

# Mindfulness Practice In Social Work Education And Practice

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**ABSTRACT:** *In recent times, mindfulness-based approach has been an emerging area of study within social work and the research base for mindfulness in social work is relatively small and more research has been dedicated in understanding the impacts and mechanisms through which mindfulness training influences physical and psychological functioning and the application of mindfulness in various contexts of social work practice. Mindfulness is defined as the way of paying attention to the experiences in the present moment in an open, intentional and non-judgemental manner (Kabat – Zinn, 1994). Mindfulness is an approach to help people reduce stress and enhance self-care, compassion and well-being. Practicing mindfulness would inculcate awareness of thoughts, feelings, behaviour and stimulate change in self and enable people to become more familiar with their ways of being: their thought processes and habits, how they experience and react to emotions and physical sensations and how these influence their behaviour and daily lives. Mindfulness is a practice of self-regulation and introspection and when this mindfulness practice is applied in social work settings, it is multi-functional, broad, inclusive and encompasses scope. The utility of mindfulness practice in social work reverberates in many perspectives of social relations and could effectively be applied by social workers at many levels of practice. A conceptual model proposed by Hick suggests that mindfulness practice in social work at three levels – micro, mezzo and macro and the role of mindfulness is multidimensional and multifunctional. At the micro level practice, the mindfulness practice could be harnessed as an internal source to strengthen the individual's own capacity and development. At mezzo level, it could be utilized as a soft skill approach to create open – mindedness and flexibility and at macro level, analysis of structural causes of injustice could be done in the policy world to facilitate social change.*

**Keywords:** *Mindfulness – based practice, mindful social work, mindfulness, social work*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent times, mindfulness-based approach has been an emerging area of study within social work. An article written by Kate Jackson states that many companies like Google and Apple have recognized the enormity of mindfulness which in turn help their employees to do their jobs creatively. This article explores how mindfulness contributes into social work education and in social work practice and also how social workers can improve their effectiveness in social work education and in practice by using this simple practice of mindfulness.

### Meaning of Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the act of being intensely aware of what we sensing and feeling at every moment without interpretation or judgment.

#### **Definition of Mindfulness**

“Mindfulness means paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally.” – Jon Kabat Zinn

This is the more widely accepted definition in practice and in academic literature and in this definition he focusses on conscious attention on the “right here, right now”.

“Mindfulness is the practice of maintaining a nonjudgmental state of heightened or complete awareness of one’s thoughts, emotions, or experiences on a moment-to-moment basis.”- Merriam –Webster Dictionary

“Mindfulness is the practice of being aware of your body, mind, and feelings in the present moment, thought to create a feeling of calm.”- Cambridge Dictionary

#### **The Construct of Mindfulness: What it is?**

The term “mindfulness” is used to refer to the psychological state of awareness and it is a characterological trait of practice of processing information, moment-by-moment awareness, without attachment to any particular point of view.

#### **Purpose of Mindfulness**

##### **Knowing the Mind**

Our mind and thinking creates sufferings and problems and it is highly influenced by ego-centrism, attachment and discrimination. Practicing reflection without judgement discovers more about one’s motivations, feelings, reactions and become more meta-aware. Thus it is important to attune our mind and thinking, with a dominating focus on knowing rather than judgement. Knowing or aware of one’s own thoughts paves way for balanced acceptance of the present moment.

##### **Training the Mind**

The practice of mindfulness is having the powerful ability to train and shape our minds as like cognitive reframing in CBT. When we become more ‘knowing’ about our thoughts, feelings, and motivations, we can explore ways to be “kinder, more forgiving and spacious with ourselves”. We can foster the capacity to be more relaxed in spite of what’s occurring around us, cultivate the development of “generosity, ethical virtue, courage, discernment, and the capacity to release clinging”. When we train our mind to be open and to receive the present moment just as it is, without either clinging to it or rejecting to it helps us not to complicate things.

##### **Freeing the Mind**

Being non-judgmental is one of the principles in social work practice, freeing the mind is based on the ‘capacity to release clinging’. Practicing to free the mind is detaching oneself from non-beneficial thoughts such as anger, judgement, defilement that we usually clinging to, would help to pass through the unwanted emotions, remaining relaxed and opening oneself to be positive.

#### **Components of Mindfulness**

**Decentering** - To observe one’s thoughts and feelings as temporary events in the mind, rather than reflections of the self that are necessarily true.

**Defusion & disidentification** – thoughts as impermanent mental facts.

**Self – regulation of attention** – ability to self-monitor one’s deployment of attention, which includes maintaining sustained attention, ignoring distracting or irrelevant stimuli, staying

alert to task goals, and coordinating one's attention during a task and attention regulation i.e directed to the present moment.

### **Mechanisms in Mindfulness**

The following are some of the mechanisms followed in mindfulness practice:

- ❖ Exposure (with habituation)
- ❖ Acceptance
- ❖ Cognitive Change
- ❖ Self-Management
- ❖ Relaxation
- ❖ Response Prevention
- ❖ Inhibition of secondary elaborative processing
- ❖ Doing mode to being mode
- ❖ Introspection
- ❖ Counter experiential avoidance
- ❖ Learn to respond reflectively
- ❖ Habituation
- ❖ Tolerance of uncertainty

### **Benefits of Mindfulness Practice**

#### **Improved Working Memory**

In a research study done by Jha and colleagues in 2010 among military participants with control group and experimental group, it was found that mindfulness meditation practice increased the working memory capacity and the participants reported greater positive effect and lowered negative effect.

#### **Lower levels of Anxiety**

In a study done by Goldin and Gross in 2010, Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction training in social anxiety disorder (SAD) patients helped them to lower their anxiety levels and depression.

#### **Reduced Emotional Reactivity**

The role of mindfulness meditation supports in 'emotive reactivity' which is empirically tested where the participants with wide-ranging experience in mindfulness meditation were better able to disengage emotionally in which they showed greater focus on the even when emotionally upsetting pictures were shown. Slowing down and active listening are essential to ward off emotional reactivity.

#### **Reduces Stress**

Mindfulness Meditation - a research proven way to reduce stress. Mindfulness training has also been linked to lower stress levels. Mindfulness meditation can improve both physical health and mental health and it is a powerful tool to relieve stress and improve well-being.

### **Importance of Mindfulness**

1. Being mindful can help us manage our emotions and feelings in stressful situations;
2. Through practice, we can learn to decenter from negative 'ways of being' and free our minds;
3. Mindfulness practice allows us to step back and accept our own mental processes without judgment;
4. It can help us to cope with feelings of anxiety, and even depression;

5. Mindfulness practice in everyday life can lead us to really savor experiences with new perspectives;
6. Practicing mindfulness in relationships (as we'll see in a second) can help us listen better, appreciate others more, and get along at work;
7. Research suggests that mindfulness helps us in attentional processes;
8. We may even be able to manage physical pain using mindfulness;
9. Mindfulness practice helps us not to react instantly with emotion;
10. We can become more aware of how we practice self-compassion; and
11. Being mindful may assist our attempts to build resilience.

### **Mindfulness in Social Work Education and Social Work Practice**

Social Workers are problem solvers, which is inherently creative. Mindfulness increases the neural pathways for body regulation, balancing emotion, attunement, modulating fear, having a more flexible mind, and increasing insight. As a therapist or practitioner, it is important to be much more aware of their own feelings and emotions and being mindful helps social workers with self care and when the practitioners deal with extreme difficult things, mindfulness can help them not feel overloaded. Social workers and their clients can also benefit from the release of judgment that comes with mindfulness. Being mindful helps one to center themselves i.e conscious focus or conscious attention. Mindfulness can help us cope with depression, boost our psychological well-being, improves our memory better, to deal with anxiety or stress, to improve attentional skills and being mindful of our emotions helps us to toggle to more positive thoughts and mindsets which would have a positive implications in terms of relationships as well as to work better. Mindfulness practices were found to enable to hold the emotional upset arising from the distress and trauma people presented within day-to-day social work interactions, and help mitigate emotional reactions 'spilling over' from one exchange to another.

Social Work Education is also increasingly addressing and including mindfulness practices. Social Work educators are using mindfulness practices, especially in direct practice and field education courses, both as a form of self-care for students and to enhance direct practice skills of attending, therapeutic presence, fostering an accepting and non-judgemental stance towards clients. Mindfulness practices can help social work students and interns to reduce compassion fatigue and improve their demanding coursework and field education expectations. With the increased presence of mindfulness in social work education and practice, it is important to identify training and competency guidelines for the effective use of these practices.

## **2. CONCLUSION**

Given the potentially demanding nature of teaching, efforts are underway to develop practices that can improve the well-being of social work educators and practitioners, including interventions based on mindfulness. Mindfulness was generally associated with positive outcomes in relation to most measures. Quantitative findings confirmed that participants who received the mindfulness training reported increase in their perceived level of mindfulness. Mindfulness offers emotion regulation skills that support productive responses to error. Mindfulness may be a meaningful and impactful in social work training for educators, practitioners and students with a wide range of cognitive, affective, attitudinal and behavioural benefits.

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