Mindfulness Techniques and their Impacts in Social Work Practice

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ABSTRACT

Mindfulness is a tool that has grown the extent it is incorporated into social work practice. Social workers want to empower their clients, and mindfulness is a tool that can enhance an individual’s emotional toolkit (Hamer, 2014). Even with mindfulness becoming more common, there are gaps in the published research regarding how mindfulness is used in social work and the impact it may be having on clients in various settings and populations (Turner, 2018). This research contributes to this gap by interviewing social workers regarding their use of mindfulness as well as the impact they feel it has on their clients.

Literature Review

History of Mindfulness

Mindfulness dates back as old as 2,500 years ago. Traditional Buddhists used mindfulness to lessen ‘human suffering’ and enhancing a central focus on the present moment (Turner, 2009). Eastern mindfulness typically is practiced through meditation, deep breathing, and body scan-based exercises (Carlson, 2013). When mindfulness was implemented in Western settings it combined Western psychology and sciences (Lynn, 2015). Typically, there was a spiritual context to the practice of mindfulness in Eastern settings, whereas in Western settings it is described as ‘cultivating inner clarity’ (McGarrigle, 2011). The primary goal of mindfulness is to sustain self-awareness in the present moment (Fortney, 2013). The practice of mindfulness in
Western settings is growing through the practice of yoga, mindful eating, mindful walking, and micro-practices based off Eastern practices (Coholic, 2016).

**Overview of Social Work and Mindfulness**

Social work is a global profession that strives to protect human rights, advocate for individuals, and provide peace and justice in communities. The following quote describes the global social work definition according to the International Federation of Social Workers:

> Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels. (International Federation of Social Workers, p. 2, 2014).

Overall, the profession of social work grew from individuals experiencing injustice, poverty, and many other social justice issues (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014). Social workers are working to discover new professional interventions to combat injustice and serve their greater communities. As such, a social worker employs various techniques to try and give their clients skills that also enhance a greater wellbeing (Lynn, 2015).

Social workers use mindfulness in a variety of settings and with a variety of issues, which include mental health, substance use, individual/group work, and other programs (Turner, 2009). The use of it can be applied to all ages; although, there is limited research covering its impact.
with children in the social work field (Turner, 2018). An example of mindfulness used with youth was highlighted in a research study where the researcher taught mindfulness and yoga techniques to youth in a school-based setting over a twelve-week period. The intervention of mindfulness was deemed ‘attractive’ to the students, teachers, and administrators in the school district for the benefits it had on the youth and their emotional regulation post implementation. Over the twelve-week period, they reported less stress, able to manage negative thoughts, and more present feelings due to the emotional tools they acquire through the research study (Dariotis, 2010).

In order to make a connection with a client, social workers must work towards building a relationship with the individual. It is difficult to create a real relationship with a lack of empathy and not being fully present with the client (Turner, 2009). One study suggests that mindfulness-based interventions that focused on the social worker and the way they practiced benefited the social worker. Resilience is something that a social worker strives to enhance in a client’s life, yet many social workers are forgetting how to be resilient within their own practice. Mindfulness based programs like the one implemented in this study strive to balance emotional regulation, enhance self-awareness, and give an individual emotional tools to employ throughout daily life to be more present (Crowder, 2017).

Researchers in the area of addiction are seeing benefits of mindfulness practice. One study suggests that those who are re-offending addicts benefitted from implementations of a mindfulness-based relapse prevention program. Individuals who went through the program experienced less regular drug use and needed less interaction with medical and legal professionals (Barricks, 2014). In another study, thirty clinical social workers in a study were placed into a 9-month long mindfulness intervention program to assess their stress at three
After learning mindfulness techniques, different check-in points can be observed for decreases in stress, job burnout, depression, and anxiety (Fortney, 2013).

Mindfulness tools can benefit social workers by grounding them in their work and regulating their emotions. Social service workers are placed in situations that are of high intensity at moments, and they must deal with various emotions and highly confidential information. These high intense situations can create difficulties in emotional regulation, resulting in compassion fatigue, which can in turn leave the social worker not as present with their client due to being emotionally drained (Crowder, 2017). High amounts of stress within the workplace can lead to high rates of burn out and a lack of being present within one’s work (McGarrigle, 2011).

**Gaps in Research**

Research that has been published regarding mindfulness and social work practice typically covers the topics of burn-out prevention, growing intervention skills, and how to ground oneself within the work that one does (Crowder, 2017). An analysis of articles published on the topic of mindfulness and social work practice suggested most of the research is on mindfulness with adults in social work settings. Only one article was found on mindfulness impacts with children in social work settings. Therefore, more research is encouraged with the use of mindfulness with children in social work settings due to the positive impacts it can have and how often social workers interact with children in their practice (Turner, 2018). There is also little research as to how practitioners integrate mindfulness within their own practice for themselves (Lynn, 2015). Overall, there is a large gap in research regarding mindfulness implementations in social work settings with how the practitioner uses it and the impact that it is
having on children specifically. More research is encouraged to better understand the impact that mindfulness may be having on individuals in social work settings (Turner, 2018).

**Research Question**

In order to contribute to the gap in research about how mindfulness is being used in the practice of social work, the researcher will investigate the following question: How is mindfulness being implemented with clients in a social work setting and what impact does it seem to have?

**Methodology**

**Research Design**

The researcher used a qualitative research design to learn from social workers who currently use mindfulness in their social work practice. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. The ‘snowball sampling’ method was implemented so interviewees could direct the researcher to other potential social workers using mindfulness. The researcher conducted four interviews with social workers with an audio recording of each interview, each interview lasting approximately thirty to thirty-five minutes. The interviews were conducted with social workers in a variety of settings, from an individual therapeutic practice to a juvenile justice and residential treatment program. The ages of the client populations ranged from young children to adults. Mindfulness techniques were used in group as well as individual therapy sessions within social work based agencies.

**Interview Questions**

The researcher asked four primary questions, each developed to understand the use of mindfulness as well as the impact that it has on their ‘clients.’ The four questions were: 1) How does your agency use mindfulness techniques? 2) In what ways do you use mindfulness as a
social worker? 3) What impact do you think mindfulness has on the clients/people you work with? And 4) How do you measure the impact of mindfulness in your agency?

Data Analysis

The data analysis process began by transcribing each audio recording. The researcher then captured nodes within each interview which are words or phrases that relate to the research question. Next, the researcher clustered the units by pulling the nodes from each interview into categories. The clustering of nodes highlighted important information relevant to the research question like perspectives, insights, and feelings. Each cluster of units was then identified with a theme. The cluster of units represents what nodes were found across all four interviews and places them into similar categories. This process helped the researcher understand what themes were prominent in the interviews.

Results

The researcher’s goals of this project were to understand how the social worker uses mindfulness, what impact mindfulness is having on the clients it is being used with, and how that impact is being measured within the agency. The following themes were pulled from the four interviews to answer the research questions.

Use of Mindfulness Techniques

There were three primary themes related to how mindfulness is used in social work practice, one related to the variety of types of mindfulness techniques and the second described the variation of degree of complexity. The third relates to when under what circumstances will a social worker implement mindfulness techniques.
Variety of Techniques

Two interviewees stated that everything that they do at their agency has a mindfulness component within it yet, all four interviewees highlighted a wide variety of mindfulness techniques that they use within their practice but there was some overlap. For example, all four interviewees highlighted that they used Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) within their mindfulness techniques. DBT is a psychotherapy intervention that works towards changing behaviors within an individual. There are mindfulness techniques and skills within DBT that all four interviewees highlighted. Interviewee 1 identified that they use yoga, DBT, Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), meditation, and deep breathing as mindfulness techniques within their social work practice. Interviewee 2 and 3 highlighted that they use DBT, meditation, and deep breathing as mindfulness techniques in their social work practice. Interviewee 4 highlighted that they use DBT, meditation, deep breathing, and yoga as mindfulness techniques in their social work practice. Deep breathing and DBT were highlighted as the most used techniques by all four interviewees. One interviewee referred to deep breathing and stated, “It is just kind of centering themselves to be in the moment. Kind of focusing on that and focusing on calming the racing thoughts down if they can center around one thought and then focus on the breathing so they can relax that way.” (Interviewee 3)

One interviewee highlighted that having a variety of mindfulness techniques is what they think makes their agency so popular among individuals. They stated, “We’ve attracted clients and clinicians that gravitate towards using mindfulness and kind of integrative health in their care.” (Interviewee 1) This interviewee discussed that offering various forms of mindfulness techniques can benefit those who seek services because they are not being placed into a model, instead the agency is working to model for the client.
Another interviewee highlighted that their agency does not have a formal modality of how to deliver their mindfulness services. They discussed that it is primarily left up to what the individual is trained in and what they like practicing. The interviewee said it was nice to have the freedom to decide what they think is working or not working with their clients because they have that choice to switch up the techniques that are being used.

**Range of complexity**

The interviewees described using mindfulness techniques which ranged significantly in the level of complexity, ranging from three simple breaths up to hour long meditative sessions. Two out of the four interviewees highlighted that deep breathing was easy for their clients to use. One interviewee stated, “So, for me what I find working with teenagers is the breathing is easy they can understand that.” (Interviewee 3) Simple breathing was highlighted to ground the clients in the present moment. Two interviewees highlighted that the breathing skills were skills that ground the individual in whatever situation is present. This grounding provides the individual to think rationally before they decide. For example, an individual may feel anxious, if they are able to take a breath and think, they can potentially avoid a panic attack.

One interviewee highlighted that meditation and yoga are skills they teach their clients if the client is interested. The interviewee highlighted that meditation brings them into the ‘now’ and keeps them from thinking too far into the future, and without going back into the past. This interviewee stated, “I just think more than ever with technology and there are so many distractions that more than ever we need support where we can connect with our being, our calm, our relaxation.” (Interviewee 1) This quote highlights how important it is to bring ourselves into
the present moment and how rewarding it can be for our bodies and minds when in that present state.

**When mindfulness is used**

Two out of the four interviewees highlighted that they use mindfulness primarily with clients who suffer from anxiety, depression, or sleeplessness. The two interviewees highlighted that the mindfulness techniques assisted with alleviating stress in their clients. The two interviewees reported their clients sleeping better and less panic attacks if they were implementing and practicing the mindfulness techniques.

All four interviewees highlighted that they implement mindfulness techniques when they are trying to create a behavior change. One interviewee stated, “What I am hoping to awaken in them while they are here is some level of mindfulness. Some level of being in a moment and instead of just reacting to it, having this realization of ‘Oh.,’ and observing themselves and the situation and knowing there is probably something I can do other than just react.” (Interviewee 4)

This quote highlights the main goal that these mindfulness techniques are trying to enforce when the social worker is working on helping a client change their behaviors. The interviewee highlighted that the mindfulness techniques help the children they work with become emotionally intelligent in emotionally charged situations.

**Impact of Mindfulness and Source of Evidence**

All interviewees described confidence in the positive impact that mindfulness has on their clients, but it was challenging for them to identify exactly how they know this. There were two primary themes related to how mindfulness techniques are measured and interpreted in social work practice. One related to self-report and the commonality for how it is used to identify the
impact of mindfulness techniques. The other relates to the difficulty of measuring the impact of mindfulness.

Social workers identified knowing if mindfulness was working or not typically by anecdotal feedback from the client. One interviewee highlighted that many individuals could even self-report various mindfulness skills to you in the first place they just may not know that those skills are taking on a component of mindfulness. “I tell families on their first day is that these, mindfulness and all the skills that come with it are kind of like if you talked to a very wise elder. He could say, ‘Tell me how you figured out how to get through the tough times in your life?’” and they would probably come up with a bunch of mindfulness skills for you.” (Interviewee 2)

One interviewee described that they the family reports as a measurement of their services they are providing. This interviewee stated that family report was valuable to see what the clients sleep patterns were like, how the child was practicing the skills at home, and other observations that the family would notice that may not be as present in a clinical setting. When asked about how they measured the impact of mindfulness one interviewee stated, “I would have to say overall it would be behavior change and self and family report.” (Interviewee 2) Another interviewee said that they could measure the impact if a client self-reports that they feel prepared enough to end services. The ending of services is the goal because this shows they feel confident enough to move forward with the skills they have acquired within the services they received.

Two of the interviewees highlighted that they could measure the impact through observation. The two participants discussed that they take daily reports on their clients each time they see them on behaviors, moods, hygiene, and other factors that the individual could be
presenting. Observations from the therapist/social worker were the only formal way to measure the impact that mindfulness technique/s could have been having on their clients.

The interviewees identified few ways that they formally measure the impact of mindfulness, however, they did identify some ideas. For example, one participant highlighted that this could be measured within their client satisfaction form. The interviewee described that they did not have any formal questions in that satisfaction form to measure if mindfulness was impactful or not. Another interviewee described that they do ask their incoming clients on their intake form about their mindfulness routine if they have one, but they do not measure the impact of the techniques after that intake form.

**Conclusion**

Overall, this research project gathered information on ways that mindfulness is used in social work practice and described some of the way’s practitioners measure the impact. The researcher learned that social workers are using various techniques within their practice such as deep breathing, meditation, and DBT with a range of ages; from young children to older adults. The type of Mindfulness techniques used range from simple to complex. Some of these techniques can be learned and practiced very quickly and be easily accessible to the individual, such as three deep breaths.

Self-report is the primary way social workers are learning about what techniques are or are not working for their clients. This self-report is helping guide the social worker to either try new techniques or enhance the ones that are working. This method may not be ideal to demonstrate the efficacy of these important techniques for improving client wellbeing because there is no formal measurement set in place that can guide a social worker through the data collected.
**Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

There was multiple limitation with this research project. The first was the relatively small number of interviews that the research project had, and therefore the results cannot be generalized. More interviews would provide a greater data sample. This greater sample would provide more information into the impact mindfulness is having on various client populations across a wider variety of populations. Expanding results with a wider population sample would impact the knowledge around mindfulness within the profession and the impact with children. A greater data sample could have also provided more answers as to how mindfulness and the impact is being measured within the profession.

Future research is encouraged regarding how to measure the impact mindfulness techniques have in social work settings. For mindfulness to be considered an evidence-based practice, more research should be conducted to better understand what is and is not working for them and provide necessary justification for the efficacy of this growing part of social work practice.
Resources


