

5-2017

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Recommended Citation

Long, Nicole M. and Barrall, Kathryn E., "Exploring Mindfulness: College Students' Journey Through an Abbreviated Program" (2017). *Senior Honors Projects*. Paper 575.
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Exploring Mindfulness:
College Students' Journey Through an Abbreviated Program

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Exploring Mindfulness: College Students' Journey Through an Abbreviated Program

The transition into college is the first time that students are given control over their own schedules and routines. Despite this newfound freedom, more than 80 percent of college students have reported feeling overwhelmed by all the demands placed on them (American College Health Association, 2013) and studies have shown that poor time management is a predictor of academic stress (Misra & McKean, 2000). Without a structured routine, many college students struggle to find a balance between academics and their social lives, leading them to procrastinate on their coursework.

However, college students face the challenge of balancing all of the activities that make up their time, including academic work, social activities, eating well, exercising, and jobs. In a theory described by Kelly and Johnson (2005), awareness of time, awareness of that which fills time, and positive in-task work habits are all associated with better time management. Other studies have reported that instruction in mindfulness can reduce stress and anxiety and increase well-being (Miller, Fletcher, & Kabat-Zinn, 1995; Carmody & Baer, 2007).

The purpose of this study is to examine whether or not an abbreviated mindfulness intervention will lead to improved time management skills for college students, resulting in reduced stress and better self-care. Since lack of time is a major concern for college students, this study aims to see if the same kind of benefits that can be derived from longer mindfulness programs can be achieved from a shorter program that is more manageable for college students' schedules. What follows is a review of the most relevant literature, starting with mindfulness in general, leading into common sources of stress for college students, and ending with some studies on procrastination, mindfulness, stress, and health habits.

Studies in mindfulness and mindfulness programs have been on the rise over the past decade. Jon Kabat-Zinn (2003) defines mindfulness as: “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment.” A common method of teaching mindfulness for all age groups is the eight-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn, which involves a combination of sitting meditation, body scan, yoga, and other meditative techniques. Many studies have found that practicing MBSR is effective in decreasing feelings of stress and anxiety in daily life.

A survey conducted by Rauf, Mosser, & O’Hagan (2004) revealed that the most significant causes of stress for freshman college students are being away from home, managing academic coursework, balancing time commitments, getting enough sleep, and issues with roommates. In this time of transition, all of these changes can be overwhelming for college students who have never had to create their own schedules before.

It has been found that the main barrier to college students practicing mindfulness and meditation is being unaware of the benefits (Gryffin, Chen, & Erenguc, 2014). Mindfulness reduces stress in college students, which leads to an increase in positive attitudes towards engaging in more healthful behaviors (Roberts & Danoff-Burg, 2010).

A comprehensive literature review of studies over the past 16 years focusing on stress, procrastination/time management, and mindfulness of college students resulted in 12 studies. Out of these studies, seven addressed the issue of stress, four discussed procrastination, two studied time management, and only two looked at health. Out of these studies, five out of 12 involved only questionnaires without any treatment or intervention (Sirois, 2013; Sirois & Tosti, 2012; Neely, Schallert, Sarojanni, Roberts, & Chen, 2009; Ranjita & McKean, 2000; Iskender, 2011;

Roberts & Danoff-Burg, 2010). There is some evidence that the negative self-judgments that procrastinators experience may spur some of the stress associated with procrastination (Sirois, 2013). Self-compassion facilitates the management of negative emotions and has been associated with well-being in college students (Neely et al., 2009). Similarly, having less self-compassion explains the higher levels of stress that come from procrastination (Sirois, 2013). Additionally, Sirois and Tosti (2012) studied the associations between procrastination, mindfulness, stress, and perceived health. Through this study, they found a research gap on the relationship between mindfulness and health behaviors.

Mindfulness inherently teaches values of non-judgment and self-compassion through its practices and ideals. For this reason, we feel it is important to further explore the relationship between mindfulness and stress in regards to time management as a broader category for the busy lives of college students. This study defines time management using a five-factor model, developed by Bond and Feather (1988), consisting of sense of purpose, structured routine, present orientation, effective organization, and persistence. Time management includes managing one's time among all the various responsibilities and activities in which a student is involved. We feel that a large part of time management is making the time to take care of oneself both physically and mentally. Therefore, this study aims to explore mindfulness, a practice that fosters self-compassion, decreases stress and increases awareness, and its effect on the time management skills of college students. Since lack of time is a major concern for college students, the findings of this study may offer implications for the development of an abbreviated mindfulness program that is more manageable for college students' schedules.

Method

Participants

The participants were undergraduate students who are at least eighteen years of age at the University of Rhode Island. Recruitment procedures included sending our flyer to campus organizations that may be interested, contacting Health Services, the Fascitelli Fitness Center, and other departments on campus that would be able to post the flyer, and using social media. A total of 12 students responded to the recruitment flyers. Of these 12, five students whose schedules matched the days and times of the sessions consented to participate. Of those five, two were male and three were female. Only four students completed the study. The four participants were given pseudonyms to maintain anonymity and confidentiality.

Materials

Participants completed the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ), The Perceived Stress Scale, The University Student Satisfaction and Time Management Questionnaire (v.9) (TUSSTMQ9), The Time Structure Questionnaire, and a weekly brief self-report reflection. Each week, participants received handouts explaining the mindfulness practice that corresponded with that week's topic. Participants completed all questionnaires online using either their own devices or computers that were provided.

Procedure

This study used a single-group pre- and post-test design to evaluate participants on measures of mindfulness, stress, health behaviors, and time management. Given the small number of participants, an exploratory approach emphasizing the personal reflections and experiences was taken. Participants were assigned to a group that received the mindfulness intervention treatment. Although exploratory in nature, the study used a mixed-methods design in which participants

responded to questionnaires before and after the program and completed weekly journal reflections. Participants attended mindfulness training for six weekly fifty-minute group sessions, each specifically focused on teaching strategies for time management through each mindfulness practice (body scan, yoga, meditation, etc.). At the beginning of each class, participants responded to a journal reflection prompt about their experiences that week. The rest of the session time involved group discussion and an introduction to a new mindfulness exercise. Participants completed an assigned 10-minute daily mindfulness practice as homework throughout the week.

Results

The results are presented both in terms of the descriptive results and the qualitative journal reflections. To determine the improvements in time management, mindfulness, and perceived stress, the difference between the pre- and post-assessment scores of each participant was calculated for the four measures. The results are presented in Figures 1 - 11 for the individual participants. The mean difference scores as expressed in percentages are presented in Table 1. Results showed an overall increase from pre-test to post-test in total FFMQ scores (see Figure 1). In addition, although not included in the table, participants showed a positive increase across the five FFMQ subscales (Observing, Describing, Nonreactivity, Acting with Awareness, Nonjudging) (see Figures 2 – 6). The PSS showed that participants reported experiencing significantly less stress after completing the program (see Figure 7). According to the TSQ results, participants scored lower on the post-test survey, indicating less time structure (see Figure 8). According to the TUSSTMQ9 results, participants reported greater General Life Satisfaction, General Health and Well-Being, and Time Management after completing the six-week program (see Figures 9 – 11).

The weekly reflections were reviewed and analyzed in terms of their content in an attempt to identify common themes. An important aspect of this exploratory study was to gain insight into the personal experiences and reactions of students during their mindfulness journey. In terms of the qualitative results, overall, students reported generally positive personal experiences. Their reflections also identified some of the challenging aspects of adopting a more mindful perspective. Some common themes expressed in the journal entries include increased awareness, increased energy and productivity, and increased ability to manage stress. Listed below are some of the most significant excerpts from the participants' journal reflections.

“When I first started coming, I had so much anxiety that I literally thought I was going crazy at some points from it, but now I am much calmer (still have anxiety) and am able to handle my panic attacks in a better, quicker way.”

“Overall these past 6 weeks have been extremely helpful. It is hard to find words to explain how transforming it was. I have noticed huge differences on a personal level. I am not as emotional and anxious. I used to be a very anxious person and would not accept my negative thoughts and always thought I was thinking too much. But this experience has taught me that thinking is okay, it is our mind's job and there are ways to channel our thoughts. My thoughts and attitude towards things are more positive. Not just emotionally but my concentration in my studies has increased and I have better time management. I appreciate all that is around me and have learned to appreciate the present moment, have become more mindful, and want to try to pass on this experience to others.”

“My overall experience the past six weeks has changed my view on mindfulness. I came in a bit skeptical about the practices and left with a greater appreciation and understanding of knowledge and practice. I feel that my stress levels have lowered, especially where we approach finals... I definitely think I have become more mindful. I am a lot more open to things than I was six weeks ago and I feel more aware of everything going on around me.”

“I believe that I have definitely become more mindful in my daily life throughout the past 6 weeks. I feel like I am not on autopilot as much and I am able to get out of my thoughts and be present. I feel like I am able to let my emotions go instead of getting caught up in them as much. I am not as consumed by my stress as I was before.”

We asked our participants: What does mindfulness mean to you? They said:

“Mindfulness, to me, means that you are aware of what is around you, your thoughts, and how you are feeling and reacting to those thoughts and the things around you. It is not judging those thoughts, but instead trying to understand them and take them for what they are. Mindfulness to me is peace and understanding, of yourself and what is around you. This is something that I definitely plan to continue on learning and practicing outside of this study group.”

“To me, mindfulness is being aware of what is around you. It is accepting your present self and acknowledging it. It allows for a better lived life and allows you to just be without forcing anything. It is easy to get caught up in life and I am not close to mastering this practice but I am going to continue it because I have noticed such a positive change in my life.”

“Mindfulness to me means the ability to be aware of one's surroundings, whether that be external things like the breeze on your face, the noise in the room, or internal things like stress or the ache in your body. It also means the ability to keep an open-mind and being understanding of most situations. Often, trying to find the positive out of the negative. I think it is something I would like to continue to practice going forward.”

“Mindfulness, to me, means being at peace with yourself and being able to see the world in a more positive perspective. It is something that makes me feel like I am in control of my own life and I am not being overwhelmed. One of the biggest feelings in my life is that I cannot control what has happened before, where my life is going or how things might turn out. But through mindfulness I do not have to worry about the past and the present as

much, I can accept it and not judge myself about it. I'm learning through my own experiences. I am definitely going to try to continue practicing after the program. I only hope to get better at managing my time so I can make sure to fit these practices into my daily life. I think this program gave me the tools for that.”

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to conduct an exploratory qualitative study to examine the potential benefits of an abbreviated mindfulness intervention with college students. Specifically, the research attempted to identify improvements in time management, stress reduction, and mindfulness. Weekly personal reflective journal entries served as a primary source of data during the six-week program. Additionally, four measures were completed before and after the program to provide quantitative assessments of their experiences.

In regards to the FFMQ, results suggested that the participants became more observant of their surroundings; better able to describe their feelings, thoughts, and opinions; less reactive to their emotions and to difficult situations; less judgmental of their internal experience; and more aware of what they were doing, instead of being on automatic pilot all the time. Participants also reported experiencing significantly less stress after completing the program, which is consistent with findings from other studies on mindfulness-based programs. The TSQ post-survey scores are significantly lower than the pre-test scores. This is inconsistent with the TUSSTMQ9 Time Management subscale scores as well as some of the journal entry reflections, in which participants reported having better time management. We are not sure how this is related to our study; we did not explicitly discuss time structure or time management throughout the course of the program. This could be an area for further exploration. According to the TUSSTMQ9 survey results, participants reported feeling more satisfied in their lives, having improvements in both

physical and mental health, procrastinating less and being more organized in regards to how they spend their time.

Because of the sample size ($n = 4$), we chose to focus less on the quantitative aspects of our research and more on the qualitative aspects, that is, the journal reflections that the participants wrote weekly. The participants' journal reflections showed that the program instilled in them the qualities of mindfulness, not only understanding mindfulness intellectually but also experiencing it viscerally. In addition, their reflections indicated that the program effectively taught them how to bring more awareness into their daily lives. Half of the participants reported having issues with anxiety at the start of the program; these participants reported feeling that they had the tools to better manage their anxiety by the end.

There are several limitations to this study. One way to enhance the study would be to have a comparison group. The sample size ($n = 4$) was also very small, making the results difficult to generalize. Due to the nature of this type of study, the conditions are not controlled, as participants do much of the practices independently, and our weekly meetings consist of open discussion; they are not scripted, and so therefore are not replicable. Future research should focus on abbreviated mindfulness programs, to explore the efficacy of such programs and to increase accessibility for those who feel like they do not have enough time.

Figures 1 - 11: Pre-Test and Post-Test Comparisons for Individual Participants

Figure 1

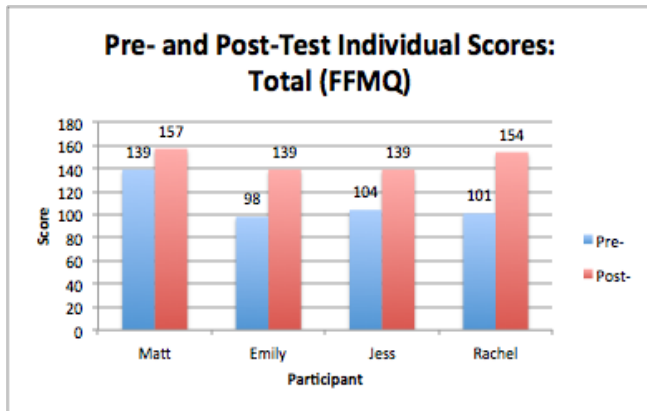


Figure 2

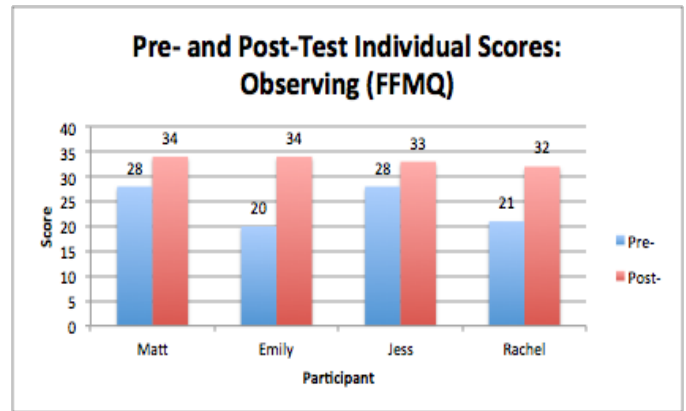


Figure 3

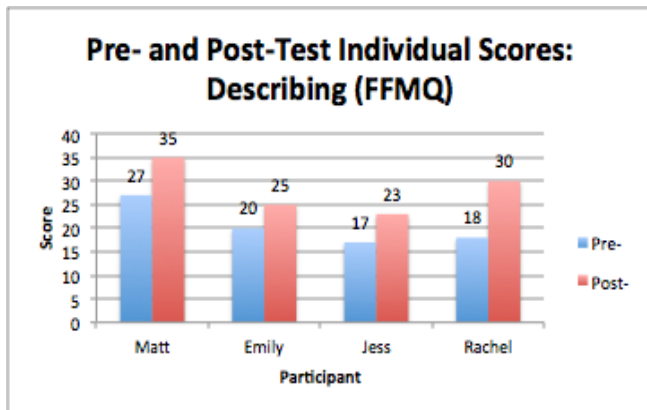


Figure 4

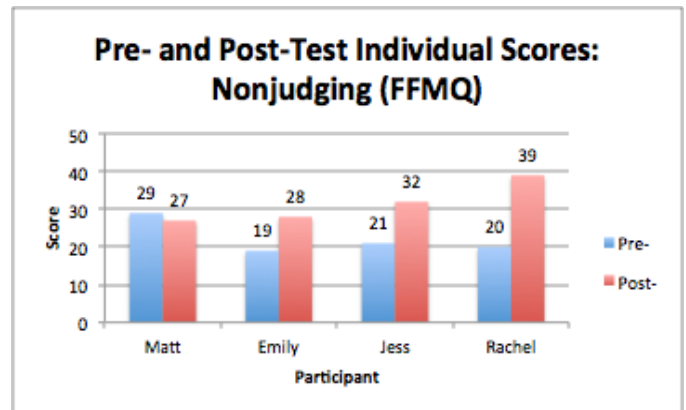


Figure 5

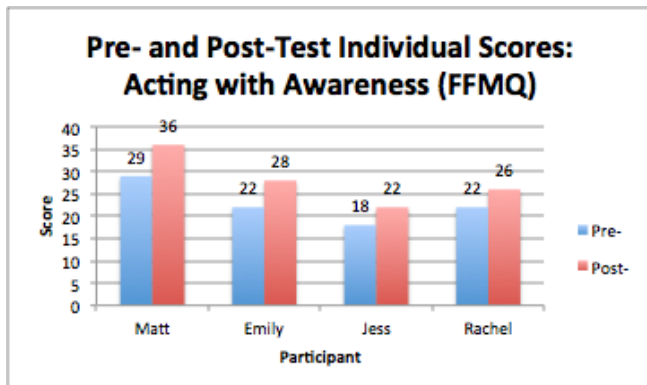


Figure 6

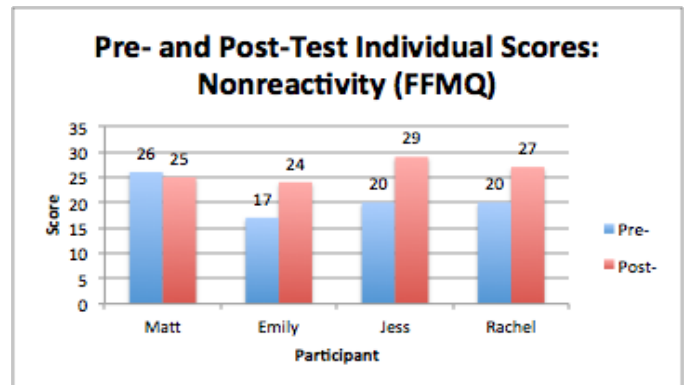


Figure 7

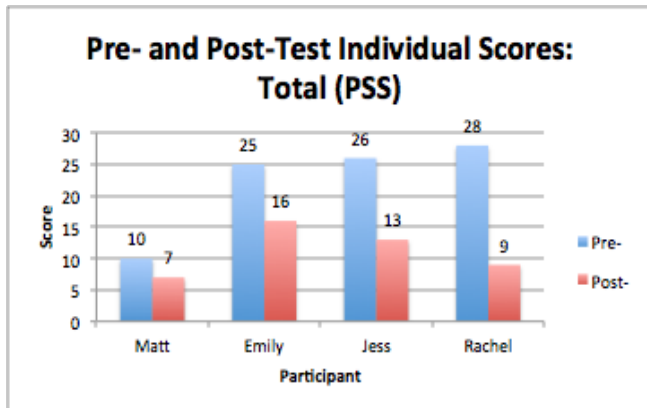


Figure 8

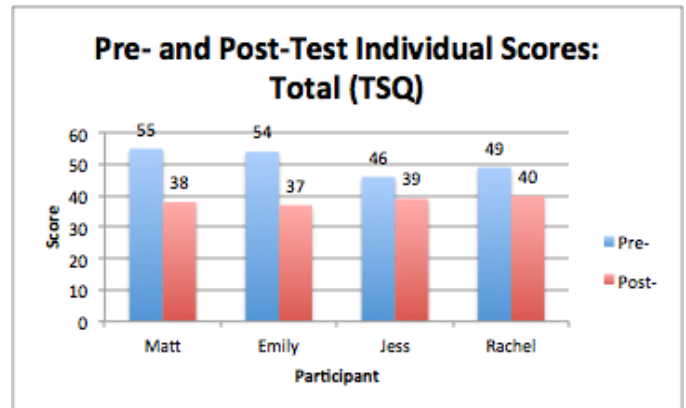


Figure 9

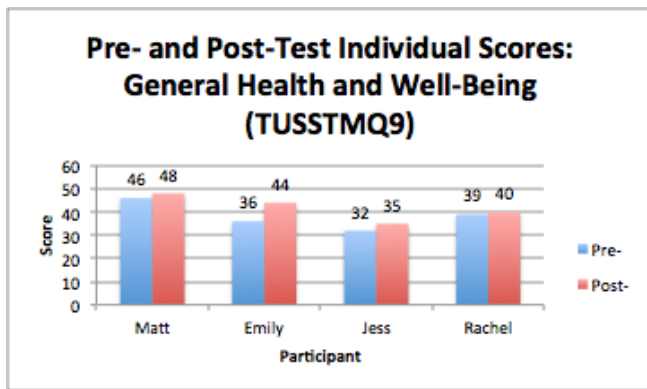


Figure 10

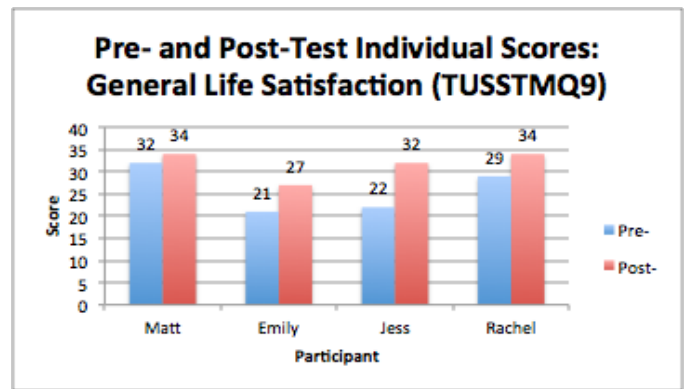


Figure 11

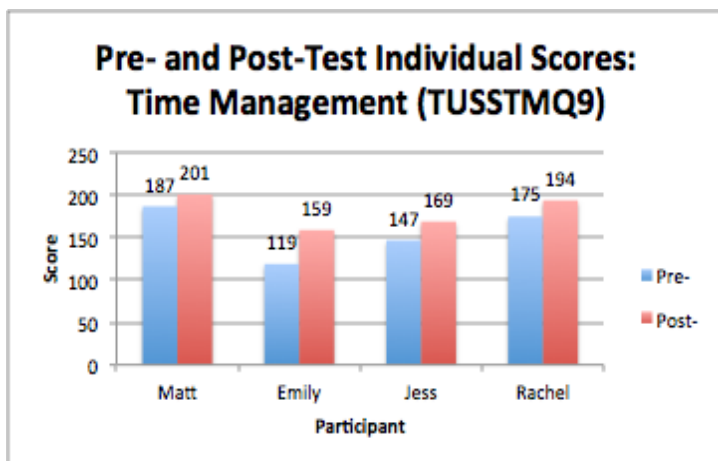


Table 1

Difference between pre- and post-test scores of each participant for the four measures

	Matt	Emily	Jess	Rachel	Average
FFMQ - Total	12.95%	41.84%	33.65%	52.48%	33.26%
PSS	-30.0%	-36.0%	-50.0%	-67.86%	-49.44%
TSQ	-30.91%	-31.48%	-15.22%	-18.37%	-24.51%
TUSSTMQ9 – Time Management	7.49%	33.61%	14.97%	10.86%	15.13%

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