

Mindfulness and mental health: Self-care for the student

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I'll never forget my client looking at me sympathetically and saying, "You look exhausted. Take the hour off—I'll come back next week."

Such is the irony of many students' experiences in psychology. In a profession based entirely on the promotion of mental health, we receive our training in programs saturated with assignments, research, and practicum, leaving no time to pause for selfcare of our own well-being.

Not only is this an unpleasant experience that contradicts the tenets of our discipline, but it may also negatively affect clinical work for students in practicum-based programs (Shapiro, Brown & Biegel, 2007). With so little spare time, then, what are we to do?

There are many techniques people use to reduce stress, but ironically, they may induce stress in the student who feels pressured to make time to practice them. Having grappled with this myself, I was excited to learn about the practice of mindfulness.

Mindfulness meditation involves purposefully attending to our present experience without judgement. This is attained through "non-doing" (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 35) - taking time out from our responsibilities and obligations to simply be present with our moment-to-moment experiences of ourselves and our environments. Not only does this allow us to come out of our thinking and be conscious

of what is happening in the here and now, but it also involves the cultivation of acceptance and caring toward the self. This practice is invaluable given the self-doubt and criticism that many students feel at various points throughout their training.

A particular advantage of mindfulness is that it can be practiced anywhere and anytime, even while we're completing daily tasks. Though putting aside time to sit and meditate may be ideal, we can practice mindfulness in a variety of situations: attending to our breathing on the bus, observing our physical sensations as we lie in bed, noticing the textures and flavours of our dinner, or being fully present with our experience as we wash the dishes.

Shapiro and colleagues (2007) found that teaching mindfulness techniques to counselling psychology graduate students was associated with decreases in anxiety, perceived stress, rumination, and negative affect, as well as increases in self-compassion and positive affect. In addition, they found that the amount of time dedicated to mindfulness practice does not have a significant effect on well-being. Therefore, even devoting minimal time to practice is beneficial.

As students of psychology, it is our responsibility to seek out feasible and effective self-care methods. Through such techniques, we look after our own wellbeing and provide an example to other professions and our clients of how to maintain balance in the face of demanding schedules and high

levels of stress. Mindfulness offers a practical way to do this, as all it requires is your presence, and “when it comes right down to it, wherever you go, there you are” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. xiii).

References

Kabat-Zinn, J. (1994). *Wherever you go there you are: Mindfulness meditation in everyday life*. New York: Hyperion.

Shapiro, S. L., Brown, K. W., & Biegel, G. M. (2007). Teaching self-care to caregivers: Effects of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction on the mental health of therapists in training. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology*, 1, 105-115.