this was not universal; some students reported that mindfulness was "not for them". Findings suggest that mindfulness fostered self-reflection, self-awareness and relaxation for many students and incorporating mindfulness at the beginning of class improved the overall quality of discussion and facilitated students' learning. Findings further suggest that students incorporated mindfulness into existing self-care practices that included a variety of other preferred techniques to enhance self-reflection, self-awareness and relaxation. Overall, our findings suggest that students should be supported through explicit instruction to develop a "toolbox" of self-care approaches that may include, but is not necessarily limited to, mindfulness.

Mental health is increasingly a focus of attention on College and University campuses. However, despite widespread concern about students' well-being across disciplines and subject matters, students are generally left to learn about and practice self-care on their own, without direct support and instruction (Rosenzweig et al. 2003). In this way, skill development in self-care is similar to that in writing and critical thinking skills; while it is recognized as important, it remains relatively rare that students are given explicit instruction in *how* to practice self-care. However, this situation may be changing. Considerable attention to the benefits of mindfulness for mental health and well-being has led to recent explorations of the potential of mindfulness-based programs for teaching students to enhance their own well-being (e.g., Newsome, Waldo, and Gruszka 2012; Reid 2013; Tarrasch 2014). The current study builds on efforts to introduce mindfulness instruction into professional development programs in nursing, social work and related fields (Chrisman, Christopher, and Lichenstein 2009; Gockel et al. 2013; Reid 2013; Tarrasch 2014). We explore a pilot project through which mindfulness instruction was incorporated into the curriculum of an interdisciplinary undergraduate practicum course. The focus of this research was on students' perceptions of their own learning about mindfulness and their use of mindfulness and other forms of self-care to enhance well-being.

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is typically defined as a state of awareness and attention to the present moment with nonjudgmental acceptance of experiences (Joyce et al. 2010; Wayment et al. 2011). While mindfulness-based practices originate from Eastern traditions such as Buddhism, Western educators and clinicians have realized the benefit of these practices in a secular context (Cohen and Miller 2009). A variety of mindfulness-based practices have been developed, including mindfulness meditation (Himmelstein 2011), walking meditation (Gockel et al. 2013), mindful eating (Haruki et al. 2008), loving-kindness meditation (Gockel et al. 2013), and Tonglen meditation, which involves focusing on experiences that arise during imagery of suffering and compassion (Gockel et al. 2013). Mindfulness is associated with several facets of well-being, including alleviating depression and anxiety, bolstering coping, and quality of life (Grossman et al. 2004). Cultivating mindfulness can also lead to improvements in executive functioning and emotion regulation (Robins et al. 2012; Teper, Segal, and Inzlicht 2013), improved self-awareness (Richards, Campenni, and Muse-Burke 2010), as well as decreased hostility (Himmelstein 2011) and anger (Robins et al. 2012). The literature on mindfulness has utilized a number of measures and definitions of well-being (e.g., Barnett, Baker, Elman, and Schoener 2007; Beshai, McAlpine, Weare, and Kuyken, 2016; Grossman et al. 2004; Himmelstein 2011; Robins et al. 2012; Teper, Segal, and Inzlicht 2013). In this qualitative study, we were interested in subjective well-being, based on participants' descriptions. This is consistent with previous qualitative research on mindfulness. For example, Himmelstein, Hastings, Shapiro, and Heery (2012) used interview data for a qualitative analysis and defined subjective well-being as any increase in positive or decrease in negative physical or psychological experiences as reported by participants.

Prior research has demonstrated that mindfulness-based practices can enhance well-being

for students (e.g., Chrisman, Christopher, and Lichenstein 2009; Gockel et al. 2013; Reid 2013; Tarrasch 2014); however, researchers have generally focused on training programs in specific disciplines such as nursing and social work and only a few studies have involved undergraduate students (e.g., Bergen-Cico, Possemato, and Cheon 2013; Newsome, Waldo, and Gruszka 2012; van Der Riet et al. 2015). The existing literature does not include examination of students' understanding of mindfulness concepts and the extent to which conceptual understanding is achieved from brief introductions to mindfulness. Moreover, published research does not seem to account for how mindfulness might fit with students' existing self-care practices. This is an important consideration as the value and impact of mindfulness may be influenced by students' use of other forms of self-care. The following research questions guided this exploratory qualitative investigation: (1) How do undergraduate students perceive mindfulness lessons within their practicum course seminars? (2) What do students learn from the mindfulness lessons? (3) How do students conceptualize mindfulness-based practices for the purpose of self-care? (4) How do mindfulness-based practices fit within students' existing self-care practices?

The Practicum Course

Mindfulness lessons were introduced in a third year undergraduate practicum course in (Department and University names to be added after anonymous review) in Ontario, Canada. The practicum course is required for students in two different Majors (withheld for anonymous review) and it provides a foundational experience in education and/or human service work for students who pursue a variety of careers working with children, families and/or older adults, such as teaching, social work, mental health counseling, occupational therapy, child life, nursing, and law. Each student is placed within a professional agency, program or school and performs unpaid work 12 hours/week in this context for the duration of the one-semester course for a total of 144 hours. Examples of placement sites include elementary and secondary schools, hospital settings, mental health centres, retirement homes, and women's shelters. Students meet weekly with the instructor and/or Graduate Teaching Assistant to engage in discussions that connect their practicum experiences to relevant research and theory.

The Mindfulness Lessons

The first author was the instructor of the mindfulness lessons in the weekly seminar. The first author has education, experience, and training in teaching and practicing mindfulness-based practices and philosophy. They began a personal mindfulness practice in 2010 at the University of Toronto where they completed the Buddhism, Psychology, and Mental Health minor while studying Psychology. The program examines mindfulness from a historical and theoretical perspective, considering both theological and Westernized practices of mindfulness, while guiding students' personal practice. As within this program, Western psychology has recognized the historical origins of mindfulness theories and mindfulness-based practices within Buddhism. Jon Kabat-Zinn, whose Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program has been at the forefront of Westernized mindfulness-based practices, has acknowledged the context from which

these practices emerged and the importance of understanding this context in the study and practice of mindfulness (see Kabat-Zinn 2003). The first author completed an 8-week MBSR program in 2012 and has studied the work of Kabat-Zinn and other such contributors. The first author also has an Applied Mindfulness Meditation Certificate completed at the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto. This training reviewed teaching mindfulness from a social work perspective. With this experience and knowledge, the first author designed a program to integrate brief mindfulness lessons into six practicum course seminars, adapted from the work of Gockel et al. (2013). They adapted the MBSR program into 15 minute lessons involving trial of mindfulness practices and group discussion. The practices included in the current study were mindfulness meditation, walking meditation, body scan, mindful eating, loving-kindness, and Tonglen meditation. These 6 particular practices were chosen to model the program of Gockel et al. (2013) and for the prevalence of MBSR practices in the existing mindfulness literature. For example, see the literature review by Fjorback, Arendt, Ornbol, Fink, and Walach (2011) on the breadth of research connecting MBSR practices to well-being outcomes. An overview of each of the practices that were used in this program is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. *Mindfulness-based practices taught in seminars*

Practice	Overview
Mindfulness meditation	Paying attention to the breath and associated physical sensations
Walking meditation	Paying attention to the sensations of the body while walking
Body scan	Guided moving of attention to all parts of the body
Mindful eating	Paying attention to experiences of eating
Loving-kindness meditation	Paying attention to thoughts, feelings, and sensations associated with loving-kindness imagery
Tonglen meditation	Paying attention to thoughts, feelings, and sensations associated with suffering imagery

The mindfulness lessons were integrated into six practicum classes, most often for the first 15 minutes of class time. Each mindfulness lesson contained a reiteration of the 3 A's of mindfulness: attention, acceptance, and awareness, as well as explanations of the practices. Students were encouraged to practice any or all of the mindfulness-based practices on their own time and to share their perspective of the teachings and practices so that students' developing understanding of mindfulness could be monitored. We recognized from the outset that some people may be uncomfortable with mindfulness practices for a variety of reasons, including possible concerns

about the religious (Buddhist) foundations. We also recognized that mindfulness may not be appropriate for all students; there is a small but growing body of literature that suggests that mindfulness meditation can have negative impacts for some individuals, particularly those with histories of trauma (e.g., Burrows 2016; Dobkin, Irving, and Amar 2012; Farias and Wilkholm 2015). There is also literature highlighting negative experiences with mindfulness for individuals based on complex factors, in addition to trauma history, such as personality, medical history, identity, context, diet and more (Lindahl, Fisher, Cooper, Rosen, and Britton 2017). In recognition of this, the mindfulness lessons were not mandatory: students were given the option to come late to class when mindfulness lessons were scheduled, leave class for the mindfulness lesson portion, or stay in the room during the lessons but not participate in the practices. Some students were observed arriving after the lessons, leaving at the start of the lessons, or opting to not participate in the mindfulness activity (for example, one student was observed listening to music with headphones during a meditation). In addition, Lindahl et al. (2017) found that amount and intensity of mindfulness practice was a risk factor for negative experiences and outcomes. Again, following the model of Gockel et al. (2013) the current mindfulness program engaged students in no more than 10 minutes of mindfulness practice, aiming to keep students' exposure to the mindfulness-based practices as introductory and minimize amount and intensity. We also felt that it was an important safeguard to have a mindfulness instructor for these sessions who was well-trained and experienced with a background in not only mindfulness, but also mental health and trauma. Burrows (2016) suggests that it is important for mindfulness teachers to have training in trauma to safeguard mindfulness experiences for college age students. The first author has experience facilitating mindfulness-based cognitive therapy groups at Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), including addressing challenges that may arise from mindfulness practice, and has completed coursework in counselling survivors of trauma from the University of Guelph.

Method

Our qualitative methods were developed to be consistent with our overarching aim: this research was designed to explore students' perceptions of their experiences with mindfulness and other forms of self-care in the context of our particular program. We acknowledge the subjective and contextualist nature of this exploratory research. In keeping with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for evaluating the "trustworthiness" of qualitative research, we aim to provide thick descriptions of our approach and findings to allow readers to determine the extent to which our findings may be transferable to other contexts.

Participants

Following ethics review and approval, recruitment emails were sent to all practicum students after the submission of final grades by the practicum instructors. Fourteen female students were interviewed for this study. We had not intended to interview only female students; however, the vast majority of students in our Department are female and we did not have any male students volunteer to participate in the study. Students were placed in a variety of community

placements for 12 hours per week for the duration of the semester. Placement locations included a childcare centre, alternative education programs, healthcare facilities, community service programs, and an on-campus support program.

The semi-structured interview focused on students' perceptions of mindfulness. The interview began by asking what students did to maintain well-being during the semester, their personal definition of self-care, and their reactions to and use of the mindfulness-based practices. Participants were also asked to describe a stressful experience in practicum and to reflect on their response to this situation as well as the specific approach(es) they took to caring for themselves after the experience.

Thematic Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) contextualist approach to thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) outline six steps for conducting a thorough thematic analysis: familiarizing, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and reporting the results. Each of these steps was followed in the present investigation. Self-care, practicum, and stressful experience themes were coded at the semantic level, which reports surface meanings of what was said by the participants (Braun and Clarke 2006). The first author has advanced knowledge of mindfulness theory and incorporated this knowledge into her analyses of the data by listening and looking for themes at both semantic (surface) and latent levels, which includes the assumptions that underlie participants' words (Braun and Clarke 2006). Transcripts were also read by the second author. We had a number of conversations during the coding and writing phases with all three authors to help ensure trustworthiness of the Results (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Results

The results are organized into two sections: The first describes participants' experiences with the mindfulness lessons in their practicum seminar. We were interested in understanding what participants learned about mindfulness theory (i.e., what mindfulness is) as well as their perceptions of the mindfulness sessions. The second section addresses participants' use of self-care during their practicum experience, including self-care based in mindfulness practices as well as forms of self-care that are not related to mindfulness.

Learning about Mindfulness

Participants began the course with a range of understandings of mindfulness concepts and prior experience with mindfulness-based practices. One participant, who we have called Sara, was very familiar with mindfulness-based practices. She had learned from her father, who reportedly maintained a regular meditation practice for more than ten years. Other participants were only somewhat aware of mindfulness before the course, most often from their experience with yoga. Some participants did not have any awareness of mindfulness prior to the practicum course, as was the case with Olivia, who said that "including mindfulness...was a good way of

introducing something new that not probably any of us or a lot of us had done before”.

Most participants described an accurate understanding of mindfulness that fit with mindfulness theory and teachings. Participants often mentioned the fundamental concept of mindfulness: being present. For example, Justine described using mindfulness meditation to “let my day go and just be in that moment”. Sara demonstrated her understanding of focusing on the breath when she stated, “when you find yourself kind of in a stressful situation and you can just take like, 2 to 5 minutes and just sit there and like, close your eyes and just like, focus on your breathing”. Overall, participants’ descriptions of mindfulness suggested that the mindfulness lessons contributed to effective learning about mindfulness concepts.

Students’ Perceptions of Mindfulness Practices

Students expressed a variety of opinions about the various mindfulness practices that were introduced. Kate expressed that she had certain practices that she found helpful and others that did not “work” for her:

...some of them work for me, some of them I know didn’t work for me. Like the walking around the classroom, I didn’t really get into that. And so I wouldn’t say that was something that was helpful for me. But in other aspects I did find some of them helpful. Like, I like the body scan, and the meditation.

Overall, participants reported positive responses to the mindfulness lessons. For example, Milena reflected that after the mindfulness-based practices in seminar she “felt relieved. Like, not relieved but a little bit less stressed about the day... after I’m like, ‘oh, I’m happy I did that’”. Some participants found that trying mindfulness-based practices at the beginning of seminar helped them relax and become present for the rest of the seminar. For example, Olivia stated:

I think it was nice to start the seminars with them because people may have gone in there feeling antsy or not really calm because it’s like, Friday afternoon, they don’t want to be at school, right? So I think that the ones that you were at that you did facilitate mindfulness at the beginning really made everyone just like, like, I don’t know, like, more like, mutual. Like, everyone felt together, united, rather than everyone just coming in from their separate ways. It was a really good beginning to a seminar... I really liked the mindfulness because it just kind of calms you down and gets you focused.

Opportunities to try techniques

Many participants also reported that they appreciated the chance to *actually try* self-care techniques rather than only being told to practice self-care, especially in the relatively stressful context of a practicum course. Alex describes this as follows:

Everyone bonds over practicum because it is so stressful. So it was good to like, have something that— like, a de-stressor I think, like, built in. Cause like, profs always talk about it. But like, you’re like, ‘ok whatever. You’re just talking about whatever.’ But it’s not necessarily like, applicable all the time. Cause profs are like, ‘make sure you take care of yourself’ and, ‘don’t get too stressed out.’ But you’re like, ‘ok, but what does

that mean?'... In our courses you hear that all the time. Like, you know, 'you're working with people,' and whatever. But I don't think in any course really we would talk about how to actually do it.

This suggests that including opportunities for students to try mindfulness-based practices and/or other self-care techniques directly in courses may be useful for enhancing students' learning about self-care and promoting well-being. Moreover, incorporating mindfulness into the beginning of seminars may benefit the quality of discussion and students' learning in the seminar.

Negative responses to mindfulness

It is important to note that students' responses to mindfulness-based instruction were not all positive. Some participants reported feeling uncomfortable trying mindfulness-based practices in a classroom setting with other students present. A few participants also mentioned feeling uncomfortable with their experience of awareness during practice. In the following excerpt, Amy describes her discomfort with the "loving-kindness meditation":

...I was hyper aware or like, being in a room full of other people... like, you know sometimes when you're like, hyper aware of everything. Like, you can just like, feel everything and like, your breathing and stuff like that. Like, you're— and I wouldn't say like, breathing heavy or anything, but like, I just— you're really aware... I just think it was like, you were thinking so much, or like, you know what I mean? Or like, blocking everything out. But I definitely think like, the other people in the room like, made a difference too.

She further explains that she was intrigued by the concepts taught and decided to try the practices alone at home. However, she still found that the practices made her feel uncomfortable and, in the end, she decided "Yea, so it's just—it's not for me".

Amy's negative experience of mindfulness underscores that this approach may not be appealing or acceptable to all students. Indeed, as suggested in the Introduction, some students were observed electing not to participate in the optional mindfulness sessions. Participants indicated that they appreciated the freedom to choose whether or not to participate. This idea is expressed by Kara in the following excerpt:

you were open to no one participating if they didn't want to, so it wasn't like we were forced in that you made us do things we were uncomfortable with. Like, you told us we might be uncomfortable with it and you were very open. So I just feel like, we had the opportunity to not participate or not be a part of it.

Unfortunately, we did not collect data on experiences of participants who may have chosen to opt out of classes by skipping the mindfulness sessions. While none of the participants indicated that mindfulness should not be taught, refusal to participate and potentially negative experiences are an important area for future research given evidence that mindfulness practices are not universally beneficial (e.g., Burrows 2016; Dobkin, Irving, and Amar 2012; Farias and Wilkholm 2015). While more information is needed, our findings suggest the importance of allowing students the freedom to choose not to participate in mindfulness instruction.

Mindfulness-based practices as self-care

Most participants reported using their preferred mindfulness-based practices as a form of self-care—to enhance well-being. For example, Christine described her use of the mindfulness-based practices as self-care:

I definitely think it impacted my well-being positively because it like, released a lot of stress so if I didn't— like, I don't know if there would be a different way that I would react to it in those situations, but when I did do the mindfulness, like I said, my heart rate would go down or I would not think about it later at night so I think I would get more sleep, or you know it would kind of spiral into something good.

There were three overarching ways that participants used mindfulness and other forms of self-care: practices were used to facilitate self-reflection and self-awareness, to acknowledge experience, and to manage stress. These three functions of self-care are elaborated below.

Self-care practices for self-awareness

Participants' reported engaging in mindfulness-based practices to facilitate self-reflection. For example, Kristen stated, "I'm so much more self-aware of how I'm feeling." Kate recalled that during stressful times she was "able to take a moment and just breathe and think about things for a moment ...". She elaborated that after taking a moment to breathe and think about a specific stressful experience she "...came back and like, had kind of a new perspective on it. Like I could do it." Christine described her experience of mindfulness as, "being one with your thoughts...being able to really think back and like understand what's going on." She elaborated, "...a lot of the time I'll— you'll jump to conclusions or overthink something. But then actually being able to look back on what happened and take a second to like, think about the situation...".

While the excerpts above emphasize mindfulness as important for cultivating awareness, participants also reported using other self-care techniques that are not based in mindfulness to improve self-awareness. For example, Caitlyn described, "taking the time to think about my personal issues and stuff" as an important part of her self-care regimen. Other participants described using writing to enhance self-awareness and well-being. Some participants described the self-reflection assignments in the course as important for cultivating awareness and helping them to "see the better side" of an experience (Natalie). Others described engaging in writing outside of the course as important for self-care.

Self-care practices for briefly acknowledging thoughts, feelings, and experiences

In the examples provided above participants describe engaging in fairly deep reflective thinking. Participants also reported engaging in mindfulness-based practices for the purpose of briefly acknowledging their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. This is consistent with existing mindfulness literature and considerations of the mechanisms at work during mindfulness practice such as decentering and re-perceiving. Decentering refers to the process of stepping back from an

experience in order to look at the experience, while re-perceiving involves the perceiving of experiences from this new perspective (Shapiro et al. 2006). These mechanisms foster engagement with objects of attention without “sinking into” emotional content. Engagement with thoughts, feelings, and experiences is therefore less emotional during mindfulness practice. Additionally, the mechanism of “disidentifying” allows for increased objectivity and understanding of thoughts as subjective and passing experiences (Bishop et al. 2004; Shapiro et al. 2006; Fresco et al. 2007). Sara explained her experience with acknowledging during mindfulness meditation as follows:

Meditation is hard sometimes because things come up that you don't want to think about that you've put out of your mind for so long. And then they eventually peek their way out and it's like, 'ok, I have to acknowledge this at some point.' And, yeah, helps you—well for me it's helped me, yeah, I don't know. You just come to peace with things eventually, right. Like, a few practices in a row I'll have the same thing sort of like nagging at me and bothering me. And just letting it come up and acknowledging it and, yeah, letting myself think about it sometimes for like, a short period of time and then breathing on it, and then letting it go.

Here, she was not deeply engaging with her thoughts, feelings, or experiences as in the previous examples, but rather briefly acknowledging them as they moved through her mind. She further explained how she deals with her nagging thoughts during her meditation while remaining mindful by using imagery:

A leaf will float down the river. That's like, my thought coming in to my head. And then I like, label it and let it like, continue on. So just like, the flow of it coming into my mind and like, acknowledging it and letting it go.

Participants also reported engaging in other self-care practices that were not mindfulness-based for the purpose of acknowledging thoughts, feelings, and experiences. One such practice is self-talk, which involves giving one's self a “pep talk” to acknowledge stressful situations and boost confidence in one's ability to handle the situation effectively. Another approach that participants described using was discussion with others, most often fellow practicum students. Prior research has demonstrated that students in practicum learn primarily through narrative; engaging with stories about others' experiences (Citation withheld for anonymous review). Participants expressed that story-sharing was important for enhancing their well-being. Christine describes this in the excerpt below:

I think hearing everyone else's stories. Because when I first went and I didn't think anyone else was feeling useless or really having the same experience as me. But then hearing other people stories I was able to hear like, this person isn't enjoying their experience either. So it was kind of nice to relate to someone on the same level. So I think that was really positive for me.

Self-care practices for managing stress

Participants also reported using mindfulness-based and other self-care practices to manage

stress. This finding is not surprising as mindfulness-based practices have been identified as relaxing and useful for stress reduction (e.g., Newsome, Waldo, and Gruszka 2012; Tarrasch 2014). Participants reported that managing stressful thoughts through mindfulness-based practices occurred both in and outside of seminars. Christine recalled using mindfulness meditation as a break from thinking about stressful situations:

In terms of mindfulness, I use the technique of like, just taking two minutes and just literally just breathing and trying not to think of anything. Depending on how stressful the situation is I try my best not to think of what I'm stressed about, but sometimes it's hard to kind of veer away from that. But actually you said that technique a couple of times and I really liked it.

One of the most commonly mentioned ways mindfulness-based practices was the body scan, which was used to manage stressful thoughts was to aid in relaxing to fall asleep. As Danielle described, "I used it more when I went home and I was trying to fall asleep and my mind was racing. I would do the body scan." Similarly, Kara shared how the body scan helped to quiet her anxiety before bed. "When you taught us mindfulness and—I started like, a meditation kind of thing at nighttime to help me get to sleep. Cause sometimes I have like, I have a lot of anxiety when I'm going to bed". The body scan meditation was an escape from anxiety and stressful thoughts to facilitate relaxing and ultimately sleep.

Most participants reported engaging in other self-care practices that are not based in mindfulness to manage stress, including going to the gym, spending time with other people, watching Netflix, venting about one's experiences to others, and eating ice cream.

A gradient of engagement with thoughts, feelings, and experiences

While the above description has positioned reflecting, acknowledging, and escaping as three separate functions of reflecting, in reality there was a great deal of overlap in participants' descriptions. For example, Christine described both acknowledging thoughts and escaping from thoughts during her mindfulness-based practice. She explained that these are separate ways of engaging in mindfulness-based practices, but also that she may switch from one to the other depending on the activity of her mind at that time. This highlights that it may be important for mindfulness lessons to include practices that can facilitate reflecting, acknowledging, and escaping as well as instructions on paying attention to which purpose is useful at different times.

Discussion

This exploratory qualitative research aimed to explore undergraduate students' perceptions of mindfulness lessons that were integrated into their practicum course seminars. We were interested in exploring students' learning about mindfulness and we were open to their positive, neutral and negative conceptions of mindfulness and its integration within existing self-care practices. Our research provides some important insights into students' experiences of learning mindfulness as a form of self-care in their practicum course. Participants demonstrated accurate un-

derstanding of mindfulness concepts and practices after just six short mindfulness sessions. Participants accurately explained mindfulness concepts and practices several months after experiencing the mindfulness lessons. This result may be related to instructor effects—the instructor was an experienced facilitator with extensive knowledge of mindfulness. Students' apparent success in learning about mindfulness may also be related to the instructors' approach to teaching it in a way that simplified concepts and aimed to make mindfulness approachable. For example, breaking down the concept of mindfulness into 3 A's: attention, awareness, and acceptance, and repeating this definition during each lesson was one of the ways complex mindfulness concepts were simplified and taught. Finally, the opportunity to actually try self-care practices during the seminars (rather than simply being told about them) was likely important for students' learning about mindfulness.

Overall, the mindfulness lessons were well received and students appreciated the opportunity to try actual self-care practices and found the lessons to be effective. Participants expressed that having the mindfulness lessons at the beginning of seminar helped them to feel present and prepared to engage in the seminar. This suggests that incorporating mindfulness in course instruction may be useful for optimizing student learning. Indeed, this is supported by prior research demonstrating that mindfulness-based practices can lead to improvements in cognitive functions such as attention, memory, and executive functioning (Chiesa, Calati, and Serretti 2010). Some of these benefits have been shown to translate to students' academic functioning in post-secondary settings (McCloskey 2015).

We also found that mindfulness lessons were not universally well-received. Some students reported that the practices made them feel uncomfortable. Amy (quoted above) stated, "it's not for me" and other participants expressed their appreciation for the freedom to not participate in mindfulness sessions. Overall, students' experiences of mindfulness in the practicum class were positive and we are encouraged to continue to integrate mindfulness instruction in our program. However, our results suggest that a cautious approach is warranted and we feel that it is important that the instructor for these sessions have experience and training in teaching mindfulness as well as the necessary background and experience to understand the challenges students may face in relation to mental health and well-being. In light of some students' discomfort with the mindfulness instruction and a few research studies suggesting the possibility of negative impacts (Burrows 2016; Dobkin, Irving, and Amar 2012; Farias and Wilkholm 2015), we feel that it is essential to allow students freedom to decide whether or not to participate in mindfulness lessons and for instructors to attend to possible neutral and negative effects. This is also an important area for future scholarship and researchers should examine the range of experiences with mindfulness, including positive, negative and neutral impacts of instruction and practice.

We also found that mindfulness-based practices taught in seminar were used in similar ways and for similar purposes as other self-care practices. These other self-care practices were not taught or discussed in seminars, suggesting that participants integrated the mindfulness-based practice into their existing self-care practice. Both existing self-care practices and mindfulness-based practices were used for three primary purposes: reflecting, acknowledging, and escaping.

Further consideration of the results suggests that reflecting, acknowledging, and escaping self-care practices, including mindfulness-based practice, may fall on a gradient of engagement with thoughts, feelings, and experiences. For example, reflecting self-care practices would involve the most engagement and escaping self-care practices would involve the least. The distinction between categories of self-care practices and a gradient of engagement on which all self-care practices may fall is significant for how self-care is understood and explored. It may be possible that the same self-care practice could shift along the gradient depending on the individual or context. It may be important to give students tools to engage with thoughts and feelings on all levels of this gradient, and to encourage them to develop awareness of the different functions and how they might use them to address their own shifting emotional needs. Our findings suggest that students should be supported to develop a “toolbox” of self-care approaches that may include, but is not necessarily limited to, mindfulness. As self-care needs will shift according to context across the lifespan, it is important that students have a variety of approaches to choose from that can work for them in various situations.

There are a number of limitations to this research. The first author conducted the interviews and was also the instructor for the mindfulness lessons, and this likely impacted recruitment. While the interview was designed to elicit positive, negative, neutral and ambiguous experiences and participants did in fact express a range of experiences with mindfulness, it is possible that students were more likely to participate in this research if they had a positive experience with mindfulness and/or with the instructor. The sample size was quite small (14 participants) and, as such, the full range of our students’ experiences with mindfulness may be missing. Nevertheless, the present research contributes to understanding the possible benefits of teaching mindfulness and suggests that integrating discussions and experiences of self-care techniques into undergraduate students’ course work could have considerable and lasting benefits for enhancing well-being. Admittedly, incorporating mindfulness into the curriculum may be an especially “easy fit” for programs such as ours in which content foci includes an emphasis on mental health and well-being as compared to the majority of academic disciplines where this is not the focus of content. Nevertheless, our findings provide further support to a growing body of research literature that suggests that explicit instruction in self-care can enhance students’ well-being and that students may benefit in particular from opportunities to practice self-care strategies (e.g., Chrisman, Christopher, and Lichenstein 2009; Gockel et al. 2013; Reid 2013; Tarrasch 2014). We would encourage colleagues across the further and higher education landscape to consider incorporating explicit instruction in mindfulness and/or perhaps other forms of self-care in the curriculum in order to help students develop essential skills to cope with the stresses of school and those they will encounter in the world beyond our classrooms.

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