

Relevance of Applied Mindfulness in Social Work Education and Practice

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ABSTRACT

Mindfulness is a constant state of meditation focused on self-awareness, one's feelings, emotions and thought patterns. It realigns the body, mind and soul of a person in one direction to realise one's existence and that of one's surroundings and environment at large. Mindfulness helps to understand and channelise these ethical considerations for their successful application in all realms of life. Social work profession being an experiential learning field explore the facets of self-awareness, exhibition of emotions and realigning thought patterns in order to achieve a state of well-being. In it, therapeutic skills are also exhibited in order to intervene through basic social work methods like case work, group work and community organisation. The current research attempts to understand the effects of mindfulness on social work practice. This research attempts to portray a wide canvas of how applied mindfulness in social work practice leads to achieving a state of overall well-being. It dwells into the past of mindfulness as a seed germinated from meditation, its applied aspects and move towards how it is seen in present context. It also sheds light on its future implications and the resultant effects it can have on social work education and practice. It also focuses on how the arena of mindfulness and its importance in social work field is gaining importance, considering the growing complex societies where it holds as a key for maintaining sustainable living and environment at large.

Keywords: *Mindfulness, Social Psychology, Social Work Practice, Social Work Methods, Applied Mindfulness, Social Work Education, Methods of Social Work*

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INTRODUCTION

Mindfulness and Well-Being

Mindfulness is a way of opening doors of perception to have a deepened understanding of self and the surrounding environment. It transcends the diagnostic applicability in terms of sustainable practices to achieve well-being in the long run (Birtwell et al., 2019). It correlates with psychological flexibility and positive well-being.

It is also instrumental in leveraging positive effect which leads to sense of fulfillment and well-being in life (McNall et al., 2021). The realm of mindfulness also transcends in terms of positive emotions and a sense of satisfaction from life which leads to a successful work life. Practicing self-compassion, mindfulness meditation are significant for satisfying results even in workplaces (Walsh et al., 2023). Self-efficacy and mindfulness can also act as predictors for enhancing quality of life among children and adolescents (Leung & Fung, 2021). It means being aware of present moment, being aware of one's breath, sense of being alive and awareness of one's surroundings and environment.

There is literature in the form of several well-known books that talks about subjective well-being. Practicing gratitude, positive thinking, managing stress, trauma, living in present are the facets which ensure subjective well-being (Sirgy, 2008). Mindfulness-based approaches have been effective in dealing with facets of well-being like managing stress, depression, trauma and anxiety (Parsons et al., 2022).

Studies also support that mindfulness coupled with a developed self-connection and meaning in life of an individual can increase the subjective well-being (Klussman et al., 2022). Empirical evidences in the form of studies show linkage between positive effect mindfulness and cognitive behavioural therapy can have on aspects mental health concerns, particularly in terms of dealing with depression and anxiety issues among university students (Brown et al., 2023). The realm of mindfulness transcends the domains of work, life and search for meaning out of one's life (Attwood et al., 2020).

Empirical evidence suggests that there is reciprocal relationship between mindfulness and subjective well-being when it comes to measuring and achieving improvements in day to day living (Ma & Xiang, 2023). A strong and significant relationship also endures between the adapting to the nature of employment, which results in increasing quality of employment (Esenaliev & Ferguson, 2019).

Studies also point out that mindfulness based programmes, apart from being effective in clinical settings, have potential to enhance self-compassion among humans in general (Golden et al., 2021).

In all, mindfulness helps to inculcate positive emotions, a successful work life, enhancing quality of life among children and adolescents. It can also result in increased subjective well-being, positive effects on mental health and enhanced self-compassion. It has potentiality to be used as a reflective pedagogy in social work education fields across the world. The resultant effect of applied mindfulness leads to overall well-being of a person. It involves both concentration and awareness of these things which keep humans away from tendency of getting distracted by the pool of thoughts hovering over mind which has tendency to block them from being in the present moment.

Past

In early years, mindfulness training was imparted to the elderly population coupled with other techniques like transcendental meditation. This was closely associated with increasing longevity among elderly population with a sense of contentment with life. Mindfulness was earlier seen as a general way of functioning through which an individual reconstructs the environment (Alexander et al., 1989). This substantiates that mindfulness is a cultivable practice that has to do with paying attention and being aware in the here and now, which is originated out of meditation. Religions like Buddhism has always kept mindfulness at the core of its meditative and contemplative practices. It has been described as a gateway to attain Nirvana. It was earlier seen as coherent phenomenological aspect to describe the nature of mind, emotions and developing highly conscientised practices (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). The application of mindfulness as a meditative practice has been, since long, adopted in short-term psychotherapy, which is given in clinical settings. Meditation has been described in varied religious, philosophical, cultural and social texts and contexts. Of which, the Buddhist traditions have been successful in transcending the philosophical concept of meditation into its practical use in the form of mindfulness.

The technique of mindfulness has been used in form of meditation, observing one's breath, concentration on body posture, repulsiveness on functioning of body parts. It was seen as a medium of self-connection within an individual, which restricted its framework to be seen as a meditative practice (Klussman et al., 2020). These activities were initially

concerned with practice of meditation carried out by the Buddhist monks, sages and lamas, which resulted in their heightened state of awareness of present moment. Though, a gradual shift can be seen in terms of its application. The concept of mindfulness is now seen from an applied perspective across different disciplines in order to get benefits out of it.

Disciplines like psychology and philosophy have developed itself by analysing the human experiences, emotions, thoughts, perceptions, etc. Mindfulness has been helpful in realigning these facets in order to achieve a sense of well-being (Deatherage, 1975).

The growing interest in applied mindfulness has opened up new possibilities. This has shifted its focus to measure its applicability. Scales like Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) which helps to measure relationship of mindfulness-based interventions and its effect on brain activity (Van Dam et al., 2010). It was also included in as a part of medicine and psychology with the advent of Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) by John Kabat Zinn. It also led to development of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) which was extensively used to deal with psychological problems. It has a capacity to enhance subjective well-being by increasing positive effect (Xu et al., 2016). However, its methodological limitations are yet to be explored through future research in order to provide strong evidences in this regard (Gu et al., 2016).

Present

Mindfulness has permeated in the modern popular culture (Hick, 2016). A change can be seen in terms of shifting focus of mindfulness towards its applied aspects. There has been a meteoric rise of mindfulness as an applied concept in the West. It certainly pertains to achieve overall well-being. The spirit of mindfulness is deeply rooted in spirituality and religion and removing it can result to distortion of its very base (Bretherton, 2017). A steep rise in availability of various courses, workshop related to develop mindfulness as a skill to achieve well-being shows its rising significance to manage life in modern and complex societies (Birtwell et al., 2019).

With the passage of time, methods of mindfulness like relaxation, guided meditation, mindfulness meditation, has helped to realise the sense of self among individual practitioners and use it as effective tool for therapeutic intervention with clients in medical and social settings. It has also been helpful to student as well as education practitioners to deal with stressors arising out of combining experiences at personal, work and

academic level. It has also been instrumental to increase the endurance to handle situations arising in personal as well as professional lives through self-dwelling realisations which in turn results into an altered consciousness (Birnbaum, 2008).

Mindfulness as a means of achieving well-being, has also, been effective in teaching professions. It is instrumental in stimulating children learning environment for enhancing their socio-emotional learning and the same has also been employed in form of interventions (Harris et al., 2016).

It is increasingly been applied while working with adolescents and youth in the domains of effective implementation of life skills. Empirical data also suggests that it produces healthy environment across all age groups, particularly adolescents and youth. Recently, meeting present needs and aspirations of youth in developing countries has been in focus of policies and programmes related to development as Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBI) have capacity to help children, adolescents and youth, to develop increased cognitive performance and stress resilience (Goodman et al., 2017; Ushie & Udoh, 2016).

The realm of applied mindfulness has been explored with a wide range of recently popular meditative practices like walking meditation, sitting meditation, practicing art of compassion, cultivating practice of deep listening. These practices can be developed through regular cultivation of mindfulness by any person which helps to derive utmost satisfaction from the life that is led with full awareness (Kabat-Zinn, 2017).

Future

The exploratory shift in perceiving mindfulness as a concept of self-contemplation practice in ancient times towards its systematic application to diverse fields has widened opportunities for further research in this area. The conception and practice of mindfulness interventions in current scenario has shown large differences in its applicability. The decision to see it as universal or a distinct practice can become a future direction of research in this area (Chiesa & Malinowski, 2011).

The growing interest of different fields to explore mindfulness and its applied aspects has created a novel interest to develop more precise and accurate scales of its measurement. This can be evident through the field of neuroscience which has recently focused on studying the highly meditative brains of monks and lamas in order to arrive at possible assimilations between healthy brain and meditation. It has potential to

open the possibilities of new advancements in the field of neuroscience and neuroplasticity as studies in this regard have also exhibited a range of stable patterns of brain activity (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

Contemplative interventions in using mindfulness to achieve well-being can also give new insights in this field to transcend its benefits to other realms of life (Harris et al., 2016). Digital mindfulness-based intervention has garnered significant research interests which can act as effective medium to transcend its benefit to the larger society. Empirical studies in this regard also point out effectiveness of digital approach to teach mindfulness which can lead to improved attention, stress reduction and reduction in depression and anxiety (Mrazek et al., 2019).

Mindfulness and Social Work Profession: A Coequality

Social work is a profession which involves the practitioner into different set of practices and models of intervention. This requires continuous physical and cognitive engagement. The areas of work in this profession are diversified and include working with most marginalised group of people comprising of individuals suffering from chronic or terminal illnesses, anxiety, depression, trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and with different segments of population like women, children, aged, LGBTQI, etc. These areas need a focused and professional intervention in order to bring adjustment capacity within people to deal with arising situations.

It tends to push practitioners to come out of their comfort zones. It is the profession requiring focused mind and practice and derives its strength from experiential based learning. Practitioners, as students, are supposed to undergo the field work as a teaching and learning based outcome on which their gradation is marked as a part of their overall social work education training. During fieldwork, they experience visceral reality along with interplay of societal dimensions that gives it a form of social issue. They often encounter the reality of suffering of clients or service user which they come across. In doing so, they have intense psychological and emotional engagement in terms of intervention and involvement with clients and their problems. This may affect their mental health and overall well-being. The practice of right mindfulness helps to regulate the mental health and well-being of student as well as educator in social work practice. How to handle strong emotions, how to take care of anger, how to be relax, how to release tension in mind, establishing compassionate listening, etc. Thus, mindfulness transcends from merely benefiting an

individual to benefitting the environment around. It has the capacity to tackle the roots of injustice and violence and converting it towards the enduring happiness of an individual, group and community at large.

In social work, case work, group work and community organisation are the basic methods through which the values and principles of social work profession are operationalised. These methods help practitioners as well as students to extend their enabling hand across all ages and sections of the society. The ethical considerations of the profession like serving humanity, realising the dignity and worth of an individual, importance of human relationships, integrity, competence and social justice, are necessary to apply while practicing it. Mindfulness helps to understand and channelise these ethics for their successful application. It gives clarity to see these challenges as a part of structural problems which tend to demarcate individuals over one another (Hick, 2016). It helps to create and enhance atmosphere of concentration, socio-emotional learning of oneself and others and also support the practitioner's well-being. The emotional and mental exhaustion through constant attempts to find constructive ways of building resilience at various levels of society, makes the profession more challenging. This signifies the need to rejuvenate one's mind, body and soul to meet the demands of the changing societal concoctions.

The fact of applying intervention strategies according to the societal needs cannot be sidelined in social work field for a meaningful, professional and guided intervention. But, most of the clients struggling to adjust the new and sudden change or collapse of their support systems find it difficult to cope with it, also signifies the need to self-building. Mindfulness transcends the capacity of an individual to be presently oriented in the here and now instead of contemplating about past and future. Being conscious about present is the first step to realise the need of an hour and to accumulate strength to deal with the situation at hand. It is a practical guide to meditation.

As a social work educator and practitioner, the teacher should always strive to teach students a well-rounded and considerate approach towards resolving conflicts in the society. An institution's approach, normally is to have expectations from all its members to contribute and support the existing learning environment. Any deviance from it is seen as unskillful or unwanted and against the existing learning environment. Social work education tenets are rooted in experiential learning pattern wherein a student practitioner tries to apply the learnt concepts in field. One of the important aspects of this type of learning is its process also evolves

an individual who is practicing the profession. Through mindful self-reflection as well as being in present moment leads to clarity and nurturing qualities of kindness, respect, self-consideration as well as consideration of clients with whom the practitioner works. It helps to develop a non-dualistic approach towards orientation of self, environment and the client.

CONCLUSION

Exploration of mindfulness and its attempts to permeate in to different spheres of life has also gained momentum to see it as most sought after skill in the new age dimensions of living. Much has been talked about the required set of skills to deal in the world of volatility where the twenty-first century competencies like character & strength building has high potential if implemented at school levels (Lavy, 2020). Mindfulness is instrumental in building these skills to transform and make lives more meaningful. It has also provided various platforms on which, potential to explore its clinical and social implications can be built towards a better and heightened understanding of living life with consciousness (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

Though the current exploration of mindfulness is characterised by conceptual ambiguity as universally applicable concept but it is seen as inherent quality of human consciousness which can give a new ray of hope to proceed and explore its new dimensions. Its growing popularity can lead to new challenges of measuring and evaluating mindfulness in ways excluding post-experience self-reports (Terzimehić et al., 2019).

Mindfulness is a meditation put in practice in order to consciously see and experience the present context. It has potential to permeate into different spheres of life like health, employment, social outcome, environment, attitude as well as in other wall of life. Mindfulness being one of the effective ways of experiencing well-being, holds the key in this modern and complex diaspora of societies to achieve a heightened sensitivity, awareness and compassion towards oneself, one's surroundings and environment at large.

Social work is a practice-based profession. The evidence-based approach of teaching and learning in this profession further reiterates the need of changing intervention strategies with changing connotations of the socio-cultural aspects of society. Mindfulness helps to get a grasp of these changing landscapes through being consciously aware of it. The

present awareness brings alignment in thought pattern towards active listening, listening with compassion and intervening keeping in mind the values and principles of the social work profession. The evidence of using mindfulness as pedagogical tool in reducing stress, anxiety, improving mental and physical health is available but its use in social work education is yet to be explored.

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