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Navigating anxiety and stress through mindfulness: Cultivating mindfulness and awareness in a community-based setting

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Statement of the Problem: Stress afflicts 23% of Canadians age 15 and over and 30% of adults between 35 and 54, significantly impacting health and well-being, absenteeism, and health care costs. Anxiety disorders, ranging from mild to severe impairment, impact 12% of Canadians. Community-based non-medical alternatives are needed to relieve pressure from the health care system, provide wellness-based solutions that do not rely on medication, and empower the individual to assume a primary role in self-care. The purpose of the 8-week “Navigating Anxiety and Stress through Mindfulness” program is to assist individuals who identify problematic anxiety and/or stress by contextualizing and presenting mindfulness-awareness meditation training and related practices.

Methodology & Theoretical Orientation: Mindfulness training develops precision and accuracy; awareness training fosters openness and a greater connection to the environment. Rather than regarding anxiety and stress as problems to be gotten rid of, participants were coached to relate to these experiences non-judgmentally, with openness, curiosity, and an interest in learning from them. The eight 2.5-hour sessions incorporated mindfulness-awareness meditation, walking meditation, “head and shoulders” (pausing practice), tonglen (compassion practice), and mindfulness-in-everyday-life activities.

Findings: Data from five groups (40 participants) indicated a 40% improvement in scores. Participants’ self-reports indicated significant improvement in: their ability to interrupt storylines (discursive thought patterns), rumination, not being fully present, and their ability to accept things as they are, ranging from 25% to 60%.

Conclusion & Significance: It is evident that participants found mindfulness-awareness meditation and related practices beneficial. Their evaluation responses showed significant understanding of the key elements of mindfulness and that they had begun integrating mindfulness into their lives. The majority developed a regular home meditation practice. The program proved to be viable in a community-based setting.

Biography

Andrew Safer is a Mindfulness Instructor and Trainer, Program Developer, Workshop Facilitator, and Writer. As a 48-year practitioner of mindfulness-awareness and Zen meditation, he began practicing in the Zen tradition in 1968, while in high school, and then continued in the Tibetan Buddhist and Shambhala traditions over the ensuing decades. He became an authorized Meditation Instructor after completing training with Shambhala International in Halifax in 1993. He moved to St. John's in 2008 and began offering mindfulness workshops through the Family Life Bureau in 2010. He has delivered Mindfulness workshops and training for a wide range of organizations including Addiction Treatment Services Association, Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation-NL, Canadian Mental Health Association-NL, Desjardins Financial Security Life Assurance Company, Eastern Health, Key Assets, Memorial University, Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of School Councils, Newfoundland and Labrador Housing, and Newfoundland and Labrador Sexual Assault Crisis and Prevention Centre. Since 2010, he has developed and implemented a number of secular mindfulness programs, including Mindfulness-Awareness (an 8-session weekly program), Mindfulness in Recovery (a 6-session weekly program plus one full day), Dealing with Anxiety and Stress Through Mindfulness (a 7-session weekly program plus one-half day), Mindfulness at School (10 one-hour sessions), and Workplace Mindfulness (10 1-hour sessions). He is a member of the Faculty of the Atlantic Contemplative Centre in Halifax.

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