




# Minimal Mindfulness for Maximum Impact: Mandalas, Positivity, Self-Compassion, and Gratitude in the Higher Education Classroom

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## Abstract

Numerous mindfulness-based interventions have demonstrated significant increases in users' overall physical and emotional well-being. Often, however, graduate-level instructors believe it would be too time-consuming to incorporate these worthwhile self-care strategies into their curriculum. The aim of this study was to evaluate whether participating in a day of mindfulness-based activities could increase overall mindfulness in graduate students. Intervention activities were focused on creating a safe and focused space, as well as instilling self-compassion, positivity, and gratitude. Twelve female graduate students completed short activities utilizing mandalas, prompts for self-compassion and positivity, and a forgiveness practice. Paired-samples *t*-tests showed the intervention significantly increased overall mindfulness in these students. This suggests the benefit of using mindfulness-based interventions in higher education.

**Keywords:** *mindfulness, mandalas, optimism, gratitude, higher education*

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## Introduction

Mindfulness allows us to be present, focused, and nonjudgmental. People with various types of physical infirmities can benefit from mindfulness interventions, which have been shown to decrease blood pressure (Marquez et al., 2019) and provide better quality sleep (Black et al., 2015). Additionally, mindfulness has proven to be beneficial to mental health. For example, several studies have found mindfulness to decrease

anxiety (Falsafi, 2016; Lemay et al., 2019). Researchers have also found that mindfulness activities can both help prevent depression (Geschwind et al., 2011) and diminish the reoccurrence of depressive episodes (Piet & Hougaard, 2011). Clearly incorporating mindfulness into our lives can create many benefits to our physical and mental well-being.

Graduate school is often a time of heightened anxiety, due to high expectations for coursework, the challenge of finding a personal and professional life balance, and general feelings of isolation. Barreira et al. (2018) found that 18% of the graduate students they studied were experiencing depression or anxiety, and 11% reported suicidal ideation. These researchers suggest that feelings of isolation and loneliness were contributors to these mental health issues. Some students did not feel they could talk to their advisors, and some feared leaving a bad impression. Over 20% of the students stated they did not have personal time for enjoyment.

Given the propensity for increased mental health concerns in graduate students, more emphasis should be placed on incorporating self-care into our graduate programs. A focus on mindfulness can help move feelings of isolation toward feelings of connection, feelings of anxiety toward those of gratitude, and feelings of overwhelm toward self-compassion. One reason graduate students may not incorporate mindfulness practices into their routines could be that they lack awareness of these practices. Additionally, students may feel these approaches require a great deal of time, and they are already overwhelmed enough by their workload. Therefore, it would make sense to introduce some small but beneficial mindfulness-based techniques right into the course curriculum.

There are many ways mindfulness can be incorporated into the classroom. In our current study, the aim was to support increased mindfulness through activities that augmented one or more of the following: (a) a sense of safety, security, and focus; (b) increased positive thoughts or optimism; (c) increased self-compassion; and (d) increased gratitude. All of these are aspects of mindfulness that have been shown in research to support physical and/or emotional well-being. The specific activities and the focus area for each were as follows: First, students created mandalas to produce a safe and focused space. Next, Because I'm Happy Positive Affirmation Cards were used to enhance optimism and gratitude. Self-Compassion Cards served to evoke increased self-compassion. Finally, a forgiveness activity was aimed at supporting students in further embracing positive thoughts and releasing any residual negativity. Further information on the procedure for each activity is contained in the methods section. The aim of the research was to determine if this 90-minute intervention could lead to increased mindfulness. To our knowledge, it is the first study to examine whether incorporating one day of mindfulness activities into the graduate school curriculum could increase overall mindfulness.

## **Mandalas**

The mandala, or circle, represents a circle of protection. Several studies have shown that mandala interventions are beneficial to physical and emotional well-being. Mandala interventions have been used to decrease psychological strain significantly in patients undergoing venipuncture treatments for pain management related to various physical ailments (Stinley et al., 2015). Other studies have shown that creating mandalas can lower blood pressure and boost the immune system (Black & Slavich, 2016). Additionally, mandala art therapy has been studied in the treatment of patients for both the physical and psychological effects of breast cancer (Czamanski-Cohen et al., 2019).

Mandala interventions have been used therapeutically in several mental health settings to support people suffering from anxiety. Carsely and Heath (2018) found that creating mandalas could be used to significantly decrease test anxiety in adolescents. Other researchers have concluded that school personnel can use mandala art therapy as a proactive intervention for children and adolescents displaying characteristics of anxiety disorders (Kostyunina & Drozdikova-Zaripova, 2015). Furthermore, Henderson et al. (2007) found notable

decreases in trauma symptoms in patients with post-traumatic stress disorder at a one-month follow-up after completion of a mandala-based art intervention.

In addition to the aforementioned positive results with anxiety, mandalas can also have other positive impacts in an educational setting. Holbrook and Comer (2017) recommend using mandala creation to enhance self-expression and self-exploration. Mandala art has been used to promote interpersonal competence and self-awareness (Marshall, 2003). Furthermore, in the college classroom, mandalas have been used to facilitate creativity, communication, and community (MacKenzie & Wolf, 2011).

### **Optimism and Positive Thoughts**

Each day, human beings experience pleasure and pain, which act as a catalyst for varied behaviors. Pain may contribute to our decisions to hold back, and pleasure may allow us to take a chance. Optimism refers to the general expectancy that one will experience good outcomes in the future. Having positive thoughts and expectations may contribute to physical wellness. Researchers suggest, for example, that optimism may decrease our risk of a cardiovascular event (Boehm & Kubzansky, 2012). Optimistic ideas and positive thoughts that educators instill in students could carry them for years, both physically and mentally. Healthy psychological attitudes have reportedly reduced mortality in some populations (Chida & Steptoe, 2008).

Optimism and positive thoughts have been able to affect students within the classroom setting as well. In a recent study, 195 college participants completed a self-report survey, and researchers found that individuals with lower levels of mental distress reported higher levels of optimism, self-esteem, and social support (Knowlden et al., 2016). Teaching principles of optimism and positive thought can also foster resilience within students, which is associated with bouncing back from adversity. Researchers have also found that elementary and high school students with poorer levels of resilience were more likely to engage in, or be victims of, bullying behaviors (Moore & Woodcock, 2017). Yalcin (2011) found a positive correlation between Turkish college students' levels of life satisfaction and levels of optimism and perceived support from family and faculty. Thus, fostering optimism and positive thinking in students could benefit students throughout their lives. Also, students can then model this optimistic mindset to those around them, potentially creating a positive systemic impact.

### **Self-Compassion**

Mindfulness practices have shown to significantly increase self-compassion in students pursuing careers in helping professions (Newsome, Waldo, & Gruszka, 2012). In fact, self-compassion is often included as an important element of mindfulness-based interventions. Self-compassion is also a predictor of forgiveness in college students (Oral & Arslan, 2017). In counselors, self-compassion can protect against vicarious trauma, by being a vital component of a self-care plan that ultimately protects against burnout in a profession with high propensity for stress (Coaston, 2017).

Self-compassion serves as a catalyst for personal strengths and engenders resilience in individuals encountering challenges. Self-compassion has been seen as a key predictor of autonomy, environmental mastery, and purpose in life, as well as self-acceptance (Saricaoglu & Arslan, 2013). Researchers have found that parents of young people and adults with intellectual disabilities can foster resilience through self-compassion to counteract depressive symptoms and stress (Robinson et al., 2017). Self-compassion can also protect against dysregulation of emotion in adolescents who experienced maltreatment as children (Vettese et al., 2011).

Lack of self-compassion can result in negative outcomes. Xavier et al. (2016) found that fear of self-compassion may be a key contributor to acts of non-suicidal self-injury in adolescents. Feelings lacking compassion toward self, such as self-criticism, have been found to explain paranoid ideation in adolescents

(Carvalho et al., 2019). Therapies focused on self-compassion can be used to decrease criticism toward self and avoid negative outcomes

Evaluating qualities essential for mindful leadership in schools, Wells (2015) describes the mindful leader as compassionate toward self and others. She points out that mindful leadership can increase productivity by limiting nonproductive behaviors, such as placing blame. Self-compassion cultivates relationships that inspire community environments in schools.

## Gratitude

Gratitude in one's life may also contribute to positive physical and psychological outcomes. Gratitude practices can support college students by increasing focus while studying and taking exams, as well as lowering stress levels (Wilson, 2016). While it is common for adolescents to have disordered relationships with food, healthy eating habits have been seen in adolescents who participated in a gratitude-based intervention (Fritz et al., 2019). Additionally, researchers have noted that gratitude can enhance relationships in education. Specifically, when doctoral students focused on gratitude toward their advisors, they reported positive impacts on communication and overall positive feelings toward their research projects (Howells et al., 2017).

## Our Study

We aimed to examine whether a day of mindfulness could positively impact students in a graduate-level class. Specifically, we asked: Could spending a 90-minute classroom period focused on safety, optimism and positive thoughts, self-compassion, and gratitude significantly increase overall mindfulness in the students? To examine this, students gave informed consent, completed a pretest measure, and then proceeded to follow the directives of the research methods instructor through a series of activities. At the end of the session, students completed the same survey as a post-test measure. Paired-samples *t*-tests were conducted to answer the posed research question.

**RQ:** Can overall mindfulness be significantly increased by incorporating one day of mindfulness into a course for graduate students?

## Methods

### Participants

Participants for this study were recruited from a graduate-level research methods course offered at a midwestern university. Twelve students agreed to participate, all of whom were women.

### Measures and Instruments

The Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory (FMI) short form (Walach et al., 2006) was used to measure mindfulness. Participants responded to 14 items (e.g., I am open to the experience of the present moment) using a Likert-type scale from 1 (rarely) to 4 (almost always). Higher scores indicated higher levels of mindfulness. The FMI covers all aspects of mindfulness, including openness to experiences, awareness of senses, appreciation of self, etc. Using Cronbach's alpha, this scale has an internal consistency of .86. According to the authors, Principal Component Analysis suggests one common factor (Walach et al., 2006).

Because I'm Happy Positive Affirmation Cards: This is a card deck created by a small business called Because I'm Happy, which has a store on Amazon. The deck includes 54 cards that each contain an affirmation on the front and multiple questions on the back (over 150 total questions). According to the creators of the cards, the

intentions of the affirmations and associated questions are to “care for your well-being, maintain positive outlook, and share positivity with friends.”

The Self-Compassion Deck: This card deck was created by clinical psychotherapists Chris Willard, PsyD, Mitch Abblett, PhD, and Tim Desmond, LMFT, for “an easy-to-commit-to mindfulness exercise to instill great appreciation for yourself and your life.” The deck consists of 50 cards with a small prompt on each card.

## Procedure

Participants were first given a brief introduction to the purpose of the study and the activities they would be doing. Consent forms were then handed out. After the consent forms were returned, the 14-item FMI short form was distributed and completed by participants.

Participants were then led through a variety of mindfulness activities. For an introduction, an audio track of Pema Chödrön discussing mindfulness and the difficulties of learning to stay was played for the group to remind students to be compassionate and nonjudgmental throughout the exercises (Chödrön, 2005, track 2).

After the introduction, the first activity was the mandala activity, in which participants colored a mandala while listening to relaxing music to create a safe and focused environment. The second activity centered on the Because I’m Happy Positive Affirmation Cards. Each participant selected a card and read the focus on the front and one of the associated questions on the back aloud. Questions on the cards elicited thoughts of positivity and gratitude (e.g., “What was something that made you laugh today?”). Participants were encouraged to stand in a circle and share their answers with the group. Next, cards from The Self-Compassion Deck were handed out. Participants were asked to read their card and consider the prompt it offered. The instructor then offered additional prompts to the group. For the final mindfulness task, participants were asked to recall something that had been bothering them or an error they had made that they had been fixated on. While thinking of this, they blew bubbles as a visual cue to let those thoughts go and forgive themselves.

After the mindfulness activities, participants were led through a brief discussion about the activities and their experiences of them. Participants were given the names of all the mindfulness activity materials and were able to take pictures of them so they would be able to access them again if they wished. Post-tests of the FMI short form were then handed out. After the posttests were completed, all participants were thanked and the study was concluded.

After the intervention, pre-test and post-test data were entered into IBM SPSS Statistics to calculate the overall score for each participant. Paired-samples *t*-tests were conducted to examine whether the day of mindfulness produced any significant results. Analysis included a comparison of the overall scores, as well as the pretest and posttest mean for each item in the assessment.

## Results

A paired-samples *t*-test was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0 to evaluate the effectiveness of a day of mindfulness in the graduate classroom. A significant increase in mindfulness was found between the overall mindfulness score on the pretest ( $M = 36.25, SD = 7.30$ ) and the post-test ( $M = 39.75, SD = 7.88$ ),  $t(11) = -2.50, p < .05$ .

**Table 1:** Results of Dependent-Samples *t*-test and Descriptive Statistics for Mindfulness on the Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory (FMI) Short Form

Outcome	Pretest		Posttest		<i>n</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>				
Overall FMI score	36.25	7.30	39.75	7.88	12	.80	-2.50*	11

\*  $p < .05$ 

Table 2 shows significant areas of increase found in a paired-samples *t*-test analysis for each item. Statistically significant increases were shown related to two items, and near significant results were shown related to two additional items.

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics for Statistically Significant and Near Significant Items on FMI

Item	Pretest		Posttest		<i>t</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
I sense my body, whether eating, cooking, cleaning, or talking.	2.25	.75	2.83	.94	-3.03*
I feel connected to my experiences in the here and now.	2.50	.80	3.17	.94	-2.35*
I am open to the experience of the present moment.	3.00	.74	3.42	.67	-2.16 ( $p=.054$ )
I see my mistakes and difficulties without judging them.	1.83	.72	2.33	.78	-2.17 ( $p=.053$ )

\*  $p < .05$ ,  $N$  for all items = 12 ( $df = 11$ )

## Discussion

Researchers have found mindfulness to be associated with positive impacts on many aspects of physical health and mental health (Black et al., 2015; Geschwind et al., 2011; Marquez et al., 2019). Mandala art therapy has shown to support sufferers of anxiety disorders (Kostyunina & Drozdikova-Zaripova, 2015). Self-compassion can protect against trauma and stress (Coaston, 2017). Gratitude can augment relational well-being (Howells et al., 2017). Finally, maintaining a positive disposition can increase imagination, creativity, and social bonds (Fredrickson, 2004).

Our study aimed to examine the impact of mindfulness-based activities in a graduate school course on overall mindfulness and well-being. Additionally, we hoped to demonstrate that incorporating mindfulness exercises into our lives does not have to be cumbersome or time-consuming by evaluating whether one day (90 minutes) of mindfulness-based activities could create a substantial impact. Activities were selected that were accessible and easily acquired in the hopes that participants would continue to incorporate them into their lives. The focuses of the activities have been shown to have a positive impact on physical and mental health in recent research studies. First, mandalas were colored to create a safe and focused environment. Next, cards were used to provide prompts to influence positive thoughts, self-compassion, and gratitude. Finally, students focused on letting go of troubling thoughts by blowing bubbles while focusing on issues or traits that they perceived to be not serving them in a positive way. A discussion of the experience took place at the culmination of the activities. Before and after the activities, all students completed the Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory (FMI) short form (Walach et al., 2006)

Paired-samples *t*-tests were conducted via IBM SPSS Statistics to analyze the pre- and post-measure. Students who participated in the mindfulness activities demonstrated a statistically significant increase in overall mindfulness. Item analysis showed significant impact on items related to being in the present moment. Qualitative follow-up as a discussion group demonstrated that participants felt more present and calm.

There were limitations related to the sample size and demographic of the group. Specifically, the sample in this study included a small number of female participants at a midwestern university. Future studies could replicate the study with more participants, include males in the population, or select a more diverse geographical demographic. Additionally, it would be interesting to see if additional time could increase the mindfulness of the group even more. Future studies could try comparing groups who are given mindfulness activities for varied amounts of time to see if a certain amount of time would have the greatest impact. Also, for this study, we used only one scale of overall mindfulness. Future studies could look at the impact of each of the subcategories individually, having the group complete scales of nonjudgment/safety, self-compassion, positive thoughts/optimism, and gratitude. Lastly, later studies could evaluate whether the impact is sustained over time by including either an additional quantitative post-test administered weeks after the study or a qualitative follow-up interview to see if participants demonstrated increased mindfulness in their lives.

Demonstrating that a day of mindfulness activities in the classroom can significantly impact overall mindfulness in this sample of graduate students has implications for mental health, education, school psychology, and other helping professions, as well as general well-being. Specifically, in higher education we often believe we do not have time to promote self-care. In light of all of the protective factors associated with mindfulness-based strategies, however, using these activities in the classroom would arguably allow for more productive educational time. As Benjamin Franklin so astutely expressed it, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” The students in this study are all pursuing careers in fields that nurture others, and it is imperative that people in helping professions practice self-care. Teaching these practices and modeling the importance of self-care at the beginning of a career in a helping profession can support students long-term. Additionally, this is another piece of evidence supporting the benefits of preventive practices in mental health. Rather than dealing with the outcome of emotional and mental instability after a crisis has occurred, more mindfulness-based practices could prevent many of these situations. This study shows that taking a small portion of one day can significantly impact graduate students’ mindfulness. Additional similar interventions could have far-reaching positive implications.

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