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MINDFULNESS PRACTICE AS A MULTIDIMENSIONAL STRATEGY FOR SOCIAL WORKERS TO CULTIVATE WELLBEING, HEALING, AND COMMITMENT TO THE STRUGGLE: A PRACTICE BRIEF

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This practice brief discusses the recommendation that mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) be intentionally woven into educational and workforce development strategies that support social workers. Incorporating a regular mindfulness practice into educational requirements and professional development expectations has the potential to support the overall resilience of individual social workers, promote recovery and healing within the practice community, and bolster the efforts of the profession to dismantle systems of oppression.

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

The term mindfulness refers to a state of being innate to humans in which one's attention is purposefully focused on what can be sensed, felt, and observed in the present moment. The intention of mindfulness practice is often to cultivate openness, curiosity, non-judgement, compassion, and kindness (Kabat-Zinn & Hanh, 2009). Mindfulness in the form of meditation and contemplative practices arose thousands of years ago throughout many world religions. Mindfulness, as it is referred to in the West today, is a limited and secularized version of ancient philosophy and praxis primarily derived from Buddhism, Hinduism and Yoga (LaPlante, 2021).

In the second half of the 20th century, as Buddhist mindfulness meditation grew in popularity in the west, researchers began to study its impact on well-being. In the 1980's John Kabat-Zinn, an American medical doctor trained in Zen and Theravada meditation, who studied under Thich Nhat Hanh, developed the 8-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) curriculum (Selva, 2017).

In MBSR, the practice and application of mindfulness is taught over eight to twelve weeks during 2-hour sessions and one day long retreat. Participants practice formal and informal meditation and movement to anchor attention in breath, sound, and physical sensation while observing thoughts and emotions with non-attachment (Kabat-Zinn & Hanh, 2009). Today MBSR is the most widely researched MBI, and with mounting evidence of its benefits on health, quality of life, and social functioning (Kinman et al., 2020), there is a growing movement to explore the application of mindfulness practice in healthcare, education, and the workplace (Zhang, D. et al 2021).

Current Research and Rationale Supporting Integration of MBI in Social Work Practice

Due to large caseloads, limited resources, trauma exposure, and potential for public scrutiny, social work is described as a profession with a higher risk of burnout compared to other professional categories (Kinman, G. et. al 2020). While research exploring the integration of MBIs in social work is small (Udhaya, R. and Giftson, T., 2020), there is a growing body of evidence that supports the benefits of mindfulness practice in the field. Common outcomes of mindfulness practice include an increase of self-awareness, higher tolerance of fluctuating emotional states, and reflection on cultivating internal resources of support, which enables individuals to notice and respond to early indicators related to burnout, reduce rumination, and increase self-compassion (Hugh-Jones et al., 2018). Additionally, mindfulness has been found to support overall well-being and effectiveness by cultivating self-control; mental clarity, focus, problem-solving, creativity, adaptability and reframing (Moore & Malinowski, 2009; Chiesa et al., 2011; Ostafin & Kassman, 2012; Hanley & Garland, 2014; Lebuda et al., 2016).



Each of these components support social workers' ability to have a meaningful impact in their work. In a study observing the effect of an 8-week MBI with social workers as participants, Kinman et al. (2020) found mindfulness practice to increase emotional self-efficacy, psychological flexibility and compassion satisfaction while reducing compassion fatigue and perceived stress. Maddock et al. (2023) discovered that adapting an MBI to the unique needs of social workers through a six-week online Mindfulness-based Social Work and Self-Care (MBSWSC) program was even more effective than standard MBIs at improving stress, emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and depression. MBSWSC was also more impactful at improving acceptance, mindfulness, non-attachment, attention regulation (decentering) and worry in the thirty-three social workers who participated.

COLLECTIVE HEALING

MBIs have also been found to have a positive impact on individuals facing some of the most common challenges that social workers are called to respond to. MBIs promote prosocial behaviors and have a positive impact on the biopsychosocial experiences of individuals experiencing depression, anxiety, stress, insomnia, addiction, psychosis, pain, hypertension, weight control, cancer-related symptoms, diabetes, HIV/AIDS, and chronic pain (Zhang et al., 2021; Niazi & Niazi, 2011). MBSR can effectively reduce symptoms of PTSD related to various causes, can be just as effective at reducing symptoms of anxiety as the anti-anxiety medication escitalopram, and can support relapse prevention during recovery from substance misuse (Liu et al. 2022; Hoge et al., 2022; Vallejo & Amaro, 2009).

STEADFASTNESS

The growing popularity of MBIs in a variety of contexts has inspired critical discussion related to the role of mindfulness in advancing macro level conversations related to anti-racism and anti-oppression, another important realm of social work practice. Katheryn Ester McIntosh (2023) writes on how the self-awareness and consciousness of the reality of the present moment cultivated with mindfulness practice are key elements in social justice work. Mindfulness also provides a strategy for individuals to "metabolize the effects of racial distress and create more ease and calm" (pg. 8).

McIntosh stresses that when coupled with intentional examination of structures of oppression, mindfulness has the capacity to support a decolonial approach to social justice that is "spatial, somatic, and movement oriented" (pg.8). Gaard & Erguner-Tekinalp, (2022) make the connection that the consciousness, attention, and awareness promoted in diversity, equity and inclusion work can be cultivated through mindfulness practice to support efforts to expose how white supremacy and coloniality are replicated and reinforced in daily experiences. A systematic review of studies correlating MBIs and social bias supported the hypothesis that mindfulness practice reduces the ingroup bias and outgroup bias that contribute to the preferential treatment of social groups in power and the oppression of marginalized groups (Chang et al., 2024).

Implementing the Integration of Mindfulness Practice in the Field of Social Work

Regular mindfulness practice that is supported by educational and organizational structures cultivates the opportunity for social workers to take care of themselves, to soothe the pain and suffering within their communities, and be more well-resourced to address the oppressive systems responsible for causing harm. Two potential strategies to integrate mindfulness as a workforce development approach for social workers include integrating MBIs into the curriculum of social work academic programs (Kinman et al., 2020) and including MBIs as a required topic of continuing education credit (Klatt, M. D., 2017).

While benefits of MBIs can be observed up to three years, its benefits are most strongly observed in the weeks and months after the intervention suggesting regular practice is helpful at maximizing potential impact (Sercekman, 2024). Supervisors should be encouraged to cultivate a culture that supports the incorporation of mindfulness practice into social workers' daily routine. Individuals who feel permitted to take care of themselves and share a sense of emotional safety among their peers are more likely to benefit from employer-based mindfulness practice (Micklitz et al., 2021). Additionally, the integration and application of MBIs should be coupled with critical perspectives on multicultural education to include discussion on the influence of racism, sexism, and other oppressive forces in order to support anti-racist work (McIntosh, 2023).

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