



Introducing mindfulness moments in the classroom

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Introduction

There is growing interest in the mind-body strategies to reduce stress and improve overall well-being. Stress is an inevitable part of life, which is often described as feeling overwhelmed, worried or rundown (Richards, Sheen, & Mazzer, 2014, p. 17). Stress in college students is prevalent and widespread, and often results in negative health and learning outcomes (Turner & McCarthy, 2017). Nursing students are especially prone to feel stress as they engage in new knowledge acquisition and clinical performance expectations. A study of over 89,000 U.S. College students (American College Health Association, 2015) found one third of students reporting that stress affects their academic performance. Over 40% felt dragged out, tired, or sleepy during class 3–5 days per week. The Higher Education Research Institute (2015) discovered an alarming downward trend in students' perceptions of their own mental and emotional health, and significantly greater use of mental health services. This is disturbing and disappointing news for educators because stress is known to negatively affect health and learning (Turner & McCarthy, 2017). Stress can affect a person's mental, physical, emotional and spiritual well-being (Seaward, 1994), which could result in a series of health issues including headache, back pain, high blood pressure, depression, anxiety, fatigue, low energy, insomnia, irritability and decreased immunity (Bazarko, 2014). It is a challenge for students to pay attention and be fully engaged in class when they have these stress-related health issues. In addition, stress can cause an inability to concentrate or make sense of incoming information, decreasing memory and thereby affecting grades (Vogel & Schwab, 2016).

Mindfulness is the practice of “paying attention to your thoughts, emotions, and other experiences on a moment-to-moment basis, without judgment” (Siegel, 2016). The regular practice of mindfulness has many benefits, including improved attentional efficiency (Burger,

2015), stress reduction (van der Riet, Levett-Jones, & Aquino-Russell, 2018), relaxation, calm mind (Bazarko, 2014), reduced rumination, boosts to working memory, less emotional reactivity, and relationship satisfaction, to name a few (Davis & Hayes, 2012). Meditation is one of many tools used for developing mindfulness (van der Riet et al., 2018, p. 201). Nursing students could benefit from an introduction to mindfulness and meditation practices to reduce their stress and improve their overall well-being, increasing their potential for learning. In addition, developing a routine of mindfulness meditation could result in students being more “present” or “in the moment” in other areas of their lives (Bazarko, 2014; Vankuiken, Bradley, Harland, & King, 2017).

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to describe an educational strategy that can be used in the classroom to manage student stress and fatigue while encouraging engagement, focus and learning. The authors, two nurse educators, teach a two-hour health promotion course to 64 junior students who are in their first semester of a rigorous accelerated baccalaureate nursing program. The course is taught late in the day, after students have attended two previous courses, equaling 6 h of class time. As they enter the classroom students often appear sleepy, tired, and disengaged. Many appear preoccupied, as they have busy lives complicated by managing a full load of college courses (16 credits), part-time/full time employment and family obligations.

Being familiar with stress management principles and literature relating relaxation to learning (Benson & Proctor, 2010; Conley, Travers, & Bryant, 2012; McConville, McAleer, & Hahne, 2017; Schwind et al., 2017), the educators implement a 5–10 min “Mindfulness Moment” at the beginning of class each week. During this time, students are taught basic principles of mindfulness and relaxation, then

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guided through a brief meditative practice. The aims of the intervention are to 1) give students the chance to transition from the previous classes to the current class, 2) calm their minds enough to increase learning, and 3) increase student engagement during the ensuing class time. Over four semesters the educators continued to consider the intervention to determine if it was a workable and reasonable use of class time, and to assess student perceptions. After review of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) application, it was decided that this project was exempt from IRB oversight, as it did not meet the definitions of human subjects' research according to federal regulations.

The mindfulness moment intervention

During the first class meeting of each semester, faculty provide a twenty minute overview of the prevalence of nursing student stress (Alzayyat, 2014; Cleary, Horsfall, Baines, & Happell, 2012; Turner & McCarthy, 2017) and the importance of self-care (Crane & Ward, 2016). The relaxation response (Benson & Proctor, 2010) is briefly explained, and a video about “calming the monkey mind” (Rinpoche, 2016) is shown. After the introductory material is discussed, expectations for the mindfulness meditation intervention, which we call a “Mindfulness Moment,” are outlined. In subsequent class meetings, the Mindfulness Moment begins promptly at the beginning of class. Students are asked to be on time so they will not distract others during the quiet time. Lights are dimmed and the classroom doors are closed. Laptops and cell phones are stowed. Participation is voluntary. If any students do not wish to participate, they are not obligated to do so, and asked to sit quietly during the mindfulness meditation.

To begin the mindfulness meditation, students are instructed to get into a comfortable position. They are then invited to focus on their breath and observe their thoughts without judgment. After that, students are guided through a 5–10 minute relaxation exercise. By offering them a different exercise in each class, students are able to explore the possibilities and decide what might work best for them. For example, they are guided through mindfulness meditation with a focus on the breath, mantra-based meditation, music-based meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, remembered wellness, loving kindness meditation, and a simple body scan. During the last class of the course for each semester, relaxation exercises are briefly reviewed and students are given 10 min of quiet time to guide their own relaxation process. Each of the Mindfulness Moment meditations are described in Table 1 and can be adapted for use in the classroom.

Student feedback

Faculty felt it was important to elicit student feedback in order to accommodate student needs and perceptions regarding Mindfulness Moments. An anonymous midterm student survey was conducted for the first cohort to experience Mindfulness Moments, as faculty adjusted course materials for this additional weekly intervention. The survey asked students to comment on four open-ended questions about the course: what was going well, what wasn't going well, suggestions for improvement, and feedback about Mindfulness Moments. Out of 63 students who completed the survey, 59 (93.6%) of the students provided positive comments such as “love it”, “really like it” and “it is a nice moment to relax”. Only one student responded in the negative, stating, “Not a fan.” Six students suggested that the Mindfulness Moments should be longer, and three students suggested doing the Mindfulness Moments at the end of class so they could go home relaxed. Five students mentioned that it made them tired or sleepy. Other themes included an appreciation of being introduced to mindfulness meditation. Several students stated that they used the relaxation methods in other areas, such as while standing in line at the grocery store, or studying for exams in other classes. Based on these positive results, the educators decided to implement Mindfulness Moments as part of every class session for the subsequent three semesters that the

Table 1
Mindfulness meditation practice descriptions

Mindfulness meditation practice descriptions	
Focus on the Breath	Invite students to notice what it feels like to inhale and exhale, observing movement of muscles, the air moving through nostrils, posture, while releasing judgment and expectations. When mind wanders, call it back to observing the breath.
Mantra-based Meditation	Repeat a symbol, word, or phrase during mindfulness meditation. Students choose a mantra to repeat, such as “Love” or “I am at peace” or “Om” or a positive affirmation. When mind wanders, return focus to chosen mantra.
Music-based Meditation	Ask students to focus the mind on music during mindfulness meditation. Use slow-paced, peaceful music without lyrics. When mind wanders, focus on the music.
Progressive Muscle Relaxation	Verbally guide student to tense and then relax one large muscle group at a time, noticing the difference between tensing and relaxing.
Remembered Wellness	Verbally guide students to remember and focus on a time they were at optimal health. Engage all 5 senses by asking students to notice how optimal wellness felt physically, emotionally, spiritually, socially, cognitively, etc.
Body Scan	With each inhale, ask students to mentally scan body from toe to head, searching for areas of tension. With each exhale, release the tension from head to toe.
Guided Imagery (Special Place)	Verbally guide students through an imaginary scenario involving all 5 senses. For example: Ask students to create a “special place” in their imaginations and notice what they feel, see, hear, smell, and taste while they are in the imaginary place.
Loving Kindness	Verbally guide students to focus on feelings of compassion and wishing others well. For example: Ask students to imagine other living beings and silently repeat three times, “May you live with ease, happiness, and good health.”

course was taught.

In the anonymous university initiated final course evaluations, students are asked to comment about instructor and course effectiveness. No specific questions are asked about the Mindfulness Moments intervention, so all student comments are voluntary. Students have not written negative comments about the intervention, and continue to provide positive statements to describe their opinions about Mindfulness Moments.

Student comments illustrate the concept that lowering stress increases learning, which was one of the aims of this educational strategy:

I loved the mindfulness moments! I learned so many great things in this class because they made it non stressful, fun and interactive.

I loved the meditation moment that we had in this course. It was so relaxing and was a great way to start class!

I also found the meditation at beginning of class very effective for my focus.

Mindfulness Moments were very effective in decreasing levels of stress during first semester! Loved it!

Students expressed desire to continue Mindfulness Moments throughout the curriculum:

Meditation was magical. Can't wait to see it in the rest of the program.

The meditations used at beginning of class were the best and this technique should be used in every class!

Students commented on how they applied mindfulness to other areas of their lives:

Relaxation techniques have really helped me in my life.

Loved the daily meditation! She [instructor] got me started meditating on my own!

Discussion

In an already busy and compact curriculum, educators may not be able to spare 10 min at the beginning of every class. Taking a few minutes of “down time” before class can be very beneficial, resulting in increased learning and memory. Faculty are encouraged to find holistic interventions to assist students with reducing stress and anxiety in the classroom (Manocchi, 2017). Consistently, opening each class session with a mindfulness strategy, even for a minute is found to increase presence and focus (Vankuiken et al., 2017). Burger and Lockhart (2017) determined that first semester nursing students exhibited increased attention, lower perceived stress and improved mindfulness after four weeks of daily ten-minute meditations. In this course, taking 10 min was initially a challenge but the benefits outweighed the risk. As demonstrated in the above student comments, the perception of some students was that they could engage more in class when relaxed, their stress levels were lowered and they were able to focus on the content being taught.

A potential challenge to this educational intervention is that educators may not feel confident, comfortable or experienced enough to teach relaxation methods to groups of students. Keep in mind that implementing Mindfulness Moments is not like teaching a formal meditation course, but constitutes allowing time for students to relax and focus on the present. Simply giving students the opportunity to slow down and “just be” for a few minutes before class starts does not take an expert to execute. There are multiple online resources, scripts and videos that can be used by instructors to guide students through a few minutes of quiet time and can range from one, three, five or 10 min in length. Web-based sources offers a variety of approaches faculty can select, depending on their comfort level in facilitating mindfulness meditations. Demonstrations, examples and strategies along with frequently asked questions are available for faculty consider. It is also possible to simply invite students to close their laptops, silence their phones, and sit quietly for a few minutes, letting go of potential distractions. When a student can find a comfortable position and focus on breathing, clearing the mind is helpful to influence relaxation and presence (Manocchi, 2017).

Another opportunity is to allow students familiar and comfortable with mindfulness strategies to lead their classmates through various meditations, breathing exercises and guided imagery. Students and faculty can collect mindfulness meditation resources, linking them to scripts, music, videos along with other information about meditation, campus support resources for them to use an explore further. As students advance through the program, they identify stressful events such as high stakes testing where they ask faculty or classmates to lead them in mindfulness meditations.

As evidence-based practice is introduced throughout nursing programs, students appreciate learning the evidence behind stress management and mindfulness meditation techniques. Research findings and resources are plentiful in the literature and can be presented in class or students can be assigned to search on their own. Faculty can also direct students to national initiatives focused on student health and learning or healthy behavior for nurses. For example, the American Nurses Association and Healthy Nurse, Healthy Nation Grand Challenge focus on nurse wellness and self-care, providing updated resources for combatting stress, preventing nurse burnout and compassion fatigue (ANA, n.d.).

Conclusion

Introducing Mindfulness Moments into nursing curricula may lead to positive self-care in reducing stress in students' personal and professional lives. Having exposure for consecutive weeks throughout the semester may establish new patterns and behaviors. The authors found that incorporating an intervention such as Mindfulness Moments can be easily implemented and is a reasonable use of class time. It can be a

win-win for faculty and students alike. Students may be more engaged in class discussions and activities while faculty appreciate an attentive and involved audience. Decreasing stress can promote the health of students both physically and psychologically, and improve classroom engagement and learning.

Mindfulness Moment meditations resulted in student satisfaction and perceived learning engagement. At the conclusion of every semester that Mindfulness Moments were integrated into the course, students requested that they be offered in subsequent courses throughout the curriculum. Focused research needs to be done to measure stress and learning outcomes for mindfulness-based approaches. Areas for further exploration include the following:

- Is 10 min once a week enough time to improve learning and decrease stress?
- What learning outcomes could be measured from regular use of mindfulness meditations?
- What are objective measures for student engagement and focus during class?
- How can mindfulness meditation be incorporated effectively across a nursing program curriculum?
- How can mindfulness meditation skills influence patient-centered clinical nursing practice?

Declarations of interest

None.

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