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**Examining the Benefits of Adding Mindfulness-Based Programs into the  
Curriculum of Undergraduate and Graduate Social Work Programs: A Review of  
Literature**

by

Sarah Dickerson

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the  
University Honors Program

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Department of Social Work

The University of South Dakota  
May of 2023

The members of the Honors Thesis Committee appointed  
to examine the thesis of Sarah Dickerson  
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## ABSTRACT

### Examining the Benefits of Adding Mindfulness-Based Programs into the Curriculum of Undergraduate and Graduate Social Work Programs: A Review of Literature

Sarah Dickerson

Director: Kelly Bass DSW

Undergraduate and graduate students are often enveloped in an array of stress and anxiety, and it is no surprise that undergraduate and graduate social work students are faced with high amounts of stress due to vicarious trauma as a result of exposure to via coursework and experiential learning. It also comes as no surprise that social work professionals are exposed to numerous stressors causing the burnout rate for social workers to be high. Mindfulness techniques are used in various cultures and religions around the world with the purpose of synching mind and body. Using mindfulness techniques, individuals can be fully aware and present, which allows for the identification of emotional and physical patterns and adjustment to provide the most benefits. Awareness and adaptation of one's emotional and physical sensations, especially in a helping profession like social work, is crucial in combating stress and burnout. This thesis will examine various articles and peer-reviewed studies conducted on mindfulness techniques being implemented in undergraduate and graduate social work curricula. This thesis will hopefully link mindfulness training added to the pedagogy of undergraduate and graduate social work programs to a decrease in the stress and burnout rate for social work students.

**KEYWORDS:** mindfulness, social work, curriculum

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### **Personal Interest**

This writer personally became interested in the effects of integrating mindfulness techniques into the curriculum of Social Work courses after her first year in the Social Work Program at the University of South Dakota. While taking Social Work-based courses at USD, the topic of burnout and vicarious trauma in the profession of Social Work was a major topic in lectures and discussions. Burnout is defined as “physical, emotional, or mental exhaustion accompanied by decreased motivation, lowered performance, and negative attitudes toward oneself and others” (American Psychological Association). Vicarious trauma is defined as “a change in [one’s] own worldview and sense of the justness and safety of the world” due to “repeated emotionally intimate contact with trauma survivors” (American Psychological Association). Compassion Fatigue is defined as “the burnout and stress-related symptoms experienced ... in reaction to working with traumatized people” (American Psychological Association). The idea of burnout was heavily ingrained into this writer during her courses, but it was only taught that the symptoms of burnout and vicarious trauma were only seen once one starts a career as a Social Worker or in a helping profession. This writer found this not to be the case when she started to exhibit symptoms of burnout in her junior year of college. She started to experience a lack of motivation, decreased satisfaction with school and personal life, and felt self-doubt, all of which are symptoms of burnout. Taking Honors courses, working a part-time job, and learning about trauma through casework in classes, all while trying to maintain relationships and friendships, was too much for her to handle.

This writer started to feel overworked and over-stressed. After talking to her peers in the Social Work Program and others this writer knew in majors such as nursing, this writer came to the realization that these feelings were rather common.

Currently, this writer is interning at an agency that focuses on advocating and assisting survivors of sexual assault. Working directly with individuals who have experienced a traumatic event(s) have reignited and added to the feeling of insurmountable stress that she had noticed in her previous year at USD, along with the symptoms of burnout that she had previously acknowledged. Now, this writer is not only dealing with coursework, maintaining relationships, and hearing and learning about trauma in a classroom, she is now fully integrated into guiding and assisting those who have had a traumatic experience(s) while at an unpaid internship.

This writer's direct curiosity surrounding the benefits of mindfulness techniques being integrated into the curriculum of undergraduate and graduate courses comes from her personal experience and the benefits that she saw in herself when mindfulness activities were added to a social work course she took when she was a junior in 2021. The course focused on trauma in adults, adolescents, and children. During this course, this writer was exposed to materials via text, video, and personal accounts that described in detail the traumatic events individuals experienced as well as how these traumatic events affected their brains. This was the first time she had been exposed to material that solely focused on the hard-hitting reality of trauma. She noticed her heart rate increasing, herself fidgeting more than what was normal for her, and she could feel herself increase in body temperature as she began to perspire while sitting and waiting for class to start. Around halfway through the semester basic mindfulness activities were added to the

beginning of each class period. Students in the class were asked to participate in mindful breathing exercises (bringing awareness to the breath as it entered and exited one's body, including what one's breath felt like leaving one's nose/mouth and what their bodies response was, e.g., relaxed or tense), short, guided meditation, and short journaling.

After a few weeks of these mindfulness activities being implemented into this course, this writer found herself more relaxed while learning about the trauma that was being taught, and she was better able to identify when she was having a physical or mental response to the material in the class and was able to successfully ground herself by using some of the mindfulness techniques she was taught. Due to this writer's personal experience with the benefits that came with the addition of mindfulness techniques, she began to become intrigued by the research done surrounding mindfulness techniques and the benefits of their addition into undergraduate and graduate school social work curricula.

The goal of this thesis and literature review is to concisely report on the effects mindfulness techniques have on students in undergraduate and graduate social work programs when they are implemented into the curriculum. This writer hopes to begin the conversation on the benefits mindfulness techniques have on college-level students and to assess the feasibility of implementing mindfulness techniques and activities into the social work programs curricula at the University of South Dakota.



## CHAPTER TWO

### Stress Among College Students

The transition to college can be an exhilarating yet stressful time for young adults. With the added demands that come from rigorous college-level courses, and for some, the responsibilities of independent time management and finances, it is not surprising that for many college students, this is when they exhibit the first onset of many mental health problems (Pedrelli, Nyer, Yeung, Zulauf, & Wilens, 2015). The National College Health Assessment conducted by the American College Health Association (ACHA) surveyed 54,204 undergraduate students in the Spring of 2022. The ACHA surveyed a total of 129 institutions that included public, private, 2-year, and 4-year institutions throughout the northeast, Midwest, south, and west regions of the United States of America. The campus sizes ranged from less than 2,500 to 20,000 enrolled students. The survey uncovered that “43.7% of students from these institutions attributed stress as a factor that negatively affected their academic performance” along with “51.7% reporting moderate psychological distress” (ACHA, 2022). The experiences and demands of educational institutions can provide tremendous self-growth, but they also can add to or induce “negative internal states such as anxiety, isolation, and depression that may ... decrease a person’s learning experience” (Leland, 2015, pg. 19). The National Survey of Counseling Directors was dissected in an article titled “College Students: Mental Health Problems and Treatment Consideration” (Gallagher, Gill, & Sysko found in Pedrelli, Nyer, Yeun, Zulauf, & Wilens, 2015). After surveying 274 institutions, it was found that “88% of counseling center directors reported an increase in ‘severe’ psychological problems over the previous 5 years including learning disabilities, self-injury incidents, eating disorders,

substance use, and sexual assaults” (2015, p. 2). The increase in psychological issues for college students is alarming. Without proper treatment these issues can fester and have a life-long effect on a person’s life.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Stress Among Students in Helping Profession Majors

Mental health needs and concerns among general undergraduate college students are increasing. This reality leads to the discussion of the stress felt among students in a helping profession and human service major. “Many studies confirm that those in the helping professions are at high risk of experiencing compassion fatigue (Adams, Figley, & Boscarino, 2008; Badger, Royse, & Craig, 2008; Bell, 2003; Bride, 2007; Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006; Sprang, Clark, & Whitt-Woosley, 2007; Van Hook & Rothenberg, 2009 found in Harr & Moore, 2011, pp. 350-351). Although it has been proven that those in helping professions and human service professions are more exposed to stress than those in other professions, research has shifted to focus on the levels of stress and compassion fatigue that students majoring in helping professions and human service professions experience.

#### **Stress Among Undergraduate Social Work Students**

Social work students not only experience all the same stressors that come with being a college student but are also exposed to an array of class material that focuses on trauma and the subsequent factors of trauma. Examining social work cases and role-playing cases that “contain high levels of trauma, abuse or discrimination” (Teater, 2011; Gockel and Deng, 2016 found in Maddock, McCusker, Blair, & Roulston, 2022, p. 2761), in social work courses can lead to increased levels of stress, and emotional and physical distress in students. Indications that social work students have been experiencing high levels of psychological distress have been documented since the 1990s (Tobin & Carson, 1994 found in Dziegielewski, Roset-marti, & Turnage, 2004). Authors also note

that “the social work training period is potentially more stressful than the subsequent professional career” (Pottage & Huxley, 1996, found in Dziegielewski, Roset-marti, & Turnage, 2004, pg. 106). Social work education is not limited to classroom material. Undergraduate and graduate social work students are also required to complete a field practicum or internship period.

Being directly integrated into social work practice as a senior in college can be an intimidating and daunting experience that can lead to a host of other problems, such as burnout, vicarious trauma, and self-doubt. “Social work students are faced with difficult situations in their practicums and internships, and stress, emotional exhaustion, and vicarious trauma are commonly reported side effects; these effects have been shown to be more pronounced for students during their education than in their subsequent careers, and students commonly report experiencing “burnout” before they ever embark on their careers” (Napoli & Bonifas, 2011 found in Leland, 2015, p. 21). Similarly, Lewis & King (2019), in their article “Teaching Self-Care: The Utilization of Self-Care in Social Work Practicum to Prevent Compassion Fatigue, Burnout, and Vicarious Trauma” note that the risk of secondary trauma is increased when engaging directly with a traumatized population (Hatcher, Bride, Oh, King, & Catrett, 2011). Undergraduate social work students that are exposed to situations that are deemed stressful to the profession are at a high risk for secondary traumatic stress (Humphrey, 2013 found in Lewis & King, 2019). Secondary traumatic stress can lead to anxiety, depression, and self-doubt, which makes it incredibly difficult to provide the care needed in a social work profession.

Authors Harr and Moore (2011) conducted a study in their article titled, “Compassion Fatigue Among Social Work Students in Field Placements”. The study was

conducted in 2007 and 2008 with a total of 258 bachelor's in social work and masters in social work students at a university in the southwestern United States to explore the psychological effect of compassion fatigue and compassion satisfaction social work students experienced during their internships. Using the Professional Quality of Life Scale: Compassion Satisfaction and Fatigue Subscales developed in 2005, it was uncovered that social work students showed an increase in the compassion satisfaction scores, the risk for burnout scores, and the compassion fatigue scores.

Overall, students had a mean score of 39.98 (SD = 6.36) on compassion satisfaction as compared to the instrument average score of 37. Students had a mean score of 26.67 (SD = 5.79) on risk for burnout, compared with 23 for the instrument average score. Students scored a mean of 12.65 (SD = 6.40), almost the same as the instrument average score (13) on the construct for compassion Fatigue (Harr & Moore, 2011, p. 358).

This study displayed the reality most social work students face during their field placement. Although social work can be a rewarding and satisfying profession, there is an alarming level of compassion fatigue that seems to go hand and hand with the profession of social work. Compassion fatigue can lead to “the inability to concentrate, decreased self-esteem, apathy, preoccupation with trauma, perfectionism, rigidity, or, in extreme cases, thoughts of harming self or others” (Harr & Moore, 2011, p. 352). Symptoms of compassion fatigue such as, “anxiety, guilt, anger, fear, and sadness” (Harr & Moore, 2011, p. 353), make it incredibly difficult for an individual to have the ability to perform ethically and on par with the standards of the social work profession.

It is common for students, especially undergraduates, to encounter anxiety, self-doubt, and stress as they enter fieldwork. Studies further reveal that students in the human service professions face additional stresses— related to their clinical training—and that social work students have been known to show high levels of psychological distress. The social work training period can be more stressful than one’s subsequent professional career (Collins, Coffey, & Morris, 2008; Dziegielewski, Roest-Marti, & Turnage, 2004; Munson, 1984; Pottage & Huxley, 1996; Romph, Royse, & Dhooper, 1993; Tobin & Carson, 1994 found in Harr & Moore, 2011, p. 354).

### **Stress Among Master of Social Work Students**

Graduate social work students are unique in their risk of stress and compassion fatigue. Master of Social Work (MSW) students not only experience all the same stressors previously noted, but they also now have the added pressures from “familial and financial responsibilities entering graduate school” (Addonizio, 2011, p. 9). Not only are MSW students encompassed in even more rigorous coursework than they were in their undergraduate program, but they may also feel the pressure of finding employment after graduation which is exasperated by the looming student loan debt many of them have, along with the stresses that come with another field placement. “MSW students are exposed, likely for the first time, to intense professional expectations with regard to course work and internship responsibilities” (Addonizio, 2011, p. 22). The prevalence of stress in the social work profession is not a new revelation and that while MSW students are involved in their field placement they are at risk for the same stressors assigned to help clients overcome. Financial concerns and compassion fatigue are some of the

primary reasons graduate school students contemplate and decide to drop out of the program (Addonizio, 2011).

In addition to the stressors that come from financial responsibilities during an MSW program and after graduation, MSW students are also tasked with completing a field internship. In most cases, MSW students are given more responsibilities during their placement and complete a lengthier field placement. At one's field placement, they are often exposed to instances of child abuse, trauma, hopelessness, sexual assault, homelessness, and poverty. The continued exposure to these types of stressors often leads to physiological symptoms such as, "anxiety, depression, heart palpitations, and muscle aches and pains" (Addonizio, 2011, p. 114-115). When experiencing these symptoms MSW students may feel unequipped to provide support to clients and may become "impaired, potentially putting their clients and themselves at risk" (Addonizio, 2011, p. 1). Untreated physiological and psychological concerns leave MSW students at an increased risk of impairment and the inability to properly provide care for those they serve.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Mindfulness

Although the side effects of being a social work major are daunting and highly problematic, there is a newfound interest in research that focuses on the effect mindfulness has on the stress levels of social work students and their overall well-being. The concept of mindfulness is rooted in ancient Buddhist philosophy and is practiced to obtain eternal happiness and peace while uncovering the “true nature of existence” (Olendzki, 2010 found in Hölzel, Lazar, Gard, Schuman-Olivier, Vago, & Ott, 2011, p. 537). In current literature and research, mindfulness is defined as “the ability to ‘pay attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally’” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994 found in Alvear, Soler, & Cebolla, 2022, p. 1544), by observing one’s “thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations ... as they arise and pass away” (Hölzel, Lazar, Gard, Schuman-Olivier, Vago, Ott, 2011, p. 538). Practicing mindfulness allows a person to cultivate self-awareness by focusing on the present moment, helps one in reducing their judgment of their emotions, thoughts, and bodily responses by consciously experiencing and acknowledging them, along with regulating one’s mood.

During mindfulness practice, one usually focuses on bodily sensations or sensory experiences such as breathing. While doing so, one lets themselves be fully affected by their present experience by noticing and acknowledging any thoughts or emotions that arise while focusing on the present (external stimuli and bodily sensations). The development of conflict monitoring, and attention regulation is often seen in the early practice of mindfulness (Hölzel, Lazar, Gard, Schuman-Olivier, Vago, & Ott, 2011). Due to the integral component of mindfulness, bringing awareness to one’s present internal



state and external environment, “individuals learn to ‘pause’ and respond more thoughtfully to environmental stimuli with greater awareness and less automatic reactivity” (Carmody & Baer, 2008 found Gray, 2021, p. 100).

For the purpose of this literature review, mindfulness will be defined as it is by Khong (2009), which “describes mindfulness as the cultivation of attention to feelings (experiences, thoughts, beliefs, etc.) and [the ability to] experience them as they are (letting it be) without needing to change.” The ability to be mindful of one’s thoughts, emotions, and actions is a “stable but trainable ability” (Alvear, Soler, & Cebolla, 2022, p. 1544). Being mindful takes practice and guidance and,

Supports decentering (defined as seeing thoughts and feelings as temporary and separate from oneself), emotional regulation, focused attention, decreased attachment/aversion to feelings, and decreased mental proliferation, all of which can lead to an increase in well-being and reductions in mental agitation (Grabovac et al., 2011; Hölzel et al., 2011 found in Smit & Stayrulaki, 2021, p. 3087).

### **Benefits of Mindfulness**

There has been a growing interest in research regarding the effect mindfulness practices has on an individual. The consensus among researchers of mindfulness is that practicing mindfulness has produced positive beneficial effects on stress-related symptoms, mental health issues, and persistent somatic issues (Baer, 2003; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004 found in Hölzel, Lazar, Gard, Schuman-Olivier, Vago & Ott, 2011). Mindfulness-based interventions are proven to be effective in treating clinical disorders such as anxiety, substance abuse, chronic pain, and depression (Hofman, Sawyer, Witt & Oh, 2010; Bowen, 2006; Grossman, Tiefenthaler-Gilmer,

Raysz & Kesper, 2007 found in Hölzel, Lazar, Gard, Schuman-Olivier, Vago & Ott, 2011). Self-reported questionnaires have also shown improvements in quality of life, burnout, and stress-related symptoms after completing a mindfulness-based intervention (Khoury et al., 2015 found in Harp, Freeman, & Neta, 2022). The benefits of practicing mindfulness techniques are not limited to mental health issues, they also have been found to improve empathetic responses and self-regulation.

Emotional regulation is a crucial component for social work students when trying to decrease the risk of burnout. The ability to regulate one's emotions "refers to the alteration of ongoing emotional responses through the action of regulatory processes" (Ochsner & Gross, 2005 found in Hölzel, Lazar, Gard, Schuman-Olivier, Vago, & Ott, 2011). Before emotional regulation can take place, internal awareness needs to be achieved. Being able to properly regulate one's emotions allows for decentering to take place, which then allows one to detach themselves from the trauma those they encounter face. "Studies from the field of mindfulness research have addressed improvements in emotion regulation through a variety of approaches, including experimental, self-report, peripheral physiological, and neuroimaging data" (Hölzel, Lazar, Gard, Schuman-Olivier, Vago, & Ott, 2011, p. 543).

Internal awareness is also an essential part of properly practicing social work because "Acute observations of the self are required for the appropriate understanding of others" (Decety & Jackson, 2004 found in Hölzel, Lazar, Gard, Schuman-Olivier, Vago, & Ott, 2011, p. 352). Without understanding one's emotional process, including triggers, reactive tendencies, and biases, one cannot successfully care for others.

Learning (and practicing) mindfulness skills also increases neural connections in the areas of the brain related to stress reactivity and attentional focus. The teaching of specific skills to practice mindfulness formally and informally to support daily living is effective in managing stress, as well as improving academic performance (Greeson et al. 2014; Lynch et al. 2018 found in Greeson, Juberg, Maytan, James, & Rogers, 2014, p. 2).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Mindfulness in Continued Education Courses

In a study conducted by Smit and Stavoulaki, the effectiveness of a Koru mindfulness curriculum, when delivered online, to undergraduate college students was examined. This study used a four-week Koru mindfulness program that is based on four weekly meetings that last 75 minutes and include mindfulness-based exercises such as mindful eating, walking, coloring, guided meditation, and breathing. Students are also expected to complete ten minutes of meditation a day during those four weeks. Students were given a custom textbook to help guide them through the Koru program along with a mobile app that assisted them with meditation and other mindfulness exercises (Smit & Stavoulaki, 2021)

This study included 69 college students from a non-profit, private university in the northeast of the United States of America with a total of 5,000 undergraduate and graduate students. After participants completed both a pretest and post-test survey, it was found that after the Koru program, students reported greater levels of mindfulness overall. This finding of increased mindfulness after completing a mindfulness-based program infers that awareness of one's emotional reactions and states is also increased, as awareness is a key component of being mindful (Smit & Stavoulaki, 2021). Awareness is a crucial component of being a competent social worker. A social work student is tasked with not only handling their emotional states but also the emotional states of those they learn about and work with. Participants also reported decreased stress and declines in sleep problems over the course of the program. Decreased levels of stress may be

attributed to the student's newfound ability to mitigate and regulate their emotional state when stressful situations arose due to the exercises learned in the mindfulness program. (2021).

Researcher and instructor Gray also conducted a study to evaluate the effects a semester-long mindfulness course had on perceived stress, academic procrastination, resiliency, levels of mindfulness and self-compassion, and sleep quality in undergraduate students at a large midwestern public four-year university in January 2017 through December 2018. Gray collected data from 104 undergraduate, upper-class students across six semesters. To collect data, Gray sent out a survey packet during the first and second weeks of the fourteen-week semesters and again during the twelfth week of instruction. The mindfulness program that Gray designed and implemented into her course was based on the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Koru mindfulness programs. The mindfulness program used in this study focused on five modules that included "reading, didactics, reflection writing assignments, discussion, and teacher-guided formal mindfulness meditation sessions" (2021, p. 102). Throughout the semester, students practiced eight mindfulness awareness categories including "awareness of breath, awareness of body, awareness of thoughts and emotions, informal mindfulness approaches, and integration of multiple approaches. Techniques such as belly breathing, counting breaths, the STOP acronym (a mindful check-in), Gatha practice, mindful walking, and mindful eating" (2021, p. 102) were also taught to and practiced by students.

Gray used the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) to measure dispositional mindfulness. The MAAS is a fifteen-item Likert five-point scale where

higher scores reflect higher levels of perceived mindfulness. To measure resilience, Gray used the Brief Resilience Scale (BRS) to assess students' "ability to 'bounce back' from setbacks and goal-related obstacles" (2021, p. 102). The twenty-item Procrastination Scale (PS) was used to assess students' tendencies and actions that may lead to procrastination. To assess levels of self-judgment, isolation, and self-kindness, the Self-Compassion Scale-Short Form was used. The Sleep Quality Assessment is used to measure students' quality of sleep, and the Cohen Perceived Stress Scale is used to assess which scenarios in student's life are seen as stressful (2021).

The overall result of this study concludes that when a mindfulness-based program is added to the curriculum of an undergraduate course, there is a "positive relationship between mindfulness programs and quality of life" (2021, p. 105). The results of Gray's study signify the benefits of mindfulness practices on students' overall well-being when embedded into the pedagogy of undergraduate programs. Gray concludes that after completing the 14-week mindfulness course, "students had improved resiliency, mindfulness, self-compassion, and sleep quality...and had decreased stress levels and procrastination" (2021, p. 105). There is a significant benefit to students in offering an academic course that utilizes the practices and concepts of mindfulness skills and theory. (2021).

## CHAPTER SIX

### Mindfulness in Social Work Curriculum

Due to the high rates of burnout and compassion fatigue among social workers and social work students, mindfulness techniques have recently begun to make their way into the curriculum of social work programs. Research on the effectiveness mindfulness techniques have on the ability of an individual to manage and mitigate the effects of stress and vicarious trauma while also improving one's self-awareness has increased in recent years. One of the most well-researched and accepted methods of administering mindfulness techniques in a large group, such as a classroom of students, is Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). MBSR was developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn in the 1970s and is an 8-week program that is usually completed with groups of individuals. The concept of MBSR is relatively simple and is highly flexible and individualized to suit each person's individual needs and skill level. Yoga and meditation are the primary components of MBSR, and it has been effective in improving the psychological health of participants (Greeson, Juberg, Maytan, James, & Rogers). Although MBSR is widely accepted as a fundamental and effective way of administering mindfulness in group settings, it has been found that any addition of mindfulness techniques or activities is beneficial.

Researchers Chinnery, Appleton, and Marlowe (2019) conducted a study that looked at the effects mindfulness instruction had on the reflective capacity of pre-placement social work students. Their method of administering mindfulness greatly resembles the core competencies of MBSR. The mindfulness program in this study, was

added to an undergraduate social work curriculum and was administered over six weeks focusing on “comprise, breath awareness, body scans, cognitive meta-skills of stop-relax-refocus-observe, decentering, loving and kindness, and equanimity” (Chinnery, Appleton, & Marlowe, 2019, p. 294). The study looks at the effects a “group-based mindfulness teaching intervention (MTI)” (2019, p. 291) has on the cultivation of attention and awareness in undergraduate social work students. The interactive and group-centered qualities of this implementation of mindfulness in the pedagogy of the undergraduate social work program promoted “self-awareness, reflectivity, presence for practice, and self-care” (2019, p. 292), which are all vital to a social worker’s ability to administer proper care for those they serve and themselves. This study used the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ), which is a “multidimensional, reliable, self-report measure of mindfulness comprised of five subscales: *observing, describing, acting with awareness, non-judging of inner experience, and nonreactivity to inner experience*” (2019, p. 300). The FFMQ is a 39-item questionnaire that uses a Likert-type scale where participants rate their experiences from 1 (never or very rarely) to 5 (very often or always true).

The practice of being compassion-forward is an important aspect of social work practice. Having the ability to not only be kind to those that one serves but also to oneself is, at times, an uncomfortable but necessary component of working in the field of social work. In the pretest survey, students reported that they often struggled with the “kindness to self” component and found it “personally confronting” (2019, p. 298). After the six-week mindfulness program, it was found that students’ self-compassion benefited greatly due to the implementation of mindfulness in their coursework. Students reported being



able to use self-compassion in regulating their affect, and attributed mindfulness in their heightened ability to understand the perspectives of their group members uninfluenced by judgment. Along with this discovery, students also reported that their use of empathy became stronger and that by nurturing kindness in themselves, they were able to respond to the emotional states of themselves and group members in a way that aligned with social work standards. “Enhanced empathy for others, in this case peer group members, seemed to be a natural outflow of their self-compassionate stance” (2019, p. 298). Being able to address one’s own emotional states with openness and without judgment allows for great compassion and understanding of other’s emotional responses.

Overall, students reported positive gains in awareness after the completion of the course, which provides support for the effectiveness of the MTI and its group work focus.

Partnering of these learning objectives is mutually beneficial as both group work and mindfulness are focal to cultivating skills in self-awareness, and effective management of self and engagement with others, and these aptitudes are important to becoming a relationally responsive social work practitioner (2019, p. 301).

Two of the significant results of the study are in the learning objectives *Describing* and *Nonjudging*. These objectives “suggest a developmental influence” (2019, p. 301).

*Describing* and *Nonjudging* are two of the first objectives that are taught to students, and because of this, they are practiced longer than the other objectives. Coupled with the length of practice, these facets also support all other practices that are introduced in the MTI, which “strengthens the capacity for attention regulation and growth in awareness” (2019, p. 302). Throughout the course, students were instructed to be aware of their

internal and external experiences and were advised that this skill would assist them in working relationships. This instruction was seen to “heighten the students’ ability for doing so” (2019, p. 302). In pretest scores, students showed the ability in describing their experiences thus, the MTI may have simply increased their confidence in doing so (p. 302).

There was also a significant improvement in the nonjudgment facet of the FFMQ. This improvement could be correlated to the fact that each awareness practice that was taught in the course encouraged students to be open and accepting of their present moment. Students were also made aware that it would be normal for them to experience thoughts of judgment early on in practice and were taught nonjudgmental ways to accept that. The previously learned skill of self-compassion likely added to the high scores in nonjudgment, which lowered students’ emotional reactivity. Decentering practices taught in the course also reinforce a nonjudgmental attitude by allowing students to view their experience by cognitively stepping back and seeing the event as “a temporal event of the mind, distinct from a defining aspect of the self” (2019, p. 303). Overall, the results from this study show that mindfulness practices, when implemented in the curriculum of an undergraduate social work program, increase students’ confidence and skill in self-compassion, empathy, nonjudging, and decentering (2019, p. 305).

### **MBSWSC Study**

A study conducted by Maddock, Mccusker, Bliar, and Roulston (2022) focused on the effects a mindfulness-based program would have on third-year undergraduate and master-level social work students in the United Kingdom who were completing their fieldwork placements. To collect results, participants completed a quantitative and

qualitative questionnaire before the first session and one week after they completed the program. The program used in the study is the Mindfulness-Based Social Work and Self-Care program (MBSWSC), which is a mindfulness-based program specifically designed for social work students. The MBSWSC program ran for six weeks, and participants were required to attend weekly sessions that lasted 1.5 hours (2022).

### **MBSWSC Program Structure**

The overall structure of an MBSWSC revolves around the input of mindfulness activities to directly benefit a social work student. In the first week of practice, mindfulness is defined, along with how being mindful can support a social worker or one studying social work. In the first week, students are taught how to complete a mindful body scan and are assigned the responsibility of completing two mindful exercises: being mindful while completing a daily routine activity and eating one meal mindfully.

In the second week of the MBSWSC program, students discuss anti-oppressive social work and how mindfulness may support that along with the importance of self-care and how mindfulness practices may benefit one's self-care. During the session, students complete a guided body scan and participate in a role-play with other students about how one thinks, feels, and physically responds to working with someone who has committed a sexual offense (2022). Being mindful includes the ability to recognize one's emotional and physical responses to situations, and this role-play helps students identify how they are reacting to an uncomfortable situation.

The third week of the program focuses on how to respond and cope with difficult thoughts and emotions that may arise while in social work practice. Students participate in guided breathing exercises and are taught how to be mindful of their breath. Breathing

exercises help regulate one's body and allow space to recognize and cope with difficult emotions. As homework, students complete two body scans along with breathing exercises and mindful movement (2022). The third week of the program provides students exercises and tools to help them cope with difficult thoughts and emotions.

In the fourth week of the program, students learn about the importance of staying in the present when practicing mindfulness while also learning the importance of self-compassion and acceptance. During the session, students complete a guided body scan, but now the focus is not only on recognizing what one is feeling, but also on accepting the feeling and letting it pass. Students also participate in a role-play designed to allow students to react to a mistake they made in practice and formulate a plan to recognize the mistake. During this role-play students identify what they are feeling towards the mistake while staying compassionate towards themselves. For homework in week four, students complete another acceptance body scan and write a self-compassionate letter to themselves (2022).

The fifth session of the MBSWSC program focuses on reflexivity. Students learn how to reflect on themselves and their actions and emotions. During the session students participate in a guided body scan and breathing exercise. As homework students are expected to complete a body scan where they recognize, sit in, and reflect on what they are feeling and a breathing exercise three times a day particularly if they are experiencing negative thoughts and feeling towards themselves and others.

In the sixth and final week of the program, students learn how to embed mindfulness in their personal and professional lives. Students are taught ways to continue practicing and implementing the exercises they have learned during previous sessions.

During the session, the students complete a guided body scan and engage in a discussion with other students about how they might continue working on being mindful.

### **MBSWSC Program Results**

After the six-week MBSWSC program was implemented into a third-year social work course and a Master of Social Work Course,

93 percent of the participants felt that the MBSWSC program improved their mood; 89 percent felt that it reduced feelings of anxiety; 89 percent felt that it improved their sense of well-being; 85 percent felt that the program allowed them to cope with feelings of burnout; and 82 percent felt that it reduced their stress levels (2022, p. 2766).

The MBSWSC program used in this study supports the idea that a mindfulness-based addition to a social work program's curriculum would support students' well-being and mental health. Because these results are self-reported by the participants, it can be inferred that students feel as though the mindfulness-based program has helped them cope with and mitigate feelings of anxiety, stress, and burnout.

After the program had been completed, 56 percent of the participants reported that they engaged with the mindfulness practices every day, 41 percent practiced every couple of days, with 3 percent practicing once a week. Eighty-one percent of participants said that they felt that the learning from this program would be extremely beneficial to their day-to-day lives. Ninety-three percent of the participants felt that the MBSWSC program would help them to practice in an anti-oppressive manner more skillfully. Eighty-two percent of participants felt that the MBSWSC program would be extremely beneficial to their social work

practice, with another 11 percent reporting that they felt it would be moderately beneficial. Eighty-nine percent of the participants, either strongly agreed (74 percent) or agreed (15 percent) with the statement that the MBSWSC program should be a mandatory part of their social work training. Ninety-two percent of participants reported that they would recommend the MBSWSC program to other social work students (2022, p. 2766).

The results of this study indicate that a mindfulness-based program, when implemented into a social work program's curriculum, can benefit students' personal and professional lives while also making them more likely to practice mindfulness in the future.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Discussion

This literature review provides a concise look into how mindfulness, when implemented in the pedagogy of undergraduate and graduate programs, can equip students with tools to help combat and mitigate levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout. College students are experiencing stressful situations in their personal lives and academic careers, which when left untreated, can cause burnout and further mental health concerns. Research has shown that mindfulness enables students with the ability to non-judgmentally address their emotional states with more awareness and acceptance. Having the ability to be open and accepting of one's emotional state allows one to have less perceived stress because they have the tools to address their emotional state healthily.

The benefits that come from adding mindfulness techniques into the curriculum of social work programs is a growing area of research. It is common knowledge in the literature regarding the profession of social work that social workers experience high levels of vicarious trauma and burnout. This area of research is now expanding to look at the levels of vicarious trauma that students in undergraduate and graduate social work programs experience. Being exposed to the traumatic experiences of those in the social work curriculum inadvertently exposes students to vicarious trauma. Students are also directly exposed to the trauma of others through their required field placements in social work-based fields. This direct exposure to trauma makes it easier for students to suffer from vicarious trauma.

Mindfulness techniques, when added to the curriculum of social work programs, have been shown to reduce students perceived levels of stress and have increased their

levels of awareness of themselves and others, their self-compassion, their openness, their ability to reflect, and their ability to remain non-judgmental. All these areas of improvement allow one to maintain the level of care that is needed to perform in the field of social work properly and ethically.

Further research into the feasibility of implanting a mindfulness-based program into the curriculum of undergraduate and graduate social work programs at the University of South Dakota should take place. A study should be conducted that focuses on the mental health needs of social work students at USD and their knowledge and experiences of the mental health services provided by USD. Currently, USD offers two main recourses to students regarding their mental health. The Cook House, a counseling center on campus that is free to students, provides therapy-based services to students and an online tool called TAO Connect (Therapy Assisted Online). TAO Connect provides users with tools via education videos for life skills, resilience, and a few guided mindfulness practices. Before a mindfulness-based program can be implemented into the social work programs at USD, accreditation requirements of those programs need to be addressed along with the feasibility of implementing a mindfulness-based program into social work curriculums at USD.



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