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THE ROLE OF MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMS IN IMPROVING STUDENT WELLBEING



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UNIVERSAL INTERVENTIONS

Universal SMPH's provides a low-cost, low-resource strategy for instilling such preventative interventions.

There are three different tiers of SMHPs:

- (1) Indicated services that take a one-on-one approach between a specialist and a student.
- (2) Selective services for an identified student population that undergo a mental health intervention targeted toward their needs.
- (3) Universal SMHP encompasses a mental health promotion program applicable to all (Adi et al., 2007).

Most notably, universal SMHP's are created to **improve** mental health awareness and **prevent** the development of mental health disorders by supporting school-age children in learning to cope with stress and engaging in help-seeking behaviors (Weare & Nind, 2011).

Additionally, such interventions "can have a significant impact on the trajectory of children and young people's mental health by reducing early symptoms and increasing their ability to deal with adverse events" (Adi et al., 2007).

Universal SMHPs are enticing to schools due to the delivery approach, which allows a large number of beneficiaries, a straightforward implementation, and a less intrusive approach compared to indicated and selective services (Weare & Nind, 2011).

UNIVERSAL INTERVENTIONS

The provision of universal SMHP programs are especially important for disadvantaged communities, as they facilitate direct access to proper mental health care for all (Afifi et al., 2009).

Extending this concept, researchers have dub such interventions the ‘great equalizer’ as they provide effective entry points to mental health services (Koegel & Koegel, 2012) with their positive outcomes being maintained during eight-year follow-ups (Barrett et al., 2010).

Therefore, displaying the influential role of school-based universal SMHPs in increasing mental well-being for children, especially those in vulnerable communities living in high-stress environments with limited access to adequate mental health services (Weare & Nind, 2011).



MINDFULNESS INTERVENTIONS

Mindfulness, as defined by Bishop et al. (2004), involves people’s ability to focus their awareness, without any judgment, on the present moment while accepting the experience of any thoughts, sensations, or feelings that may arise. Many therapeutic practices use mindfulness as a treatment tool.

According to Baker et al. (2018), these include acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT; Hayes et al. 1999), dialectical behavior therapy (DBT; Linehan 1993), mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn 1982, 1990), and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT; Segal et al. 2002). The impact of mindfulness, discussed below, spans over a multitude of areas including attention for individuals with learning difficulties (ADHD & others), adaptive emotional regulation, behavior regulation, general anxiety, improved positive affect, and reduced negative affect.

ATTENTION FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

The effectiveness of mindfulness has been studied in both children and adults and has been shown to reduce ADHD symptoms.

Mindfulness-based interventions, according to a meta-analysis by Poissant et al. (2020), combining the results of 14 studies, were successful in reducing the symptoms of ADHD - showing a moderate reduction in inattention and hyperactivity. Another study also demonstrated that not only did mindfulness interventions improve ADHD symptoms, but this reduction in symptoms was still observed three to six months post treatment (Poissant et al., 2019).

BEHAVIOR REGULATION & ACADEMIC ATTAINMENT

The effects of mindfulness and mindfulness-based interventions - particularly Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) - on academic attainment (which can be considered a measure of behavior regulation) were examined in Sixth-form students (Bennett & Dorjee, 2015) and in university students (Bóo et al., 2020).

Bennett and Dorjee (2015) found a medium-sized effect difference between the training group and the control group regarding academic attainment (i.e., students in the training group were able to achieve higher grades).

Although qualitative, the study by Bóo et al. (2020) portrayed that students who took the mindfulness intervention reported that it positively influenced their academic performance.

Both studies demonstrate that mindfulness-based interventions help improve students' well-being, self-awareness, and self-regulation - leading to improved academic attainment (Bennett & Dorjee, 2015; Bóo et al., 2020).

GENERAL ANXIETY

There is no doubt that today, most adolescents are overwhelmed with stress and anxiety. Several studies have examined the impact of mindfulness on anxiety and general well-being. Chowdhury (2017) found that mindfulness based interventions actually aided in reducing feelings of anxiety even in non-clinical contexts. The experimental group received a 5-month-long mindfulness training. Results showed that, compared to the control group, the treatment group showed a significant reduction in anxiety and increased general well-being (Chowdhury, 2017).

Another study by McEvoy et al. (2017) demonstrated that mindfulness interventions, directly and indirectly, reduce anxiety. The study examined the effects of a specific mindfulness-based intervention termed Mindfulness-Based Progressive Muscle Relaxation (MB-PMR) on reducing anxiety. Results showed that the MB-PMR group, compared to controls, experienced a reduced state of anxiety. MB-PMR also resulted in present-focused attention and more reduced uncontrollability and dangerousness metacognitive beliefs, all of which led to lower anxiety (McEvoy et al., 2017).

There has also been biological evidence that demonstrates the effectiveness of mindfulness-based interventions in reducing anxiety. One such study, by Hoge et al. (2018), examined whether or not Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) is effective in the treatment of Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD).

In theory, the successful treatment of GAD would lead to a change in certain biomarkers - measured by the Area-Under-the-Curve (AUC) concentrations of the adrenocorticotrophic hormone (ACTH) and pro-inflammatory cytokines (Hoge et al., 2018). The study results showed that the participants in the MBSR group, compared to the control group, had a significant reduction in ACTH AUC, AUC concentration of inflammatory cytokines, and stress markers (Hoge et al., 2018). This study provides biological, hormonal, and immunological evidence that mindfulness-based interventions successfully reduce anxiety (Hoge et al., 2018).

ADAPTIVE EMOTIONAL REGULATION

In order to achieve adaptive emotional regulation, people must first be able to distinguish between the various existing emotions they feel. More often than not, people are more prone to develop emotional disorders when this distinction cannot be made (Gucht et al., 2019). In cases such as such, mindfulness-based interventions may help with the differentiation of emotions and thus lead to adaptive emotional regulation. Gucht et al. (2019) examined the effect of these interventions on the distinction between positive and negative emotions. Results showed a noticeable improvement in negative and positive emotion regulation, even up to 4 months post-treatment (Gucht et al., 2019). Thus mindfulness interventions play a role in adaptive emotional regulation.

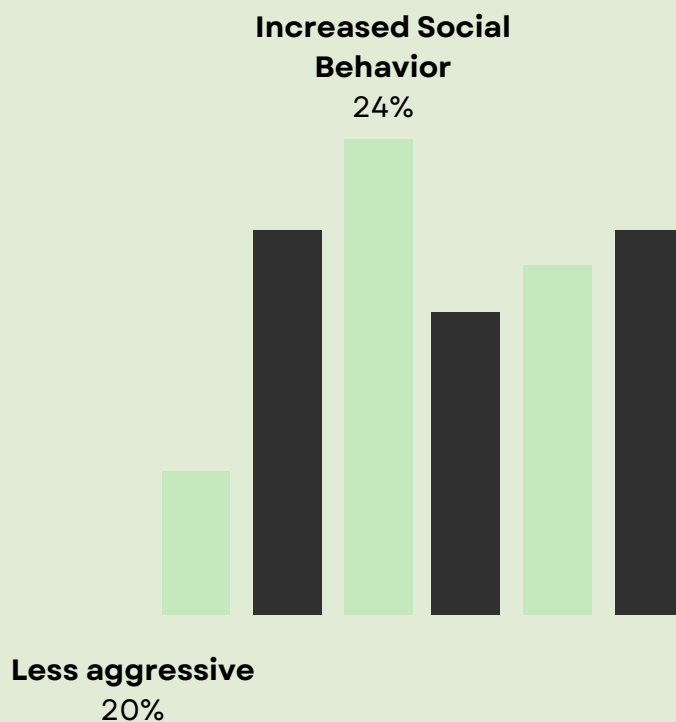
In another study by Tumminia et al. (2020), the relationship between mindfulness and positive and negative affect was examined. It was hypothesized that less negative and more positive affect was associated with increased mindfulness. The study's outcome depicted that mindfulness interventions led to less rumination, which, in turn, decreased negative affect (Tumminia et al., 2020). This suggests that mindfulness-based interventions play a role in reducing negative affect and thus increasing positive affect.

STRESS AND TRAUMA

Unfortunately, increased exposure to life stressors and trauma has proven to increase learning and behavioral issues. Yet what is promising is that such negative impacts can be largely reduced through mindfulness interventions, which decrease stress hormones such as cortisol and reduce the body's natural reaction to stress, such as blood pressure and heart rate (Engwerda, 2021).

PRIMARY OUTCOMES IN CLASSROOMS

Mindfulness interventions have been proven to have significant impacts on children's academic and social characteristics. According to Schonert-Reichl's study in 2015, students in schools that implemented mindfulness programs achieved higher math scores had 24% more social behavior and were 20% less aggressive (Gerszberg, 2020). Additionally, the benefits extend to behaviors such as improved attention span, which translates to better grades, memory, emotional and self-regulation, reduced stress levels and increased empathy (Gomstyn, n.d.; Gerszberg, 2020).



Furthermore, incorporating mindfulness programs improved not only academic, social and emotional learning but also developmental processes such as attention and focus ability and resilience (Gerszberg, 2020). Youth now are becoming equipped with ways to handle stressful situations from a very young age and experience a greater sense of wellbeing (Gomstyn, n.d.). Mindfulness interventions also led to the reduction of suspensions of students by 50% and led to the outperformance of many students upon following such programs (Gomstyn, n.d.).

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