

Mindfulness can help PhD students shift from surviving to thriving

November 26 2018, by Karen Barry, Emma Warnecke And Megan Woods



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Undertaking a Ph.D. can be very stressful, due to a range of [challenges](#). These include having to develop discipline expertise as well as generic skills (such as academic writing and maintaining motivation) during a largely solo pursuit.

Concern has been growing about the prevalence of mental health issues (such as depression and anxiety) among Ph.D. candidates. A [survey](#) of more than 2,000 graduate research students from 26 countries published this year found they were six times as likely to experience depression or anxiety as the general population.

A [study](#) of Ph.D. students in the United States showed that of those who identified as experiencing depression or anxiety, 84% did not seek help from university support services. Perhaps, then, the best way to help Ph.D. candidates is to give them the skills and strategies to manage their stress.

Earlier this month, we published a [study](#) in the *[Journal of American College Health](#)*. It provides evidence that practising [mindfulness](#) can help reduce stress, improve levels of depression and anxiety, and enhance feelings of hope, optimism, resilience and self-efficacy about completing a Ph.D.

How mindfulness can help

In recent years, [mindfulness](#) has become increasingly popular as a method for managing feelings of stress and distress.

Mindfulness research has exploded in the past five years. A medline (the major medical literature search engine) keyword search on the topic today reveals 5,815 search results, with more than 70% of these in the last five years. The quality of this research is also increasing, with 584 systematic reviews (the strongest level of evidence that combines lots of similar studies) included in these results.

Our research is the first to examine the psychological impacts of mindfulness in a controlled trial with Ph.D. students. It followed the [findings](#) of a randomised controlled trial conducted at our institution by

Emma Warnecke.

Her study showed that a guided mindfulness [practice](#) could significantly decrease perceived stress and anxiety among 66 undergraduate medical students. This is a relatively small study, but it used the gold standard design of a randomised controlled trial, and showed statistically and clinically significant results.

Our new study used the same [guided mindfulness practice](#) over an eight-week period as a daily intervention in a randomised control trial design. More than 80 students at our university volunteered to take part, and were randomly allocated to a control or intervention group.

How we measured stress

Psychological distress was measured before and after the eight-week trial period using the [perceived stress scale](#) (PSS) and the [Depression, Anxiety and Stress scale](#) (DASS).

We also measured levels of [psychological capital](#), which is a positive psychological state of development composed of four psychological resources: feelings of hope, optimism, resilience, and self-efficacy.

Psychological capital was originally developed in the field of positive organisational behaviour, and previous research has primarily explored how psychological capital influences workplace attitudes, behaviours and performance. In recent years, scholars have begun to explore how it may also influence educational performance.

Pre- and post-intervention surveys collected from both groups provided data on the stress candidates experienced, how it affected their studies, the strategies they used to manage things that stressed them out, and their experiences of completing the intervention. Some 14 members of

the intervention group also volunteered to be interviewed about their experiences.

For some candidates, mindfulness practice provided a period of peace and calm which gave them a time to relax, regroup, and recharge their batteries. For others, it provided an opportunity to deal with negative feelings and then shake them off. Some said the practice gave them more clarity and focus, new ways to deal with challenges, or enabled more productive work.

Several candidates felt increased confidence in their ability to complete their Ph.D., for example by giving them a tool to deal with challenging times. Candidates also reported that completing the practice regularly had its own particular benefits, such as by helping them become more disciplined and structured in their habits.

Room for improvement

The [study](#) showed completing the mindfulness practice significantly reduced candidates' reported levels of depression and improved their psychological capital. Perhaps just as importantly, these effects occurred even though study participants actually practised the mindfulness meditation much less often than requested.

The [intervention group](#) was asked to complete the 30-minute mindfulness intervention daily, a total of 56 practices over eight weeks. But the average number of sessions completed was 35.

An even greater effect may be possible if students practised more often. Alternatively, a daily practice may not be required in participants who are used to learning new complex skills so often. Or, shorter practices (such as 5-10 minutes) could be used with similar effect, such as those available through apps such as [smiling mind](#).

Placing attention not only on the academic but also the psychological aspects of learning is key to successful outcomes and well-being. Self-help strategies such as mindfulness now have a proven place for supporting the Ph.D. journey. Integration of these approaches with peer support programs such as the [Write Smarter Feel Better](#) program developed by the CRC for Mental Health provides a win-win to reduce loneliness on the journey to a Ph.D., and turn surviving into thriving.

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