

Using Mindfulness to Manage Stress in the Classroom and Beyond

Ann Beck and Heidi Verticchio, CSD
CTLT Teaching and Learning Symposium, 2019

Every program has areas that increase stress for students. Excessive, unmanaged stress cannot only result in debilitating physical conditions, it can also negatively interfere with learning and overall attitude. One particularly stressful activity for CSD seniors is the graduate school application process.

Mindfulness has been shown to help individuals manage stress. To help our students create a strong application with the least amount of stress possible, we created an Independent Study (IS) designed to teach students about both the application process and mindfulness. Thirty-three students signed up for the IS and we met as a class for 50 minutes each week.

As our “textbook” we purchased “The Mindful Twenty-Something” by Holly B. Rogers and distributed it to each student in the IS. The first class period was an introductory class in which we described the course, collected informed consent, and took pre-measures. The second class period was devoted to discussing and practicing mindfulness. Every fourth class period was entirely devoted to mindfulness. All other classes began with 5 minutes of breath work and 2 minutes of journaling before discussing the stressful topic of graduate admissions.

MEASURES

The authors designed a pre- and post-questionnaire to determine students’ (a) levels of competence in completing each aspect of graduate applications, (b) perception of the most stressful aspect of the process, (c) whether or not they engaged in stress management practices, (d) what the practices were in which students engaged, (e) their definition of mindfulness, and (f) how they rated their level of self-compassion. The questionnaire consisted of seven 5-point Likert type rating scale items, one yes/no item, and three open-ended questions. The students also completed the Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2016) at the beginning and the end of the course.

RESULTS

Questionnaire: Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Tests were calculated for the Likert type items. Pre- and post-differences were significant for all items. Students’ self ratings of confidence increased for all aspects of the graduate application process. Mean rating of self-compassion was higher at the end of the semester. At the beginning of the semester, 18 of 33 reported engaging in stress management practices. At the end of the semester, 28 of 31 who responded engaged in stress management practices. At pretest, no one indicated they engaged in mindfulness/breath practices, at post-test 19 listed this as a stress management practice.

SCS results: Paired t-test indicated a statistically significant difference in mean SCS scores existed between pre- and post-tests. Mean pre-score = 2.81 (SD=.74); mean post-score=3.17 (SD=.79). That is, students’ self-compassion as measured by the SCS increased.

CONCLUSIONS

A course carefully designed to help students navigate the graduate application process increased confidence in ability to complete the process appropriately and decreased perceived stress about it. The addition of a mindfulness component resulted in an increase in their self-compassion and in their engagement in stress management practices, most notably mindfulness practices.