

MINDFULNESS PROJECT

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BACKGROUND

Medical students experience high levels of stress during their medical training⁽¹⁾ and continue to experience stress in their junior doctor years⁽²⁾. The consequences of high stress may manifest as depression and anxiety⁽³⁾, burnout⁽⁴⁾, and suicidal thinking⁽⁵⁾. These mental health issues put medical students at increased risk of poor professional behavior, including impaired decision-making⁽⁶⁾, increased errors⁽⁷⁾, reduced attention and concentration⁽⁷⁾ and cynicism and loss of compassion⁽⁸⁾, all of which have the potential to affect the health and safety of the communities that they serve.

AIM

There is growing evidence that mindfulness training during medical school can be a useful and effective tool for reducing stress levels. We sought to determine the feasibility and effectiveness of an online mindfulness training program to medical students at the Rural Clinical School of WA (RCSWA).

METHODS

An 8-week online training program was delivered to third year medical students at the RCSWA in 2016. Using a quantitative-qualitative mixed-methods approach, we measured the frequency and duration of the participants' mindfulness meditation practice, and assessed changes in their perceived stress, self-compassion and compassion levels, as well as personal and professional attitudes and behaviours.

RESULTS

Forty-seven students were recruited to the study. 50% were practising at least weekly by the end of the 8-week program, and 32% of responding students reported practising at least weekly 4 months following the intervention. There was a statistically significant reduction in their perceived stress levels ($p=0.038$) and a significant increase in self-compassion ($p=0.017$) at 4-month follow-up. Participants reported qualitative insights about the personal and professional impact of mindfulness meditation training as well as barriers to practice.

CONCLUSION

The results provide preliminary evidence that online training in mindfulness meditation can be associated with reduced stress and increased self-compassion in rural medical students. More rigorous research is required to establish concrete measures of feasibility of a mindfulness meditation program.

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