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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The benefits of a mindfulness program for university students: A qualitative exploration on intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships

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Abstract

This study explores the perceived benefits of a mindfulness program for university students, focusing on changes in their intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships. The findings underscore increased self-compassion and self-care and diminished levels of self-judgement. Mindfulness programs could be incorporated into counseling services in higher education to improve students' well-being.

KEYWORDS

college counseling, higher education, mindfulness, relationships, self-compassion

INTRODUCTION

Western societies have witnessed unprecedented growth in interest in mindfulness in the last 20 years, with applications in diverse domains including the military, hospitals, workplaces, prisons, and schools (Hyland, 2016). Some have argued that this interest originates in an innate human need for a practice supporting connection and compassion that can guide daily life in increasingly secularized times (Crane, 2017). At the same time, this growing interest has been galvanized by research evidence demonstrating the positive effects of mindfulness on a wide range of outcomes. Studies have linked mindfulness to decreased anxiety, depression, and irritability (Baer et al., 2006), reduced symptoms of stress and gloom (K. W. Brown et al., 2007), decline in overthinking, worry, excessive stress, and concentration problems (Carmody & Baer, 2008), and happiness and meaning in life (Bellin, 2015). Mindfulness is considered beneficial for young people and has been increasingly applied in educational settings around the world (Albrecht et al., 2012).

Mindfulness has been advocated in higher education as well to promote mental health among university students and to stimulate contemplative and reflexive learning (Bush, 2011). One argument

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is that students need help developing their capacities for self-care and self-compassion to improve their well-being, ethical sensitivities, and civic engagement (Heineberg, 2016). In addition, the inclusion of mindfulness in university settings can help students to gain adaptive coping strategies and awareness of their mind-body connection. This can help them to make more mindful health choices and consequently cope better with stressors in the transition to university, everyday university life, and off-campus life (Ramasubramanian, 2017). Therefore, some have argued that counselling services for university students could be enhanced by the inclusion of mindfulness (Palmer & Rodger, 2009). Few universities started to offer such services particularly to international students since some evidence has indicated that international students are at high risk of psychological problems due to multiple stressors. These include anxieties about future, financial concerns, language barrier, discrimination, social isolation, loneliness, and homesickness (Arthur, 2017; L. Brown & Jones, 2013).

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Mindfulness and intrapersonal relationships

Milicevic et al. (2016) explored the impact of a mindfulness intervention with students and educators at a higher education institution and demonstrated that “participants not only reported a significant increase in non-judgmental awareness six months after the training, but also an increase in acceptance and openness towards their experiences” (p. 30). The relationship between mindfulness and well-being is partly mediated by self-compassion; one suggestion is that mindfulness cultivates a compassionate attitude that protects the practitioner against negative feelings such as guilt and self-criticism (Hollis-Walker & Colosimo, 2011). Self-compassion is defined as “a basic kindness, with a deep awareness of the suffering of oneself and of other living things, coupled with the wish and effort to relieve it” (Gilbert, 2013, p. xii). It entails being kind and understanding to the self when encountering pain or failure rather than being harsh and self-critical; perceiving one’s experiences as part of a larger human experience rather than as isolated; and not over-identifying with painful thoughts and feelings but referring to them mindfully (Neff, 2003). In addition, a self-compassionate person facing stressful life circumstances resorts to self-soothing and comfort (Smeets et al., 2014).

Self-compassion can be cultivated; for example, Smeets et al. (2014) demonstrated that an intervention focused on improving the self-compassion of female students resulted in significantly larger gains in self-compassion compared to a control group. Milicevic et al. (2016) also showed that mindfulness contributed to core skills that improve self-compassion, emotional receptivity, and self-care. Being mindful and self-compassionate can help young persons to appreciate themselves and their daily life experiences and provide them with tools that they can use to decrease stress, increase resilience, and engage more often in new experiences in a productive and healthy way (Bluth & Eisenlohr-Moul, 2017).

Mindfulness and interpersonal relationships

Whereas studies on mindfulness often focus on the individual benefits, less is known about the social and interpersonal benefits. However, one suggestion is that self-compassion and compassion for others go hand in hand (Neff & Germer, 2013). Someone who feels compassion toward others recognizes when others are in pain, feels kindness toward others, and gives them social support but also perceives social support and receives social support from others (Crocker & Canevello, 2008; Neff, 2003). In group project assignments in higher education, conflict with other group members is possible, which can hinder students’ learning and motivation in the group project. Park et al. (2018) explored the role of students’ self-compassion and compassion to others in their motivational and emotional experiences when perceiving intragroup conflict among team members. They demonstrated that compassion

for others positively influenced students' project commitment. Even when conflict occurs in a group project assignment, compassion for others may mitigate this conflict's negative influence on students' commitment to the project.

Ramasubramanian (2017) used self-reflections and self-evaluations by first-year university students and demonstrated the importance of mindfulness in enhancing students' understanding of the self and others. These findings were confirmed by Crowley & Munk (2017) who analyzed written contemplations by 28 student participants in a 15-week meditation course. Furthermore, mindfulness is associated with closeness in interpersonal relationships (K. W. Brown et al., 2007). Relationships can be improved by the individual-level benefits from mindfulness, such as positive affectivity, self-esteem and life satisfaction, and reduced anxiety, anger, hostility, depressive symptoms, and stress reactivity (K. W. Brown & Ryan, 2003). In a qualitative study of a mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) intervention by Bihari & Mullan (2014), the participants related more mindfully to their own experiences, which led to profound positive changes in their relationships with others. Their participants also reported improved communication, increased empathy, and ability to see others' perspectives. Moreover, Stewart et al. (2018) found that mindfulness predicted more of a focus on supporting and not harming others, by bringing awareness without evaluation or judgment to the present moment.

Study objectives

This study examines an 8-week mindfulness program offered to students at a Dutch university as a counselling service. The program particularly targeted international students, a vulnerable group who are more prone to experiencing psycho-social adversities (L. Brown, 2009; Sherry et al., 2010). Diverse studies on internationalization of higher education have identified that international students experience a range of challenges and stresses, such as adaptation to new academic environment, difficulties in language comprehension, culture shock, stereotyping and discrimination, alienation, homesickness, lack of friendships with local students, social isolation, and financial insecurity (Jiang & Altinyelken, 2020; Hendrickson et al., 2011). These challenges might induce considerable stress on international students, undermine their mental and physical health, and result in depression, frustration, irritability, and anxiety (Mori, 2000).

The mindfulness program aimed at developing awareness about thoughts and emotions and promoting self-compassion. It was based on MBCT, which entails experiential learning, and consists of two general elements: cultivating awareness through mindfulness practices (e.g., focusing on breathing) and developing an attitudinal framework (e.g., non-striving, acceptant, and curious) (Hopkins & Kuyken, 2012). Hence, MBCT helps practitioners "to decenter or distance from their negative thoughts and emotions" and to cultivate "non-judgmental awareness and acceptance of all experience-including thoughts" (McCown et al., 2011, p. 8). Through a qualitative exploration, this study aimed at addressing the following questions:

1. How do international students reflect upon their intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships?
2. From the perspectives of international students, what are the benefits of the mindfulness program on their intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships?

The study contributes to an under-researched field, inasmuch as offering a mindfulness program to (international) students at higher education as a counseling service is a relatively new phenomenon and researching mindfulness interventions within the counseling services is an emerging area (Chrisman et al., 2009; O'Brien & Likis-Werle, 2020). Furthermore, much research has focused on the individual benefits of mindfulness and its effects on intrapersonal factors (e.g., stress, rumination, attention); however, more recent work has begun to consider the influences of mindfulness training on interpersonal processes (Stewart et al., 2018). Moreover, most studies have looked into intrapersonal and interpersonal change processes separately (Karremans et al., 2017), while in this study both domains

are addressed. Thereby, the study underscores how these two domains are closely interrelated. Finally, there have been few qualitative studies on mindfulness (Bihari & Mullan, 2014; Tarrasch, 2015). Considering the difficulties with defining, operationalizing, and measuring mindfulness outcomes through quantitative methods, more qualitative methods have been called for within the field, with the purpose of exploring mindfulness-related constructs through in-depth exploration of the unique experiences of individuals (Cigolla & Brown, 2011). Furthermore, a qualitative approach is more suited to this study since it aims at reconstructing the individual experiences of mindfulness practice in an open-ended manner. A qualitative angle also enables a more comprehensive look at the phenomenon under investigation than is usually possible from a quantitative perspective (P. Frank et al., 2019).

The study is relevant for humanistic counseling because it concerns the implementation of a counseling service which has the potential to transform a university into a more “people responsive” and humanistically oriented organization, and due to the fact that mindfulness and its key objectives (such as promoting self-compassion) are fundamentally humanistic (e.g. explicitly cultivating curiosity, openness, and acceptance, and perceiving individuals more than a total of their thoughts, emotions and histories) (M. Frank, 2016). Furthermore, the mindfulness program as well as the research design is explicitly centered around understanding, valuing, and making sense of the research participants’ subjectively lived experiences, such as their sensations, feelings, thoughts, and opinions, to explore their personal growth and self-development, and to stimulate their awareness, self-realization, and self-actualization (see Scholl, 2008).

METHOD

The study adapts a phenomenological approach as it seeks to describe the essence of a specific phenomenon by investigating it from the perspectives and understandings of those who have experienced it (Neubauer et al., 2019). In other words, the study examines the mindfulness experiences of international students as they are subjectively lived and interpreted by them. At the same time, the study aims to “highlight general patterns and broad variations across individual interpretations of particular subjective experiences” (Hannah et al., 2017, p. 144).

Program information

The 8-week mindfulness program was initiated at a Dutch university in 2013 by two psychologists and offered since then by the Student Psychologists Center. The target group was international students, and local students were admitted to the program only when spots were available. The program aimed at addressing the psycho-social needs of international students through supporting them in dealing with stress, reducing negative thinking, and learning to be more accepting and compassionate towards one’s thoughts and feelings. It was offered multiple times a year at no cost to students and advertised through student counselors working at different departments as well as through university website.

The program was based on MBCT, with several changes to adapt it to the specific needs of university students, such as emphasizing management of study-related stress, self-compassion, and energy management. The weekly sessions took place in a regular classroom in a relatively quiet part of the building and lasted 150 min. The sessions were held in English, and they always started with a guided meditation. Afterward, depending on the thematic focus of the session, the psychologist provided some general information about human psychology, the principles of mindfulness, common setbacks and stressors among international students, and the ways in which mindfulness can help address them. This is followed by a range of diverse mindfulness exercises which could be practiced individually, in pairs or groups, such as breathing, slow tasting, drawing meditation, writing exercises, breathing,

visualization, and cognitive inquiry. Drawing meditation required students to draw something as detailed as possible with the aim of realizing how much more they can observe when they focus with full attention, and writing meditation referred to writing a personal letter to oneself to be received in 2 months as a reminder of being mindful.

After the mindfulness exercises, reflections on felt experiences, sensations, thoughts, feelings, and insights were shared with the group on voluntary basis. The psychologist tried to stimulate everyone to share their reflections and emphasized the significance of a safe, accepting, and non-judgmental space for doing so. The sessions often ended with students' general impressions about the session, and brief explanations about the homework assignments for the following week. The homework assignments varied each week, and they included a variety of exercises such as body scan, meditation, or mindfully performing a routine action (e.g., preparing breakfast, biking, or brushing teeth). Homework assignments were an indispensable part of the program, and students were expected to do them on a regular basis and report their frequency as well as personal reflections in a logbook. Practicing mindfulness regularly outside of the weekly mindfulness sessions is highly important to experience the positive outcomes of mindfulness (Chaskalson, 2014). Nevertheless, the psychologist was hesitant to pressure students to do the homework assignments regularly out of concern that such pressure might alienate students from mindfulness and might lead to perceiving mindfulness as another set of obligations.

Participants

Participants were university students enrolled in the 8-week MBCT program during the spring of 2016. With permission from the Student Psychologists Centre, which runs the program as a counselling service, all 15 enrolled students were invited through e-mail to participate in the research. Ten students gave their informed consent. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were used and identifying information was omitted. Seven female and three male students were involved in the research; their mean age was 24.4 years (range 21-27). All but one were international students, originating from Germany, China, Aruba, Canada, Italy, Turkey, and Romania/South Africa. One bachelor's program student came as an Erasmus exchange student for 6 months. The rest were staying for at least 1 year. The students were studying in various bachelor's or master's degree programs; the majority were studying Social and Behavioral Sciences (see Table 1). The psychologist who guided the weekly sessions, a behavioral

TABLE 1 Student demographic information

Pseudonyms name	Sex	Age	Nationality	Study program	Sessions attended
Julia	F	26	Germany	Bachelor—year 3	2/8
Hannah	F	24	Germany	Research master—year 2	7/8
James	M	23	China	One-year master program	8/8
Benjamin	M	25	Aruba	Bachelor—year 2	7/8
David	M	27	Romania/South Africa	One-year master program	8/8
Sarah	F	21	Canada	Bachelor—year 3	8/8
Eliza	F	26	The Netherlands/Indonesia	One-year master program	5/8
Sophie	F	22	Italy	Research master—year 2	3/8
Charlotte	F	25	Germany	Bachelor—year 3	6/8
Amy	F	25	Turkey	Research master—year 2	6/8

therapist and trained mindfulness teacher, also participated in the research. She was 42 years old when the study began.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection methods included interviews and session observations, to capture the richness and complexity of students' inner worlds, their lived experiences, and change processes throughout the mindfulness program. Interviews were also expedient in this study since they "are likely to provide greater insight into psychological mechanisms and characteristics associated with mindfulness than five-minute self-report inventories, especially because semantic complexities and response biases may be better addressed in one-on-one interactions" (Grossman & Van Dam, 2011, p. 235). Ten in-depth semi-structured individual interviews were conducted before (March 2016) and eight after (May 2016) the MBCT program. Two students dropped out of the program during its initial weeks: Julia did not feel motivated any longer and Sophie could not fit it into her busy schedule. All interviews were tape-recorded with the participants' permission. Interviews lasted 56 min on average before the program and 47 minutes afterward. The first set of interviews inquired about students' personal history, current challenges and stresses, motivations for participating in the program, and major patterns in their relating to self and others. The second set of interviews sought to understand how students experienced the sessions and the extent to which they completed homework assignments, overall perceived benefits of the program, and more specifically on their intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships. The psychologist was also interviewed to gather additional insights and to discuss the major findings.

Furthermore, the author attended the mindfulness program (with consent from participants and the psychologist) and observed seven out of the eight sessions. The author took extensive notes about the activities, the theoretical knowledge shared by the psychologist, and student reflections and discussions during the sessions. These observations were crucial for gaining insight into students' background and internal worlds, observing how they processed the mindfulness practices, for establishing good rapport, openness, and trust with them and for fostering a sense of connectedness. A year later, the psychologist and all student participants were contacted again to get feedback on the key findings and discuss their implications. Three students responded positively, and follow-up (Skype) interviews were conducted with them to inquire into their experiences with mindfulness in the past year, and to discuss the analytical conclusions and interpretations of the study.

For analysis, all 22 audiotaped interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the extensive hand-written notes from session observations were typed. Data were read for a general understanding and notes were taken about emerging observations and reflections. This exercise allowed for identification of major themes that helped address the research questions. These emerging themes were then used to develop a code list for analysis, which was subjected to some further adaptations during coding process. A computer software program (ATLAS.ti) was used for coding purposes. Once all interview material was coded, quotations for each code were then printed out and carefully read multiple times to delineate patterns of interpretation and perceptions, connections, similarities, and contrasting viewpoints. A research master student was also involved to compare the analysis and minimize any possible oversight or bias. The preliminary analysis notes were discussed, and possible dissimilarities in our understanding or interpretations were explored.

Trustworthiness of the findings were strengthened through triangulation (the use of interviews as well as session observations as research methods), member checking (returning to three international students and the psychologist following the data analysis to discuss the analytical conclusions and their interpretations), and peer checking (involving a student to reanalyze the interview data). It is also important to note that the author studied at the same university years ago as an international student. She is a regular mindfulness practitioner for 7 years and has been teaching international students for more than a decade. Some scholars argue that personal experience with mindfulness practices is a prerequisite to studying this subject (Grossman, 2008).

FINDINGS

Intrapersonal relationships

The way in which the 10 participants related to themselves varied. Student narratives generally highlighted the following aspects: self-judgment, high expectations and poor self-image; not being close to oneself; and self-compassion. Below, these aspects are elaborated, drawing on the data from the first interviews.

Self-judgment, high expectations, and poor self-image

Almost all students confided in the initial interviews that they were self-judgmental, often harsh, made comparisons with others, and had high expectations. Benjamin declared that “I am really an angry parent to myself,” or Charlotte heard her inner critic conveying negative messages such as “You suck!” or “You are the laziest person in this whole study.” Expecting a lot from oneself and being very target-driven were prominent in the narratives of several others (in particular, James, David, Sarah, and Amy). Julia confided that she judged herself a lot and felt rather depressed. She reported having low self-esteem and confidence, and a non-compassionate attitude toward herself. During a session, several students discussed how they would “beat themselves up” for a variety of reasons, and how at the same time they would feel shame about such self-beating. Hannah noted “I am harder on myself than on others ... because I am a bit too perfectionistic with myself. I do not know what the use is. Nothing probably.” Eliza, Sophie, and Benjamin also confessed to having a poor self-image. Sophie for instance commented “There are moments when I really do not like myself ... and this happens very often. I kind of always had problems with insecurities.”

The presence of a harsh inner critique appeared to be related to poor self-image in this group. The negative narrative of the inner critique also undermined their self-confidence and the courage to take initiatives and try new things:

If I have a presentation, I will say “I cannot do this! I cannot do this! I cannot do this!” ... like negative thoughts. “I am not smart enough” or “I am not pretty enough.” It is like the opposite of what you must tell yourself. (Eliza)

Eliza further explained that such thoughts would repeat themselves over and over again, and she would overthink and obsess about things, sometimes for a whole day or more. She likened her inner negative commentary to a radio station continuously broadcasting demoralizing messages. The underlying tone of her narrative about being harsh with oneself, high expectations, and self-judgment resonated with the narratives of several other students. The repercussions of overthinking and identification with negative thoughts appeared to undermine students’ well-being, self-image, and self-efficacy. Several students reported that they were “missing the moment” and not enjoying their lives.

Self-compassion

Although most students remarked that they were judgmental and self-critical, a few also noted that they were sometimes compassionate and kind toward themselves and enjoyed a general sense of being pleased with themselves. James maintained that he liked himself “99%,” in particular for his self-discipline and for all the things he managed to accomplish. The reference here was not only to his academic successes but also to overcoming “much suffering” in the past. This filled him with a lot of

compassion toward others. Sarah and Amy remarked that despite the high expectations they set for themselves, they were mostly positive about themselves and retained a good dose of self-compassion.

Not being close to oneself

Like several other students, Hannah's narrative endorsed a self-judgmental attitude, perfectionism, being hard on herself, rumination, and a not-so-compassionate attitude. At the same time, she attested to being "not so close to herself" and being in a "doing mode" and not so much in the "being mode." Consequently, she perceived the being mode and connecting to herself as difficult:

I feel like there is not much time to have a relationship with the self at the moment ...
I feel like [there is] also not much time to see what I really want and who I really am.
Because I am just always busy with school or planning for the future or other people.

She suggested that this is not peculiar to her, as many of her peers would confirm these observations. If she or her friends were alone, they just spent time on the computer, again evading an intimate connection with the self.

Program's perceived benefits on intrapersonal relationships

Following the MBCT, all students but Eliza experienced considerable changes in how they treated themselves. Their accounts consistently indicated greater understanding of their inner worlds, increased self-compassion, better self-care, more appreciation of their accomplishments, and diminished levels of self-judgment and criticism. Eliza, on the other hand, did not feel more compassion towards herself; although her levels of self-judgment were high, she did not report any changes after the program. However, Eliza attended fewer sessions than the others, and she did not do the homework exercises.

Greater understanding of one's inner world

Six students explicitly discussed that mindfulness helped to improve their awareness of feelings and needs and contributed to tackling difficult situations more effectively. Hannah explained that she got to know herself more through the mindfulness practices and had a better understanding of what was going on with herself. This increased awareness of how she felt and what she needed enabled her to act wisely and make informed decisions. Charlotte also noted the importance of increased self-knowledge through mindfulness practices:

I was just running around doing stuff that I thought I had to, like work, school, without ever keeping in mind to take care for myself ... That makes you unhappy, you know? Mindfulness reminds you to take a step back and look at the bigger picture. What are you doing? What are you doing with your life?

Increased self-compassion

The psychologist who led the program pointed out that the main aim of the program was to improve students' self-compassion. Indeed, self-compassion was key to the accounts of all seven students who

reported positive outcomes. Hannah felt that she was increasingly more compassionate with herself, treating herself as she would treat a good friend. To her, even just knowing and better understanding her inner world was an act of compassion. As a result, she recognized the need, for instance, to stay at home for a day instead of getting distracted by external stimuli all the time. For James and David, self-love also meant better appreciation of themselves and taking pride in their accomplishments. For David, even coming to mindfulness sessions indicated self-respect and self-compassion.

Amy, Sarah, and Charlotte also reported a more compassionate and gentler attitude towards themselves. Sarah was more conscious of times when she was compassionate and kind towards herself. She paid more attention to these aspects and consciously aimed to cultivate an attitude of self-compassion. She also commented that her self-compassion became more authentic as it shifted from not wanting to feel something, to actually allowing herself to feel. Charlotte confirmed this, expressing that there was a real, visible effect in her life: “You give compassion to yourself, and you give compassion to others. And there is compassion coming back.”

Improved self-care

Positive changes in self-compassion and unconditional acceptance of the self often resulted in better self-care. Six students discussed in detail how they started to take better care of themselves. James, for instance, took a break: “I am giving myself a holiday ... I have not done this for a very, very long time.” He also allowed himself to make mistakes. Benjamin, Hannah, and Charlotte also took time to relax more. As Benjamin was feeling “a lot of tension” in his body, he also started to take care of his body more (e.g., getting a massage), something he did not do much before. Such improved bodily self-care was even more dramatic for Sarah, who immersed herself in “a lot of self-care” during the program. For her, self-care involved better skin care and regular visits to the gym. Sarah, as well as others in the group, reported visible improvements in her appearance over the weeks. She believed that self-care and mindfulness have a mutually reinforcing relationship. Likewise, Charlotte prepared healthier food for herself and took moments to just be present, reflect, and relax.

Diminished levels of self-judgment and criticism

Self-judgment was brought up by almost all students as a debilitating habit, endangering their well-being, happiness, and self-efficacy. Seven students reported positive developments in this domain. Their accounts highlighted five major aspects: (1) improved awareness of negative thoughts; (2) less identification with negative thoughts, developing an attitude of observing them and questioning their validity; (3) ignoring or fighting back with the inner critic and being less of a “victim” of its tyranny; (4) as a result of less identification with thoughts, being more present here and now; and (5) having more inner peace.

James revealed that he had learnt to detect negative thoughts arising at an early stage, and to keep a distance from them by not giving into the temptation to identify with them. Hence, he did not feel tangled up by negative thought patterns, nor by the possible negative emotions they might generate. Charlotte’s account also indicated less identification with thoughts, observing them and questioning their validity. She would write down bad thoughts, and then note why they might not be true. When she heard the critical voice inside, she easily brushed it off: “Yeah, whatever. It is not something that really bothers me.” Likewise, Benjamin conveyed progress in identifying less with judgmental thoughts: “It is still there but I do not let it control me as much as before ... I have periods where it is pretty strong, but it is lessening in a way.”

Similarly, David, Sarah, and Charlotte stated that there was less self-judgment and self-criticism. For Sarah, this was partly because she made significant progress in self-care (skin care and going

to the gym), and she was happily observing these positive developments. She also developed some strategies to fight back against self-criticism, such as arguing against the critical voice or shutting it down by refusing to engage. Furthermore, several students commented that as their pre-occupation with negative thoughts lessened, they became calmer and more aware of what was happening around them. Charlotte learned a lot of street names, since she did not get lost in her thoughts as much. Hannah noticed the flowers and the smells, and David started hearing the birds, realizing that they were noisy in a charming way.

Interpersonal relationships

The analysis of the initial interviews with the students identified some salient features: feeling compassion and empathy for the suffering of others, helping, and caring for others even more than they cared for themselves, deep longing for intimacy and connection whilst simultaneously fearing this, and seeing the other as the source of suffering. Fear of rejection was expressed about friendships, but more often in connection with romance.

Feeling compassion and empathy for the suffering of others

In the initial interviews, several students expressed compassion and empathy for others. James' narrative had a strong focus on feeling compassion for others and wanting to contribute to those needing it most. This was because he had "suffered a lot" in the past; "I know the pain," he commented. James, who is from an Asian country, also added that his country's societal norms encouraged care and compassion for others, unlike what he observed in Western societies, which he perceived as rather individualistic. Julia, who is from a Western country, also confirmed such cultural differences: she travelled to Asia and experienced Asian culture as collectivist and caring, unlike the country where she grew up. Some students remarked that they found Dutch society very individualistic and Dutch people not easy to connect with emotionally.

Helping and caring for others

Six out of the eight students explicitly defined themselves as very caring toward others. James had a habit of "helping a lot." He described himself as a friend one would think of in times of distress. He gave comfort and encouragement to his friends, but also made them confront their difficulties or troubled sides. Sarah also appeared very committed to her friends and to social service in general, but her reasoning was almost the opposite: she felt privileged because of her background and wanted to give back to others who "were not so lucky."

Moreover, Hannah noted that she had always been there for everyone with an open heart and ear, doing everything for everyone, until the age of 16. She listened and tried to help in difficult situations, and often acted as a conflict mediator. With reference to her current social environment, she commented: "We are all very stressed, but sometimes I feel like I am a little clown who tries to cheer everyone up." Hannah also revealed that even while being there for everyone and being compassionate toward others, she was not present and compassionate with herself so much. When asked why, she reasoned that this was how she was raised as a girl, and what society expected of women: "the female nurturing role." She also conceded that she found it easier to care for others, caring for the self-implied egoism and self-centeredness. Likewise, Amy described herself as compassionate and caring for others, sometimes caring more for the needs of others than for herself.

Deep longing for intimacy and connection amidst fears

Several students discussed their longing for connection and emotional intimacy, and the anxieties associated with such pursuits. Benjamin complained about his inability to connect emotionally with other people. He felt very lonely and yearned for both a romantic connection and regular friendship. He explained that in order to be accepted and liked by others, he portrayed a happy and energetic person, and tended to hide what he defined as “weaknesses.” Moreover, Benjamin felt he could not be open during the mindfulness sessions and could not express the entire truth about himself, since he feared others might find his emotions too negative and might consequently withdraw. One of his most dominant thoughts was “nobody likes me.” The pressure to appear “just OK” even when struggling, avoiding vulnerabilities, and not being able to show any negative emotions were all taxing for him. For men, showing emotions was much harder, Benjamin argued. Any sign of vulnerability was taken as weakness.

Julia’s story resonated with Benjamin, as she revealed an experience of “never really connecting with someone.” She longed for emotional closeness and bonding with others, which she described as “feeling comfortable and being able to feel like yourself” in the presence of someone. Nevertheless, she experienced unrequited love a few times, and after her last experience, a deep sense of feeling crushed instigated a prolonged depression. Consequently, the pursuit of love and connection became associated with consuming fears. Julia also feared making friends since she did not want to “trouble other people” with her internal issues and her negative side: “I could maybe come to a point again where I would really feel bad about myself because someone else does not like me. Then it is safer to just have become acquainted with not so many friends.”

Eliza longed for romantic attachment and was in a relationship at the time of this study. However, her concern was that she often sabotaged the relationships herself because she longed for intimacy but feared it at the same time. Hence, in intimate relationships, she was more concerned about not getting hurt herself. With her friends, she was more caring and emotionally stable. For Charlotte, too, the search for intimacy collided with fear of intimacy. Both Eliza’s and Charlotte’s parents divorced when they were young, which appeared to contribute to a deep mistrust of men and of romantic relationships. Eliza was convinced that if she were betrayed or frustrated by the person, she attached herself to, she would not be able to survive, an irrational but nonetheless very powerful belief.

Seeing the other as the source of suffering

The students expressed care, compassion, empathy, and longing for the other. At the same time, their narratives indicated how the other became their source of suffering. In the previous section, we noted how unrequited love and fear of betrayal inflicted pain. Charlotte, Sophie, and Julia discussed how a failed romantic relationship or rejection instigated a painful period of self-doubt and self-blame. These students started to overthink their loss, analyzing it repeatedly in an effort to understand why the relationship did not work out. They tended to attribute the “failure” to their own body (i.e., not being beautiful enough) or their personality characteristics. Eliza, however, articulated that she had the opposite tendency: she blamed others when problems arose. She was aware of repeating her mother’s pattern of blaming everything on her ex-husband but could not overcome the same inclination in herself. Several students also commented about how they sought attention and validation through others, and how they were preoccupied with what others thought about them. Sometimes, there was a sense of competition and mistrust in their friendships, and sometimes they resented that their friends were getting more attention. Quite a few of these students also complained that they evaluated their self-worth and where they stand in life by comparing themselves to others. David used to seek attention and validation through posting charming photos on Facebook. When “likes” appeared on his postings, he received “a dopamine rush.” But eventually, his interactions on Facebook started to depress him

and at the start of the program, he deleted his Facebook page completely. Instead, David had more personal conversations and improved his social life.

Program's perceived benefits on interpersonal relationships

Eliza did not note any difference after the program in terms of how she related to others. The other seven students, however, stated that they had become more caring and compassionate toward people in their environment. These positive developments entailed improved understanding, gentleness, politeness, and patience. Some students started giving—and consequently receiving—more compliments; others emphasized the importance of learning to see things from another's point of view and listening to people without necessarily giving advice. In their opinion, self-compassion and compassion for others were clearly connected, since improved self-compassion appeared to kindle compassion toward others.

Improved capacity for empathy, care, and compassion

A heightened sense of care, empathy, and compassion toward others were central in the second interviews. Charlotte expressed that after starting with the mindfulness program, she cared more about herself and more about others. This care also meant improved awareness and drive to tackle social injustices worldwide. She also commented that the program helped her to be less self-judgmental. Eventually, she became less judgmental of others, too. Moreover, as Amy and some other students reported, improved self-compassion and acceptance meant less irritability with people in their surroundings, and less projection of one's own negative thoughts, emotions (particularly anger), or distresses onto others.

James articulated that he had been more caring, compassionate, and “simply helpful” toward others. For David, more compassion included working together to clean the flat, and “being a buddy” to his flat mates when they had a difficult day. Sarah also confirmed that she learnt to cultivate more compassion toward others. For her, an important aspect of this was learning to see things from another's point of view, letting others “just be,” letting others do what they want, and being supportive of others' choices. Hannah's account underscored the significance of empathy: “I try to understand where they come from, and I try to keep in mind that it's also like we grew up very differently and have different issues.”

Cultivating more understanding, gentleness, politeness, and patience

When James felt negative emotions toward others, such as anger, he became aware of it earlier, and consciously prevented intensification of such feelings. In other words, improved awareness of the process let him choose not to get involved in such negative thinking and projections: “It takes less time to step out of this emotional zone.” For Benjamin, more compassion and care for others also meant greater understanding and politeness. He said he used to be more passive-aggressive; now he realized: “I am dealing with something; they are probably dealing with something [too].”

Being present with others

David was impressed by an exercise during one session about listening to a person without giving unsolicited commentary or advice. He learned that he did not need to know or solve what was happening in other people's lives; he could just listen to their stories attentively, with full presence, and

acknowledge their difficult situations. He realized the importance of just being open and letting others “be” and listening without necessarily offering counsel or opinion. David experienced this approach as actually very supportive. Moreover, Sarah reported that after the program she experienced more authentic sharing of feelings and thoughts with other people.

Improved relationships with family and friends

According to Charlotte, since starting with the mindfulness program, everything had improved in her life, including her relationships. She reported being more gentle, compassionate, and patient with people: “I can just listen, have a nice conversation. Perhaps, I am less judgmental in my dealings.” She started giving more compliments and expressed what she appreciated in other people. She saw them lightening up and saying, “Thank you!.” Furthermore, she also realized that she was much nicer to her parents, especially to her mother, whom she used to fight with on the phone. Charlotte said that formerly she often felt this urge to contradict whatever her mother said, but after the program, she felt this drive less and less: “You know how it is with parents, how you always want to say something against what they say, but no I don’t do that anymore, I just listen and I’m much nicer to her.” Amy also reported such immediate positive changes, suggesting that as she learnt to better deal with her own negative emotions, she was “automatically” more compassionate toward others: “When I am able to cope better with my own anger, I do then less harm to others, and I approach them with more compassion. That’s why I think the two go together.”

CONCLUSION

This study explored the perceived benefits of a mindfulness program on intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships among university students. Before the program, the students reported high levels of self-judgment, self-critique, negative inner talk, poor self-image, high expectations, and perfectionism, which the psychologist confirmed as typical from general observation of international students in her practice over the past six years. Furthermore, some students reflected upon a sense of disconnection with their inner core and self-alienation, while a few other noted that they sometimes felt self-compassion. Eight students completed the program, and all but one reported substantial change in how they related to themselves. They spoke of better understanding of their inner worlds, increased self-compassion, better self-care, and more appreciative attitudes toward their accomplishments.

Furthermore, after the program, students indicated greater awareness of their negative thoughts. They learnt to identify with them less, questioned their validity, and did not necessarily believe all thoughts they had. Moreover, they appeared to develop strategies to distance themselves from their inner critic, believing less in the content of its negative messages, and at times fighting back with counterarguments. These improvements were key to their well-being and happiness. These results confirm earlier studies demonstrating the benefits of mindfulness on self-compassion, self-care and greater awareness about thoughts and emotions, and non-reactivity (Milicevic et al., 2016; Smeets et al., 2014).

With regard to relating to others, students maintained that they already tended to be compassionate and caring toward others. Many remarked that it was easier for them to be compassionate towards other because self-compassion was often associated with egoism and self-centeredness. At the same time, they perceived close friends and intimate persons as a (potential) source of suffering. Amid fear of rejection, which might be accompanied at times with a sense of humiliation and diminished self-worth, many of them expressed a deep longing for intimacy and connection. Seven students reported substantial changes in their relationships: they reported improved capacity for care, empathy, and compassion toward others and were more understanding, gentle, polite, and patient. They gave more compliments to friends and family members and received more compliments. Furthermore, they learnt

to see things from another's point of view and discovered that they can listen to friends without giving advice or feeling compelled to solve their problems. Overall, they reported improved relationships with family and friends. These findings concur with the few earlier studies on the subject (Bihari & Mullan, 2014; Stewart et al., 2018).

The connection between the intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships

Intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships are often separately researched in studies on mindfulness (Karremans et al., 2017), while the findings of this study suggest that they are interrelated. The participants confirmed that self-compassion and compassion for others were strongly linked. As they became less self-judgmental, they tended to be less judgmental of others as well. Improved intrapersonal relationship also implied less irritability with others and less projection of one's own negativity. These findings corroborate the work by Bihari & Mullan (2014), which demonstrated that intrapersonal and interpersonal changes in relationships are "inextricably linked and overlapping in nature" (p. 50). Moreover, Neff & Germer (2013) showed that self-compassion and compassion for others are mutually interconnected, while K. W. Brown & Ryan (2003) indicated that a mindful state of mind can yield several benefits that positively affect relationships with others, such as increased affectivity, better self-esteem and life satisfaction, and reduced anger and hostility.

It is imperative to support students in developing their capacities for self-care and self-compassion, which are key to their well-being (Heineberg, 2016; Milicevic et al., 2016), self-awareness, and self-regulation (Broderick & Metz, 2016). The findings of this study are rather encouraging and support further research into the potential benefits of integrating mindfulness practices into counseling services or curriculum to improve the psycho-social well-being and relationships of university students. As demonstrated in this study, mindfulness can help with addressing debilitating effects of negative self-talk, low self-esteem, poor self-image and low self-efficacy, depression due to self-judgment, and an overbearing inner critic. Through cultivating a compassionate state of mind, mindfulness protects against self-criticism and negative feelings, such as guilt and shame (Hollis-Walker & Colosimo, 2011).

Limitations and directions for future research

The study has some limitations as well. Because students experienced other stimuli in their academic and personal environments while they took part in this MBCT program, all the positive developments cannot be attributed to the mindfulness program. Yet, several students explicitly discussed the various aspects of the program and how these led to changes in the way they treated themselves and others, while some others also highlighted the problems of attribution. What is more, the follow-up with three students revealed that students' engagement in mindfulness practices decreased over a year. Studies have emphasized that mindfulness should be practiced regularly, and that mindfulness is "not a static endpoint nor a quick fix" (Broderick & Frank, 2014, p. 42). Hence, it is not clear to what extent mindfulness skills or the benefits of the program have been retained or sustained over time (Dariosit et al., 2016). Moreover, time spent engaging in home practices has been shown to be significantly related to experiencing positive outcomes of mindfulness (Carmody & Baer, 2008). In future studies, students' discipline in practicing mindfulness systematically and regularly and its possible relation to positive and sustainable outcomes could be emphasized more. Furthermore, the study is based on subjective accounts of the students and does not include the type of the convergent evidence that can be obtained from peers, or through neurological measures. The small sample size and the reliance on qualitative data analysis limit the generalizability of the findings. To overcome these limitations, future research can include a larger sample size, strategies to triangulate the subjective evidence through a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, and longitudinal research designs, which would enable generalizable conclusions and test the sustainability of positive gains over time.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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