

DOI: 10.15804/tner.2023.71.1.16

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Promoting the Development of Resilience in University Teachers Through the Practice of Mindfulness

Abstract

This article describes the results of a longitudinal study on the effects of the regular, everyday practice of at least 20-minute-long mindfulness meditation sessions on coping with stressful situations among academic staff. University teachers were selected with respect to the high stress of their occupation and their frequent statements of difficulties with responding adequately to stress arising from the necessity of communicating with students, colleagues and family members every day. They stated that they could not cope adequately and had problems concentrating on other activities such as writing, giving lectures and attending work meetings. At the beginning of the study, the academic staff were offered mindfulness meditation therapy training. The study took place from 2002 to 2020. A total of 124 university teachers were monitored. The research group consisted of 97 teachers at Czech universities (53 men and 44 women) and 27 teachers at Slovak universities (14 men and 13 women). The study's main objective was to identify the effect of an everyday 20-minute mindfulness practice, which 113 participants performed in the morning and 11 in the evening, on the development of their psychological resilience for coping

with stressful situations when communicating with colleagues, students and family members. The data were obtained from semi-structured interviews. The statements were recorded four times a year for 19 years. A total of 9,424 interviews were performed. The standard content analysis method was applied in case studies to analyse and interpret the data. The participants subjectively reported considerably calmer responses in their communication with students and colleagues during important meetings and registered an improved work performance, as they were not stressed about unsuccessful meetings. The study revealed that the regular practice of mindfulness, promoting concentration, immersion and performance, plays a positive role. The phenomenon of complete immersion in a performed activity is described as “flow” in the specialised literature.

Keywords: *resilience, protective factors, practice of mindfulness, flow*

Introduction

This article points out that the participants in this study who engaged at least once a day in a 20-minute mindfulness practice, whether in the morning or evening, got the possibility to develop their personal resilience. We focused on university students who later became academic workers either at universities or at various companies and institutions, both state-run and private. The longitudinal study was implemented over 19 years. The studied population of university students (and later university teachers) had one common problem: Their communication was disturbed within their primary families. Their families were also characterised by low solidarity among their members and by fathers who were highly dominant in resolving family issues. Despite the similarities among their primary families, the participants showed quite different reactions to stress in their adult lives, but their reactions were inadequate, for the most part. We decided to study such a specific group for several reasons. We found this group interesting for their lack of an important protective factor, resilience (coming from the acceptance and warmth of the family). The group showed a high inclination to cooperate after being offered mindfulness training. Another reason was that the group was subjected to a great deal of long-term stress. As students and later as academic workers, the participants had to perform very well in their studies, in their scientific work, when performing in education, and as part of team cooperation.

Issue of Research

Psychological Resilience and Protective Factors Resilience

Personality resilience refers to the ability of an individual to manifest a positive adaptation despite significant sources of stress. Resilience can also be viewed as a specific counterpart to vulnerability. Resilience is the process of adapting well to and surviving either a long-lasting, problematic period, a sudden period of risk after several years of a happy life, or adapting well to a permanent, negative condition. Our study focused on the promotion of resilience through the practice of mindfulness. The definitions of resilience are not consistent. In this study, we decided to lean towards the definition by Luthar et al. (2006), who defined resilience as a lifelong process through which an individual accomplishes a positive adaptation while being exposed to adverse circumstances. Subsequently, we emphasise the process of resilience as an ability and an outcome of successful adaptation by an individual, despite adverse or even life-threatening conditions (Melillo et al., 2001).

Research Focus

Mindful Meditation

Mindful meditation requires attention to breathing, a focus on air flowing “in and out”. When our attention is concentrated in this way, we can observe thoughts being formed and gradually accept them (Puig, 2013). We can slowly understand that thoughts and feelings (both pleasant and unpleasant) pass away, come and go and that it is up to us to decide whether we will act and decide based on those thoughts and feelings. Mindfulness means “to observe without criticising” and to feel empathy with oneself. Mindfulness can also help with obtaining control over one’s own life. It may bring a long-lasting change in mood. Scientific research and studies show that mindfulness not only prevents depression but also influences brain activity related to everyday stress, irritation and anxiety. Applying mindfulness to such states of anxiety involves the individual allowing the anxiety to become the object of non-judging attention.

Research Methodology

General Background of the Research

Study Procedure

Ungar (2006; 2004; 2008) and Schoon (2006) describe a qualitative approach as especially suitable for studying personality resilience and protective factors due to the following reasons: This type of study examines processes that have yet to be described and the kinds of states that come to the surface when processing specific case studies, and it also helps describe the contextual specificity of the issue and the rich spectrum of the life stories of the participants. For those reasons, we chose a *qualitative longitudinal research approach*.

The study group participants first went through introductory interviews based on which a group of participants with a common denominator was selected – they were defined by problematic areas in their primary family in particular. The most frequently-occurring problematic moments in the primary families of the participants were: Distinctly authoritarian, destructively critical behaviour towards children, namely by the father, accentuating the children's failure and downplaying their success. There was a lack of verbal communication and time spent together among family members. There was a lack of emotional support from parents towards the participant or a lack of calm in stressful situations. The parents did not show interest in the emotional life of the child. The participants felt lonely when they were children. Parenting was performed in the form of orders and bans. When orders were not obeyed, punishment followed. Parents often refused to engage in a dialogue with the participant and did not want to listen to his or her opinions.

The selected group of persons then passed an eight-week mindfulness training. Next, all participants continued their mindfulness practice for 20 minutes at least once a day. The 20-minute practice either occurred in the evening (113 participants) or in the morning (11 participants). Semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasted for at least an hour with each participant four times a year for 19 years. All interviews were recorded, processed as case studies, and analysed using the ATLAS.ti.7 program.

Research Objectives

The first objective was to determine how the participants' behaviour, experiences and thinking changed over time, particularly in difficult situations. These could be, for example, situations where performance was expected from the participants and common meetings with colleagues where the participants struggled with

managing communication conflicts, a high workload, and a highly competitive environment. At the beginning of the study, participants' reactions in emotionally charged situations were subjectively characterised by them as a lack of self-control, low self-confidence in managing the problem, and they perceived conflicts as catastrophic events that were unsolvable.

The second objective was to record whether and how the participants perceived the effect of regular mindfulness practice on their experiences of difficult situations.

Research Sample

The Research Group

The study included a total of 124 participants (53 men and 44 women), of which 97 were from the Czech Republic and 27 were from Slovakia (Tables 1 and 2). The youngest participant in the group was 23 years old, and the oldest was 31 years old at the beginning of the study (2002).

Table 1. Research Group Participants from CZ and SR

State	Men	Women	Total number of participants	Research duration in years
Czech Republic	53	44	97	19
Slovakia	14	13	27	19
Total	67	57	124	19

Table 2. Participants – University Students (CZ, SR) and Faculties at the Time of Joining the Research

Faculty	Czech Republic	SR	Total
Technology	27	1	28
Arts	46	1	47
Economy	21	2	23
Law	3	4	7
Medical	0	19	19
Total	97	27	124

Most Czech participants continued working in science and research institutions after their studies. They worked in both the state-run and private sectors. Their most frequently-stated hobbies included reading specialised literature and travelling.

The Slovak participants were mostly state employees and four were from the private sector (they also worked for the academic sector). Like the Czech group, they mostly mentioned reading literature (unspecified as to type) and travelling as their hobbies.

Instruments and Procedures

Data Collection and Analysis

An interview is not just a method for collecting research data but also has the character of an intervention. At the beginning of the session, trust was established, and consent to recording the interview was obtained. Among the kinds of in-depth interviews, we chose the *semi-structured interview*. It requires more demanding technical preparation. A strategy that was binding for the researcher was created. The core of the interview was defined. Several additional meaningful topics and questions followed the core questions. We used the inquiry method, which involves clarifying and explaining the participant's answers. Four meetings per year (every three months) were organised with each participant for the in-depth interview. The shortest interview lasted an hour and a half. The average time was two hours. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The "Transcriber" program was also used.

The method we used for obtaining research data –semi-structured interviews – was based on a prepared list of topics. As mentioned above, four meetings per year (every three months) were organised with each participant for the in-depth interview. A total of 9,424 interviews were performed with 124 participants for 19 years. We prepared a general list of questions used as an aid during the interviews.

The topics concerned the following areas:

The experienced stressful situation

The initial reaction to the situation and its manifestations in behaviour

The solution and coping with stress

Data Analysis

Methods Used in the Analysis of the Research Material

Case Study

We chose this format to understand the method each participant used to cope with the communication issues they experienced with colleagues, students, and family

members, and subsequently with problems caused by their own inappropriate communication (escaping communication situations, yelling, expressing negative emotions), especially in important life situations transpiring during the study (19 years).

The case studies helped us reveal the causal chains in the occurrences and interactions among the risk factors and the protective factors in the participants' reactions to performance situations. The individual relations described by the participants may not have appeared to be important, but even the smallest details in the participants' lives contributed to the outcome of their effect after the study had been underway for several years.

Research Results

Risk Factors and Their Effect on the Behaviour of Participants

The most frequent risk factors that disrupted the participants' resilience included performance situations. Among performance situations, the participants emphasised important meetings with colleagues and superiors to be the most problematic or risky in terms of disrupting their personality resilience. In several cases, they mentioned a problem in communication with students when they wanted to assert their intentions despite the student holding a different opinion. The participants repeatedly stated throughout the study that they resolved conflicts according to their own tendencies to assess the competencies of the partner with whom they were communicating. A communication partner who was weak in communication was perceived as submissive, and the participants would often be critical of or even behave destructively toward such communication partners. The participants added the following comments: "He should not have let me do that", "She should have defended herself", or "He wanted to be treated that way...". On the other hand, the participants describe their own fear of communicating with formal authorities. They were not able to define the origin of the fear. For instance, various participants mentioned several times that they thought the fear came from worrying about the loss of security they would undergo if they opposed an authority (even in a constructive way).

Protective Factors and Their Effect on the Behaviour of Participants

Mindful meditation practice was one of the many protective factors that all participants reported. All participants practised mindful meditation every day, in the morning or the evening, for at least 20 minutes (113 participants meditated in the evening and 11 in the morning). After practising for some time, the participants

(all of them) described a perceived improvement in their reactions regarding their own problematic situations: Remaining calm during problematic meetings, fewer situations in which they expressed negative emotions or aggressive tendencies, for example, in the form of humiliating, destructive criticism. The participants also better handled various expressions of critical opinions from others about their personalities during work meetings. They stayed emotionally stable in their expressions and neither escaped the situation nor leaned towards negative emotions (yelling, anger, restlessness).

Most Frequent Changes in Behaviour Perceived by Participants throughout the Study

The changes in the participants' behaviour were gradual and slow, yet very significant. For instance, they often assessed whether winning a negotiation or achieving a compromise and calming a disputed situation was important for them. They felt fewer negative emotions during meetings and experienced fewer critical expressions in the meetings. All of the changes then went on to influence their other reactions to stressful moments as a form of feedback from others (disagreements, different opinions, inappropriate emotional expressions). However, they did not eliminate their maladaptive behaviour. Despite that, they managed to notice various beneficial changes more frequently. We mention the most common ones for illustration. For example, they stated the following:

- They created rules for coping with everyday, recurring stress (each participant had own personal system).
- With time, their self-confidence increased, which was also based on their coping with the previous difficult tasks (both personal and job-related).
- Their efforts to achieve compromise during meetings were more frequent.
- They could concentrate on their work, their studies and the interviews themselves more.
- They felt higher confidence in their own abilities – they strived to achieve the best results possible, leading to the set objective.

Discussion

The study focused on determining the effect of mindfulness practice on the development of resilience. The long-term, regular use of mindful meditation led to beneficial changes in the experiences and behaviour of the entire monitored group of participants, which could then be used as factors that were protective of their

resilience in adverse situations. Based on the longitudinal study and in compliance with the specialised literature (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Baer, 2003; Grossman et al., 2004), we described the most frequent characteristics of the evolving personality resilience in the participants: Self-efficacy, the ability to live even in uncertain conditions (living with insecurity), real self-confidence, etc.

Evaluating the level of positive change in their perceived competencies in everyday life requires a good ability for self-reflection, which varies in different people. Our findings from the implemented longitudinal study allow us to presume, to some extent, that as far as the ability of self-reflection is concerned, this ability more or less grows linearly over time, during which the individual pays attention to developing their mindfulness. However, other possible effects should be considered as well; these most likely occurred in the lives of our participants during the study and influenced them to a larger or smaller extent.

Conclusions

During the study, these adult individuals who were students and subsequently became academic workers showed the selective effect of long-lasting mindfulness practice on specific areas of their lives. It included the training in and subsequent practice of mindful meditation by all participants every day, with a duration of at least 20 minutes, during the entire study. Above all, this included the noticeable ability to use their competencies more efficiently during important meetings and in communication with formal authorities. The monitored individuals stated that they were calmer when managing their engagement in dialogue, had a greater ability to concentrate on arguments, and had a greater ability to express their intentions during communication.

However, the level of subjective inaccuracy when estimating the beneficial changes in the participants' behaviour and experiences in everyday activities and circumstances cannot be completely verified with regard to the character of the study.

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