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Teaching College Foster Youth How to Use Mindfulness to Cope With Stress

Jiovana X. Vallejan Lugo

California State University, Monterey Bay

A Capstone Project for the Bachelor of Arts in Human Development and Family Studies

Introduction

Research has found that all foster youth face some sort of trauma at least once in their life, leading them to experience mental stress, emotion dysregulation, and depression during the transition to adulthood (Valdez, Bailey, Santuzzi, & Lilly, 2014). Many of the youth are not aware of the effects of stress on mental and physical well-being and how to cope with the stress they are feeling. Also, many of them are not aware of their mental state or how to cope with the stress they are feeling. College youth are not only affected mentally by stress, but also physically. They face a lack of sleep, body clenching, tiredness, weakened immune system, with the effects varying with the individual. According to a meta-analysis based on mental health interventions done at several universities, “highly publicized reports have revealed that approximately half of university students report moderate levels of stress-related mental health concerns including anxiety and depression. Other research reveals that university health services are only providing services to a small percentage of these students” (Regehr, Glancy, & Pitts, 2013). Because of the minimal amount of resources for coping with mental health concerns such as stress, mindfulness training may be one inexpensive and accessible intervention that can positively impact this area.

The project was a one-day Mindfulness workshop that informed students about stress factors, how to identify them, and how to use mindfulness strategies to cope with the stress. The project involved a collaboration with Hartnell Community College’s Guardians Scholars Program, a support program that gives current and former foster youth access to resources, provides academic support and personal development, helps them transition to adulthood and the working world.

Needs Statement

College youth are prone to high levels of stress due to their demanding college environment. They face the pressures of school work and demands of study time. Some have to juggle work, study, financial struggles, and socializing. It has been found that almost 50% of college youth have experienced anxiety, depression, and high levels of stress (Regehr, Glancy, & Pitts, 2013). Their stress levels change over time depending on the semester. In a recent 2019 New York Times article, Brad Wolverton warned that mental health issues such as depression and anxiety have become an increasing problem. A 2018 health report by the American College Health Association revealed that 60 percent of students struggle with anxiety and over 40 percent of college students felt depressed to the point that they were not able to function (Wolverton, 2019). Also, the Center for Collegiate Mental Health has found that between the years 2005 and 2015 the number of students visiting college counseling centers increased by more than 30 percent (Wolverton, 2019). Colleges have been trying to increase the resources available to students over the years but there are higher demands for programs. Research state that “Colleges have helped drive demand for mental health services, pouring money into education and training to help students identify problems and learn where to turn for help. But critics say many colleges have not adequately prepared for the increasing demand, leaving some students frustrated.” (Wolverton, 2019) . Mental health is a growing college issue that needs to be addressed. Among those students that face this mental health issue are foster youth.

College foster youth have even higher stress levels because of the challenging circumstances of being in the foster care system. At the age of 18 foster youth not only have to face difficulties that come with foster care, but also face the struggles of a college student and transitioning to adulthood. In some states, youth that reach age 18-19 lose the protection of foster care. They are on their own in figuring out how to find a job, a home, and attaining a higher

education (Lougheed, 2018; Okpych, 2012). High stress levels are related to circumstances such as formerly coming from an environment where they have mental and behavioral challenges, lower family support, that influence ongoing stress (Raposa, Hammen, Brennan, Callaghan, & Najman, 2014). As some transition into higher education they have higher expectations for themselves for higher education (Gray, 2018). All these circumstances create an imbalance in their stress levels and many lack the knowledge of how to cope with its negative effects.

College foster youth tend to have low completion of college and research has linked it to “inadequate social supports and mental and behavioral health challenges, in addition to academic struggles” (Gray, 2018). Since former foster youth in college have not been highly researched there is a minimum amount of information on the graduation. According to research conducted on a sample of 521 students aged 21 only 30% of the group had completed a minimum of 1 year in college in comparison to a sample done on a national sample with a 53% completion (Dworsky & Perez, 2010). Having a program that provides a personal support intervention for former foster youth such as mindfulness can have a positive effect. It enables former foster students to deal with stress and minimize their effects, positively influencing their mental wellbeing and academic standing. Through mindfulness training, many college foster youth can have a way of coping and reducing stress, benefitting both their mental and physical wellbeing.

Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) has been presented in healthcare since the year 1979. It was first introduced by Jon Kabat-Zinn, professor at the University of Massachusetts Medical School who focused his work on stress reduction through mindfulness techniques, (Kabat-Zinn J, & Gazella KA 2005). He studied the effects of mindfulness on physical pain and mental health difficulties. Mindfulness is defined as being aware of the state of mind and the body, “paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally” (Archer, 2016). Mindfulness training promotes body awareness, healthy relationships, self-

regulation, and being aware of the present. Awareness is considered being able to feel all the human experiences in its natural form and realizing feelings, emotions, and sensations (Archer, 2016). In awareness one does not think of why, what it could be, or effects of actions. The reason behind mindfulness is to reduce sorrow, grief, depression, anxiety, and any other mental difficulties, bringing a more positive outlook to what is presently with you and around you. Mindfulness can be practiced in a variety of ways and does not only pertain to one method like meditation. It can be practiced based on the participant's interest. Some choose to do Yoga, meditation, art therapy, and small actions such as noticing the environment around you, your body, and many more.

MBSR training has been found to help adults cope with distress, mental disorders, physical disabilities, and stress in everyday life (Grossman, 2004). Research using MBSR interventions have been done on university students and have come out with results of lower symptoms of anxiety and depression (Bamber, Schneider, 2015; Gray, Font, Unrau, Dawson, 2018; Regehr, Glancy, Pitts, 2013) Research has been done in patients ranging from chronic illness, university students, foster university students, and foster youth in general using mindfulness as an approach. . Research has found that at risk foster youth benefit from these support programs. In one study they lowered their stress levels and reported having better sleep (Gray, Font, Unrau, Dawson, 2018). Mindfulness stress reduction programs help build youth's resilience and mental health and have a positive impact on their academics.

The constant increase of mental health problems in college students, in particular former foster college students, indicate the need for mindfulness programs to help confront stress that can become challenging to some students. In order to expand their knowledge on mindfulness and use mindfulness techniques to identify and combat stress, I presented a 1 day mindfulness

and stress workshop to former foster college students at Hartnell College's Guardian Scholars program.

Theory and Development Application

Erikson claims that everyone goes through different psychosocial stages of development. His theory covers 8 stages of development infancy through older adults. Erikson's stages that pertain to the group studied in this project is intimacy vs. isolation that focuses on ages 19-40. During adolescence and early adulthood, according to Erikson's psychosocial development theory, young emergent adults face the challenges of seeking acceptance from others. Young adults feel isolated if they don't receive acceptance and sometimes feel a sense of failure in these circumstances (Svetina, 2014). Many are trying to balance relationships, school, the transition to adulthood, and social expectations. This furthermore affects the way they feel and cope with the events that they are facing. This shows that youth at the age of 18 and beyond are recipients that can benefit from mindfulness to cope through the negative feelings that they are experiencing. Mindfulness can balance stress that comes with transitional changes, social acceptance, emotional, self-awareness, and relationships.

A 2012 article on interventions to relieve stress for university students, discussed that mindfulness-based reduction practices have given significant proof that it has helped reduce stress in college students (Regehr, 2013). On other research it has been found that it helps promote resilience in individuals and build healthy relationships (Lougheed, 2018). Increasing resiliency strengthens coping abilities. Several studies have been done on young adults participating in mindfulness research and have proven to have positive discoveries.

Consideration of Diversity

The course of this project took place in Hartnell College located in Salinas California. According to “Community College Review,” Hartnell College is predominantly Hispanic/Latino 71%, 13% White, 4% Asian, 2% African American, 2% of two or more races, and 7% of unknown races. The ethnic groups that I observed and worked with in my project were Hispanic and White college students.

According to Svтина (2014) life tragedies do not discriminate who it attacks. The foster care system is filled with children and adolescents that come from different backgrounds and circumstances. Some come from situations in which they are adopted, others are on their own, and some are establishing back with their original families. Foster care works with a variation of ethnic backgrounds so there are different people that will benefit from this workshop. In terms of age, the program serves mainly ages 18 to 25. The Guardian Scholars program is geared toward aged out foster youth that are in college, no matter their background, ethnicity, gender, or any characteristic they pertain. Although the program is directed towards age out foster youth, it is a program that can be applied with a variety of populations. This population is not highly researched, particularly foster youth that pursue college and it is greatly needed to help them become successful in their college trajectory.

Learning Outcomes

I presented a 30 minute workshop on mindfulness to recipients of Hartnell Guardian Scholars. I had three learning outcomes for the workshop.

1. Identify one effect of stress on mental or physical well being
2. Apply one mindfulness technique to a stressful situation
3. Identify one sign of stress in themselves or others.

Methods

Participants

The participants of the project were recipients of the Hartnell College Guardian Scholars program for foster youth, located in Salinas, California. They were current college students attending Hartnell College trying to achieve either their associate degree or transfer to a 4 year university. I had a total of 5 participants in the project that attended and heard the presentation. The age range of the students were 21 to 27 years. Three students were 21 years, one student was 22 years, and one student was 27 years. Also, three students were female and two were male. Three students were from a Hispanic ethnic background and two were from a White ethnic background.

Procedures and Materials

The Guardian Scholars program gives students access to their room and resources at any time during their day from 8 am to 5 pm. Due to the schedules of the college students, a set timing for the workshop that worked for all was not possible. For this reason, I decided to administer an open mindfulness workshop on two days to try and recruit as many participants. Each day had the same content and activities. One day the open workshop hours were from 11:30 am to 4 pm and the second day it was from 10 am to 3:00 pm. It was agreed that I would conduct the presentations as students showed up. Depending on the number of students that came in, I either presented individually or in a group of two. Prior to having the mindfulness workshop, the program administrator posted the invitation for the presentation in the Guardian Scholar's social media for students to see. The program administration invited them the week before in person as well.

In order to prepare for the workshop, I created a PowerPoint set that contained the information defining stress, the effects of stress on mental and physical well-being, the definition

of mindfulness, and mindfulness techniques that they could apply when feeling stressed. See Appendix A. I also prepared grapes and pizza for one of mindfulness activity techniques introduced. Due to the unavailability of a projector, the power point was printed out on paper for the participants to follow as it was presented orally.

Workshop Days

The first mindfulness workshop was conducted on Monday, October 22, 2019. On the first day, two separate one on one presentations were given. The first presentation was given at 12:30 pm and the second at 2:45pm. On the second day October 23rd, I presented twice, one to a group of two participants and one with a single participant. The first was given at 11:00 am and the second at 1:30 pm. I started by introducing them the topic of mindfulness and stress. I asked about their familiarity with mindfulness and then followed with a question about their experiences with stress. I made it an open conversation where the participants were able to speak freely, state, and discuss their opinions. After hearing their experiences with stress, I moved on to the presentations and had them follow along with their presentation sheets.

I introduced the meaning of stress and the statistics of college students facing stress. I discussed the effects of stress both mental and physical. I gave examples of some behaviors we do when we are under stress such as clenching fists, teeth, binge eating, and thinking negative thoughts. I gave them my personal experience and I followed with a question about any familiarity with these causes themselves. The participants explained how they have seen these effects in themselves. I gave them a scenario of a stressful situation of a college student and mentioned some of the effects the student was experiencing. I asked them to determine any extra mental or physical effects that I did not mention. After, I introduced mindfulness and its

meaning. I went over how it can be used to cope with stress. It was followed up by 5 different mindfulness techniques. I went over one by one giving and showing examples. Explained to them the “What if? To What is” practice, take 5 breathing exercise using their 5 fingers and hand sensations, mindful eating using food that was brought, taking a walk and capturing the moment, and doing what you love. I took note of their reactions to the activities and asked how they felt after completing each.

At the end of the presentation, I followed with a survey of 4 questions and 1 scenario on identifying stress, effects, and mindfulness techniques. See appendix B. The first two questions were relevant to the scenario and the third and fourth were opinion based.

Results

Learning Outcome 1

Learning Outcome 1 was that students would be able to identify one effect of stress on mental and physical well-being. This learning outcome was assessed through the survey question “Identify one mental or physical effect of stressful situation” given to answer about the scenario written. The scenario was “Every day you have a really hard time staying awake in your classes. Teachers keep talking to you, but you don’t want to say you watch your baby sister till late while your mom works. It is hard for you to get much sleep because she is sick. You don’t want to fail or complain.” This learning outcome was fully met because in the first survey question the students were able to identify one mental or physical effect of stress analyzing the scenario given. All of the participants answered at least one effect, “lack of sleep, low energy levels, unable to pay attention, and tired.” See Table 1.

Learning Outcome 2

Learning Outcome 2 was that participants were able to apply mindfulness techniques to different stressful situations. Using the scenario mentioned above, the participants were able to

identify one mindful technique that they could apply to the hypothetical situation given in the survey. See Appendix B. See Table 1. They were asked “What mindfulness technique can you do to deal with the stress you are feeling?” Three students answered breathing exercises, take 5 method, 1 going for a walk and self-care, and 2 said talking to the teacher. Three mentioned mindfulness techniques, breathing being the highest of all responses. This outcome was partially met because 2 of the 5 participants gave more logical responses to help in the stressful scenario, such as speaking to the teacher about the situation instead of fully answering with a mindful technique.

Although they did not fully answer with a mindfulness technique they did mention them on the last question given “What mindfulness technique they would you like to try?” They did show they were aware of mindful techniques when they answered it. See Table 1. Two answers were taking a walk, 2 were breathing techniques, 1 was mindful eating, 1 was listening to music, and 1 taking being aware of the moment.

Learning Outcome 3

Learning outcome 3 was that, Participants would be able to identify signs of stress in themselves or others. Answering the question “Can you identify one sign of stress in yourself?” showed that they were able to identify stress in themselves. The highest response was lack of sleep, followed by anxiety, depression, crying, isolating, substance use, and moody which were effects mentioned in the presentation. See Table 1. See Appendix A. This revealed that the outcome 2 was fully met, 5 of 5 students wrote an effect from the examples that were mentioned in the workshop.

Discussion

Success

I believe the project was successful in bringing the information of how mindfulness can be beneficial to deal with stress. The recipients of the project fell under Erikson's psychosocial theory, through the stages intimacy vs isolation in which they were able to understand balancing relationship, career, and social aspects of their life. As they try to balance life, stress emerges. They displayed they were under this stage and the content fit in this phase. Another of my success was that I was able to communicate freely with the students and have open conversations with them. As we had open conversations about mindfulness and the techniques, I was able to know that they understood the state they were in and the concept of mindfulness. Their responses and receptiveness to the workshop showed they knew how to respond to stress and use mindfulness to cope with it. One of my last success was the method of delivering the information not having a screen to follow gave more freedom for the students to participate in the conversations instead of just hearing me and watching the screen. It made them more focused on what I was presenting.

Limitation

A small sample of participants was one of my limitations. I believe that if I had a bigger sample in the workshop presentations, I could have had more results to determine the effectiveness of the workshop. I would have been able to have a bigger group to discuss with each other their points of view and thoughts on the mindfulness techniques. I would work on recruiting in a future workshop. A second limitation was the content given. I could have used more examples or scenarios that would help practice mindfulness techniques and define it. If the project is done again I would also have the participants give examples themselves. Also I would

incorporate more in the survey such as asking and defining mindfulness to know if they understood the meaning and benefits.

Diversity

The diversity aspect of this project was met because the target group was part of my workshop. All the participants included were college students and they were former foster youth. This project could be applied to any person, whether they are college students or other adults because stress does not only exist in foster youth, but in anybody from any background.

A factor that would have benefited in this workshop could have been a follow up to see if students were actually using these mindfulness techniques and whether they were making a difference in coping with stress. This could have been done through an online survey or checkup to determine the effectiveness in the long run. Overall, the students seemed to understand the effects that stress has on them and the concept of mindfulness to cope with it.

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Table 1

Responses to survey

Every day you have a really hard time staying awake in your classes. Teachers keep talking to you, but you don't want to say you watch your baby sister till late while your mom works. It is hard for you to get much sleep because she is sick. You don't want to fail or complain.					
Question	(participant)	#2	#3	#4	#5
	#1 Age 22	Age21	Age 27	Age 21	Age 21
Identify one physical or mental effect of the stressful situation?	Not focusing,not having energy	Lack of sleep	Hard to focus, not able to pay attention	Lack of sleep	Tired
What mindfulness technique can you do to deal with the stress you are feeling?	Breathing in and out, going for a walk	Self care-try to get plenty of sleep, talk to teacher	Talk to the class teacher to let you be late to sleep more until little sister is better	Take 5, breathing technique	Take 5, breathing technique
Can you identify one sign of stress in yourself?	Lack of sleep	Loss of sleep,	Crying or wanting to	Moody	Using substances

		anxiety, depression, eating habits	hide, remove self from situation or people		such as alcohol
What mindfulness technique would you try?	Going for a walk, breathing techniques	Mindful eating, breathing exercise Take 5	Blasting loud music focus in the moment	Taking a walk	Taking a moment to hear what is around

PowerPoint given and presented in workshop



Using Mindfulness to Help With Stress

Presented by: Jiovana Vallejan

Why yes, I am a bit stressed.




Why do you ask?

Stress

What is stress?

"Hey are you getting any sleep you looked stressed out is everything ok?"
 Me:







What makes you think that?

Stress is your body's way of responding to any kind of demand or threat. When you sense danger—whether it's real or imagined—the body's defenses kick into high gear in a rapid, automatic process known as the "fight-or-flight" reaction or the "stress response."

How it affects your wellbeing


Physical Wellbeing	Emotional	Mental Health
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of sleep • Digestive problems • Pain of any kind • Tired • Eating more/less • Lead to use of alcohol/drugs • Weak immune system • Many more.... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship with family, friends. • Social life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety • Depression • Moody • Memory problems • Poor judgement • Negative thoughts • Not able to concentrate • Feeling overwhelmed

What do we usually do under stress?

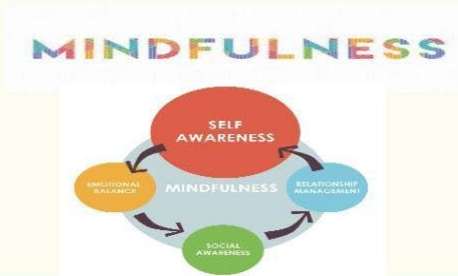





What Is Mindfulness?

"Mindfulness is the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we're doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around us."



How can we use it help with stress?



What if?

To

What is?

State of Mind

What if this happens?
 What if I don't get that job?
 What if the interview doesn't go well?
 What if they don't like me?
 What if he breaks up with me?

Changing our "What ifs" to "What is"

What is here right now?
 What can I currently take care of?

Exercises

Take 5
 30 seconds

Hands

Inhale/exhale

Reground yourself
 back to the present



Taking a Walk
 Noticing what's
 around you

Sounds

People



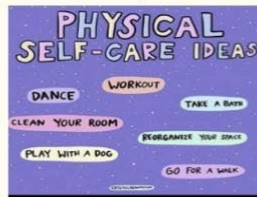
Exercises

Mindful Eating

Chewing slow to take in
 texture, smell, sensations in
 you mouth, taste



Doing what you love!



DAILY Mindfulness



ONE
 MOMENT
 AT A
 TIME



Appendix B

Survey given to measure Learning Outcomes 1, 2, and 3

Age _____ Sex _____

Every day you have a really hard time staying awake in your classes. Teachers keep talking to you, but you don't want to say you watch your baby sister till late while your mom works. It is hard for you to get much sleep because she is sick. You don't want to fail or complain.

- Identify one physical or mental effect of the stressful situation?


- What mindfulness technique can you do to deal with the stress you are feeling?

- Can you identify one sign of stress in yourself?

- What mindfulness technique would you try?

Appendix C

Capstone Presentation



Teaching College Foster Youth How to Use Mindfulness to Cope With Stress

Jiovana Vallejan
Human Development and Family Studies


What About Former Foster Youth?

- Under Researched Group
- Low Completion of College
- High demand for Mental Health Programs
- Mindfulness-Accessible Coping Method

Stress

- Stress affects physical and mental well being
- Affects daily, college, personal life

<p>Physical Wellbeing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of sleep, eating, pain, tired, substance use 	<p>Mental Health</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety, depression, mood, memory, judgement, focus, overwhelmed, negativity
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Mindfulness

- “Mindfulness is the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we’re doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what’s going on around us.”

Techniques That Help Reduce Stress

- Breathing
- Present moment
- Mindful eating
- What if to What is



Needs

- Very few programs directed towards former foster youth
- Foster youth deal with high stress levels because of
- challenging circumstances in the foster care system.
- I.e. transitioning to adulthood, college, personal circumstances
- Mental and behavioral challenges, lower support
- Low completion of college affected by low support

Theory Development

ERIK ERIKSON'S THEORY-Erikson psychologist who studied the different (psychosocial) stages of humans

<p>Intimacy vs Isolation</p>	<p>Ranges from Ages 19-40</p>
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- During adolescence and early adulthood, according to Erikson’s psychosocial development theory, young or emerging adults face the circumstance of seeking acceptance from others. Young adults feel isolated if they don’t receive acceptance and sometimes feel a sense of failure in these circumstances.
- Mindfulness helps balance social acceptance, emotional, self awareness, relationships

Workshop

Teaching and Using Mindfulness Techniques to Cope with Stress

Learning Outcomes

1. Students will identify one effect of stress on mental or physical well being
2. Students will apply one mindfulness technique to different stressful situations
3. Students will identify one sign of stress in themselves or others.

Audience

- Former Foster Youth
- College Students/Hartnell College
- Salinas, CA
- Recipients of Hartnell Guardian Scholars



Participants

- 5 Participants
- Ages 21-27
- 2 Male, 3 Females
- White and Hispanic backgrounds



Procedures and Materials

- Workshop one on one or group setting
- Powerpoint Paper Based Presentation
- Introduced Mindfulness Techniques
- Survey

Assessment Method

Written Response Survey

- Giving a scenario to identify physical and mental effects of stress
- Identify a mindfulness technique
- Identify sign of stress in themselves

Age _____ Sex _____

Every day you have a really hard time staying awake in your classes. Teachers keep talking to you, but you don't want to say you watch your baby sister till late while your mom works. It is hard for you to get much sleep because she is sick. You don't want to fail or complain.

- Identify one physical or mental effect of the stressful situation?
- What mindfulness technique can you do to deal with the stress you are feeling?
- Can you identify one sign of stress in yourself?
- What mindfulness technique would you like to try?

Results

Learning Outcome 1

Students Will Identify One Effect of Stress on Well Being.

Met 5/5
Given Scenario-identified lack of sleep, energy, focus, tiredness

Results

Learning Outcome 2

Students Will Apply Mindfulness Techniques to Different Stressful Situations

Partially Met 3/5

Question Referred to Scenario Breathing techniques/logical rational answers-conversing with teacher

Results

Learning Outcome 3

Students will identify signs of stress in themselves or others.

Met 5/5

Discussion

Success: Understood Stress & Mindfulness Identified mindfulness technique

Limitation: Small sample of participants

Diversity: Target group met

Future: Improvised survey and example

THANK YOU!