

Mindfulness in Incarcerated Youth: Developing, Delivering, and Evaluating a Mindfulness Group Curriculum at the Rhode Island Training School

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I. Background

- Incarcerated youth often come from underserved backgrounds in which chronic stress often translates to dangerous, aggressive or criminal actions, aggravated by anxiety associated with resulting incarceration.
- Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR, mindfulness) is a growing tool for improving stress, anxiety, and self-regulation. It involves awareness of the present moment and behavioral patterns and triggers, with the goal of intentionally responding rather than impulsively reacting to stressful stimuli.
- MBSR improves emotional stability, relaxation and self-regulation in incarcerated youth, and reduces perceived stress and infractions during incarceration.
- MBSR is still emerging, and has been implemented in only few juvenile correctional settings, never in Rhode Island.
- The Rhode Island Training School (RITS) is Rhode Island's only correctional facility for juveniles.
- During their time at the RITS, residents attend treatment programs such as anger management, parenting and substance abuse.

- **Purpose:** to develop, deliver and evaluate a treatment group curriculum focusing on mindfulness.
- **Hypothesis:** After program participation, participants will accept and enjoy the curriculum, comprehend and understand the material, and value mindfulness in their own lives.

II. Methods

Curriculum Development and Delivery

- The curriculum was developed based upon the original MBSR framework, incorporating other therapeutic interventions currently used at the RITS (**Figure 1**).
- The curriculum is suitable to be delivered to closed groups of residents, with 6-8 participants per group.
- RITS residents were referred to the group by their clinical social worker based on each resident's treatment needs and goals. Residents were excluded if their release date was before the last session of the group, or if the resident had severe symptomatic PTSD or psychosis.
- The groups were co-taught by the first author of this poster and another RITS clinician throughout the summer of 2019.
- Sessions began with a short conversation with the participants introducing and eliciting their prior experiences with the session's topic, followed by a longer experiential component in which the new skill was practiced. After a review and fun activity (e.g. mindful smelling, mindfulness of textures, stress balls), participants were encouraged to practice the new skill outside of group.
- In the final session, students were given a Mindfulness Resources Sheet (**Figure 2**) summarizing what they had learned throughout the curriculum.

Curriculum Evaluation

- The curriculum was evaluated based upon the Kirkpatrick model, a standard model for assessing training program outcomes.
- Pre- and post- participation surveys were developed to assess knowledge and value of the material, and acceptability of group activities. These were administered to participants during the first and last sessions (**Figure 3**).
- Given our small sample size, we were not powered and therefore could not do inferential statistics. We used descriptive statistics to evaluate the curriculum.

Figure 1: Mindfulness Curriculum Overview



Figure 3: Evaluation Pre and Post Surveys

Section 1: Knowledge	Section 2: Value	Section 3: Acceptability
Assess understanding and retention of material.	Assesses perceived usefulness, importance and value of material.	Assesses enjoyment of and engagement in group activities.*
1. Someone comes up to you trying to start a fight. You feel angry and disrespected, but you take a deep breath and calmly let him know you don't want to fight and just want to keep doing what you're doing. This is an example of: a. Emotional mind b. Rational mind c. Wise mind 2. Mindfulness helps with stress by: a. Making the stress go away b. Changing how you react to it c. Transforming you so you never feel stress 3. Mindfulness means: a. Being "awake" to what is happening here and now b. Clearing your mind of all thoughts c. Feeling only peace 4. Write two things that you can pay attention to, to help you be mindful.	Rate each of the following statements according to the following scale: Strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree. 1. It is important to me to use mindfulness in my life. 2. Mindfulness can help me lead the life I want to lead. 3. Mindfulness contributes to my overall health and well being. 4. I enjoy doing mindfulness. 5. I am likely to use mindfulness in times of stress, anger, or sadness. 6. I am likely to use mindfulness in my everyday life.	Quantitative Portion Rate each of the following statements according to the following scale: Strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree. 1. I learned something new during this group 2. I will be able to use what I learned from this group in my life. 3. I was given an opportunity to participate and discuss information with others. 4. The group was well organized. 5. The topic of this group module was interesting. 6. I felt comfortable participating in this group. Free Response Portion See Figure 4.

Special thanks to:

- The RITS residents who participated in these groups for taking a chance on something new, working very hard to learn mindfulness skills, and giving feedback on the curriculum.
- Dr. Elizabeth Lowenhaupt, Dr. Elisabeth Frazier, and Mr. Timothy Owens for advising me throughout the development, execution, and analysis of this project.
- Dr. Katelyn Affleck and Ms. Shannon Pine for co-teaching this curriculum with me, helping me to improve skills pertinent to teaching this material and working with this population, and providing valuable feedback as the curriculum was refined.
- Dr. Elena Salmoirago-Blotcher for her guidance and advice on this project and within the Scholarly Concentration in Integrative Health and Contemplative Practice.

Figure 2: Mindfulness Resource Sheet

What is mindfulness? Mindfulness means: *paying attention, on purpose, to the present moment*. This means paying attention sensations, our body, thoughts, activities, and feelings that are happening right now. We don't judge them – just notice!

When is it helpful to be mindful?

- When I am upset, anxious and want to calm down
- When I need respond wisely during a stressful situation
- When I need to focus, for example: at school, or during a conversation
- When I want to relax or fall asleep
- When I want to distract myself to take my mind off of something

How can I be mindful? Try any of these ideas, for a few seconds, or a few minutes.

1. **Mindful eating:** Notice the way your food looks, feels, smells, sounds, and taste. Eat slowly, paying attention bite by bite.
2. **Mindful listening:** Listen to music and notice the words, the sounds, how it makes you feel, what it sounds like, what it reminds you of.
3. **Breath mindfulness:** Pay attention to your breath. Where does it feel easiest to notice - your belly, your chest, your nostrils? You don't need to change your breath, just feel yourself breathing naturally as you inhale, exhale, inhale...
4. **Deep breaths:** Or, you can take deep breaths on purpose. Slowly inhale for 3 seconds, then exhale for 6 seconds, and repeat until you feel calm. This is helpful when you want to relax or relieve stress.
5. **Body scan:** Pay attention to your body sensations from toes to head. Do you feel tickling, temperature, buzzing, breath movements, itching, pain, or your heartbeat? Or nothing at all?
6. **Mindful smelling:** Pay attention to a pleasant smell. How does it make you feel? What does it remind you of?
7. **Movement:** Be mindful while walking, doing yoga in your room, exercising, or making any kind of movement. Is it easy, or hard? Do you feel your balance change? What part of your body is working the hardest? Are you breathing fast?
8. **Textures:** Pay attention to an object like a blanket, a desk, or anything with a textured surface. Notice: is it rough, smooth, warm or cool, soft or hard? Does it feel pleasant or unpleasant?
9. **Stress balls:** Using a stress ball, paper towel or other squeezable object, press as hard as you can.
10. **Imagery:** In your mind, think of a place that makes you feel happy - real or made up, like a peaceful forest or a strong mountain. Try to notice anything and everything that you can about that place that you're imagining as if you're there.

Tips:

- You can try these ideas anywhere! Whether at school, on a walk, during a meal, or in the middle of your day.
- If you are trying them in your room, find a comfortable position. Some examples are:
 - Sitting on a pillow with your back straight
 - Sitting in a chair with your back straight and feet flat on the ground
 - Lying down with your legs bent over a pillow
- If you get distracted and forget to pay attention, just bring your attention back. This is normal and happens to everyone! No need to judge, just refocus.
- Most important: practice makes perfect! Mindfulness is like lifting weights at the gym: it's hard at first, but gets easier the more you do it.

Figure 4: Acceptability Free Response Portion Answers

1. What aspect of this group did you find most useful? Why?
 - Everything/great/it was fun (3)
 - Learning to be mindful, taking time to slow down (4)
 - Specific activities (3)
 - "To be mindful of senses"
 - "Yoga, it releases tension"
 - "Taste cause I haven't had a lot of flavor lately"
 - No response/ I don't know (5)
 - Nothing (2, both female)
2. What aspect of this group did you find least useful? Why?
 - Nothing (6)
 - Specific activities (4)
 - Yoga (one student specified, "cause I don't like it") (3)
 - "Meditation for me is too distracting"
 - No response/ I don't know (6)
 - Everything (1)
3. What would you change about this group?
 - Nothing/ great/ it was fun (11)
 - No response/ I don't know (5)
 - "The place I'm in, RITS" (1)

III. Results

- A total of 17 RITS residents (14 boys, 3 girls) participated in a total of 4 groups (3 boys', 1 girls'). 10 were 17-18 y.o.; 7 were 14-16 y.o. (Text color correlates with figures 5-7).
- Survey question scores from the Knowledge, Value, and quantitative portion of the Acceptability Sections were summed and recorded as a percentage of the maximum possible score within each section, yielding a total % score for each section.
- The free response answers of the Acceptability Section are shown in **Figure 4**. The scores for the Knowledge, Value, and quantitative portion of the Acceptability Sections are shown in **Figures 5-7**.

Figure 5: Knowledge Section Scores

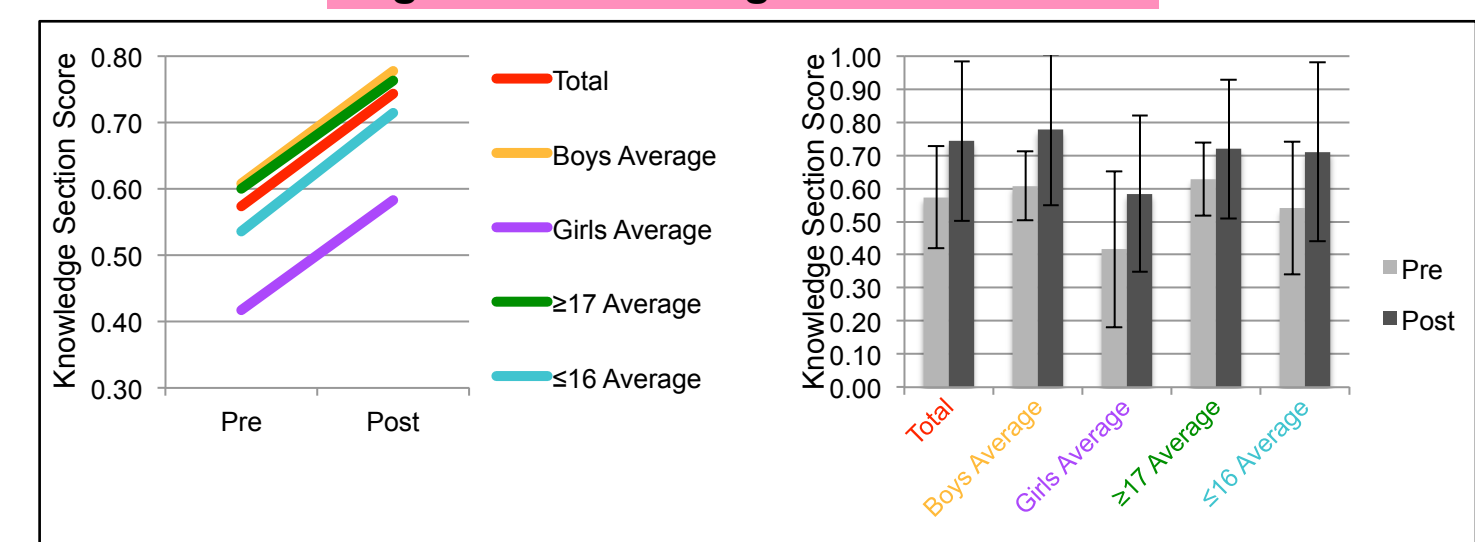


Figure 6: Value Section Scores

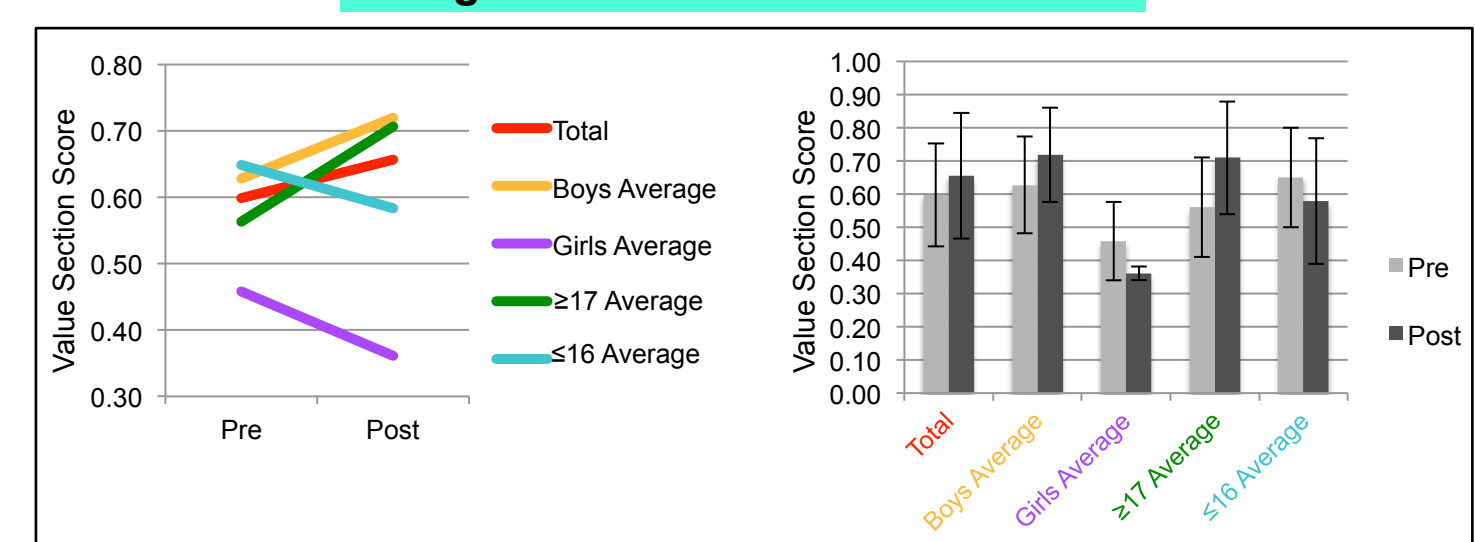
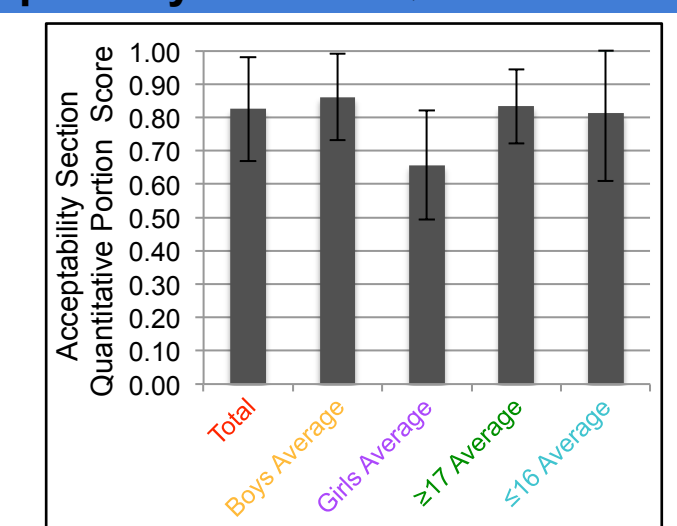


Figure 7: Acceptability Section Quantitative Portion Scores



IV. Conclusions and Future Directions

- Participants demonstrated improvement in knowledge of curriculum material after participation in the group.
- Older participants' value of mindfulness material increased after experiencing the curriculum; younger participants' decreased.
- Participants found the groups/curriculum enjoyable and engaging.
- Girls understood, valued and accepted the material less than other groups, but showed similar improvement in understanding.
- A pending IRB addendum will allow us to examine (1) how RITS behavioral health clinical assessment questionnaire scores changed pre and post participation in the mindfulness group, and (2) how aggressive tendencies, readiness to change, and PTSD severity predict or moderate outcomes from the mindfulness group.