



Wellness Week 2019

Using Mindfulness to Cope with Stress of Online Learning

Author: David G. Bailey, Psy.D

For the last decade, I have been an online student pursuing both my master's and doctoral degrees. During that time, I had difficulties with managing my studies, family, work, and other priorities. In short, I wasn't prepared for the stressors I would encounter as an online student. As I met and talked with other online students, I realized I was not alone! While higher education is undoubtedly stressful, this stress is compounded in the online environment.

Research has presented mindfulness as a means for controlling stress and building improved emotional intelligence. Mindfulness was the topic I researched for my Doctoral Project and I would like to share a bit about what I learned in an effort to promote good academic skills, increase productivity in the "classroom," and improve social connections between peers and faculty.

Understanding Stress

Stress behaviors are made up of emotional responses to environmental stimuli combined with our past cognitive responses. Survey results indicated that one-fourth of Americans polled had experienced high stress and 50% of the respondents identified having experienced a major stressful event during the previous year (NPR, 2014). More specifically, online students experience a greater level of stress, which frequently results in higher academic difficulties, emotional difficulties, and greater alcohol and substance abuse. Here is some information on stress:

- Each gender interprets potential stressors differently, but women are more likely to respond differently to stress because of the differences in schema formation are responsible for the encoding, storage, and retrieval of memories (Merz & Wolf, 2017; Verma, Balhara, & Gupta, 2011).

- In a survey conducted by the American College Counseling Association, stress is one of four common factors affecting GPAs, yet only 11 percent of students discussed this with a college counselor (Gallagher, 2013).
- **46.3 percent** of college students felt completely overwhelmed by their academic responsibilities (National College Health Assessment, 2013).
- Stress is partially responsible for the existence of mood swings (e.g. anger, sadness, or loneliness), problems concentrating, unexpected changes in weight (gain or loss), and other physiological symptoms.

Managing Stress as an Online Student

Online students are presented specific and unique challenges that differ from “traditional” counterparts. Online students have to be more disciplined in how they approach their weekly assignments. They are challenged with textbook reading assignments, journal articles, watching video excerpts, and any other numerous activities. They are also challenged with having to be disciplined to completing extensive assignments over the entire week rather than sitting in a classroom and listening to a lengthy lecture. Due to competing obligations, sometimes questions are not posed early in the week and results in waiting late into the week to start lengthy assignments. With the lack of a physical instructor, online students only have email, a phone number, or instant messaging through the electronic course room to gain clarification to assignments; sometimes the communication does not result in the help needed and the student feels left unsupported, creating a great amount of unwanted stress.

Online students may choose to use certain strategies to manage the stress. These easy-to-use strategies can result in more mental clarity, renewed stamina, and increased compassion for an online instructor who may have many students. By using mindfulness components, along with good time management, the online student can find ways to “survive” online education and complete their programs.

- **Breathing exercises.** Throughout my doctoral research, awareness of one’s breath was found to be an important part of a mindfulness practice. Within a three-minute breathing space, a mindfulness practitioner centers their mind and body during or after a stressful event (Reiser, Murphy, & McCarthy, 2016). One specific method is the “4-7-8” technique, also known as “the relaxing breath”, which is perfect for regulating the stress response cycle while replenishing the oxygen in the body (Dorman, 2015). This is known to help achieve a deep state of relaxation and is used with anxiety attacks. This is how the technique works:
 - Inhale through the nose while counting to four.
 - Hold it for a count of seven.
 - Exhale through the mouth while counting to eight.
 - Repeat for at least four breath cycles.
- **Body scan.** This intervention was designed to help increase one’s awareness and attention to bodily sensations as they happen in the present moment. The body scan is useful because it increases coping skills while dealing with conflict in a positive way. Body scans help to change the relationship between stressful thoughts and specific

events. While this is typically done in 30 minutes, it can be modified to focus on a specific area (Mirams, Poliakoff, Brown, & Lloyd, 2013; Ussher et al., 2014).

- One can practice this intervention using audio tracks, video directions, or through one of many mindfulness applications. This is used to develop an awareness to feelings or thoughts associated with stress (Haydon, Alter, Hawkins, & Theado, 2019).
- Popular mobile apps, such as Headspace, Calm, or Breath, have body scan functions that can be used in a short time frame but help to identify areas of the body that are responding to higher levels of stress.

References

- American College Health Association (2014). National college health assessment (ACHA-NCHA-II). Retrieved from https://www.acha.org/documents/ncha/NCHA-II_FALL_2014_REFERENCE_GROUP_DATA_REPORT.pdf
- Dorman, E. (2015). Building teachers' social-emotional competence through mindfulness practices. *Curriculum and Teaching Dialogue*, 17(1), 103-174A. Retrieved from <https://search-proquest-com.proxy-library.ashford.edu/docview/1716696725?accountid=32521>
- Harris, A. R., Jennings, P. A., Katz, D. A., Abenavoli, R. M., & Greenberg, M. T. (2016). Promoting stress management and wellbeing in educators: outcomes of the CALM intervention. *Mindfulness*, 7(1), 143-154. doi: 10.1007/s12671-015-0451-2
- Gallagher, R.P. (2013). National Survey of Counseling Center Directors. Alexandria, VA: International Association of Counseling Services.
- Haydon, T., Alter, P., Hawkins, R., & Kendall Theado, C. (2019). "Check yourself": Mindfulness-based stress reduction for teachers of students with challenging behaviors. *Beyond Behavior*, 1-6. doi:10.1177/1074295619831620
- Merz, C. J., & Wolf, O. T. (2017). Sex differences in stress effects on emotional learning. *Journal of Neuroscience Research*, 95(1-2), 93-105.
- Mirams, L., Poliakoff, E., Brown, R. J., & Lloyd, D. M. (2013). Brief body-scan meditation practice improves somatosensory perceptual decision making. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 22(1), 348-359.
- Mirams, L., Poliakoff, E., Brown, R. J., & Lloyd, D. M. (2013). Brief body-scan meditation practice improves somatosensory perceptual decision making. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 22(1), 348-359.
- NPR. (2014). The burden of stress in America. Retrieved from http://www.rwjf.org/content/dam/farm/reports/surveys_and_polls/2014/rwjf414295.
- NPR. (2014). The burden of stress in America. Retrieved from http://www.rwjf.org/content/dam/farm/reports/surveys_and_polls/2014/rwjf414295.
- Reiser, J. E., Murphy, S. L., & McCarthy, C. J. (2016). Stress prevention and mindfulness: A psychoeducational and support group for teachers. *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 41(2), 117-139.
- Ussher, M., Spatz, A., Copland, C., Nicolaou, A., Cargill, A., Amini-Tabrizi, N., & McCracken, L. M. (2014). Immediate effects of a brief mindfulness-based body scan on patients with chronic pain. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 37(1), 127-134.
- Verma, R., Balhara, Y. P., & Gupta, C. S. (2011). Gender differences in stress response: Role of developmental and biological determinants. *Industrial Psychiatry Journal*, 20(1), 4-10. doi:10.4103/0972-6748.98407