PROMOTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF A RESILIENT PERSONALITY IN A UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT THROUGH THE PRACTICE OF MINDFULNESS

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Abstract

The article describes the results of a longitudinal study on the effects of the regular practice of mindfulness on coping with stressful situations of university students, whom later became employees in various companies and institutions. The main focus of the study was to analyse their strategies for managing difficult situations and the possibility to maintain a state of harmony by the participants after the practice of mindfulness. From 2002 to 2018, 97 participants (53 men and 44 women) were monitored for the study. They were students at Czech universities who first passed an 8-week course of mindfulness and who practiced mindful meditation at least once a day for a period of 20 minutes. We recorded their statements four times a year for a period of 17 years. In total, there were 6,596 interviews. The first objective was to determine how their behaviour, experience and thinking changed over time, particularly in difficult situations. At the beginning of the study, their reactions in emotionally charged situations were subjectively characterised by a lack of self-control, low self-confidence in terms of managing the problem, and perceiving conflicts as unsolvable catastrophic events. The second objective was to record how the participants perceived the effect of regular practice of mindfulness on experiencing difficult situations, and how the solution of such problematic behaviour changes as a result of meditation. The results indicate a significant change in the lives of the participants during the implementation of the study. In particular, participants reported greater focus while reading and greater concentration on their studies or work, their response to stressful situations was calmer, without experiencing paralysing anxiety, and they followed daily work plans better, without the tendency to procrastinate. Therefore, mindfulness may be used as a quality and time-effective training method that reduces stress, leads to better concentration on the present moment and subsequent, calmer decision-making and behaviour, which are qualities that are considered pivotal in university studies (and later at work). Based on this longitudinal study, we prepared a programme that became the basis of a new subject, “Mindfulness in Practice”, for students of Psychology with a focus on education. We believe that a level-headed teacher is the basis for good practice in high school and elementary school and we consider opening this subject to be basal for monitoring and verifying the principles of the practice of mindfulness, under the professional supervision of a lecturer with our students at the Faculty of Education.

Keywords: resilience, anxiety, protective factors, mindfulness.

1 INTRODUCTION

This article draws attention to the possibility of developing personality resilience through the practice of mindfulness, performed at least once a day. We focused on university students who went on to become employees in various companies and institutions, both state and private, during the study. It was a longitudinal study, implemented over a period of 17 years. The studied population of university students had a common problem: the participants came from dysfunctional primary families. These families were described as lacking in solidarity between the family members, with a father highly dominant in solving family issues. In spite of the common, very similar basis in the primary family, the participants responded very differently to stressful situations in their adult lives. We will outline what particular protective factors were recorded after regular practice of mindfulness in the participants during the 17 year period. The motivation to publish the results comes from the improvements described by the participants’ responses to stressful situations. We would like to define the meaning of everyday practice of mindfulness mediation and initiate research of this effect with medical science. The results can be used as a basis for projects of student population personality development through the practice of mindfulness.
1.1 Psychological Resilience and Protective Factors

Personality resilience refers to the ability of an individual to manifest a positive adaptation in the face of significant sources of stress. Resilience can also be viewed as a specific counterpart to vulnerability. As a process of good adaptation to surviving a long-lasting problematic period, a period of risk that could incur suddenly, or after several years of a happy life. However, we can also talk about good adaptation to a permanently existing negative situation. Resilience mitigates the negative effects of distress and stressful life periods. It means flexibility, resistance and resilience. It is a common phenomenon and it is used to describe people who adapt successfully in spite of all the negative aspects they have to overcome (family, social and personal). It is a product of a mechanism for managing accumulated stress, leading to a satisfied existence. It is viewed as multidimensional, which means that there are several factors of its formation acting concurrently or subsequently (Ungar, 2008; 2006; 2004). It is an ability that changes by the effect of internal and external factors and thus we can speak of a process, but not a trait. These days, attention is paid to finding protective factors to promote the formation of a resilient personality all over the world. Authors are oriented on describing specific processes involved in coping with negative circumstances in life. We focused on the practice of mindfulness. To be able to summarise the factors that have a protective effect on an individual, we first had to find a definition that we would follow. As mentioned above, the definitions of resilience are not consistent. Each author has a different opinion on this issue. In this study, we decided to lean towards the definition by Luther, Sawyer and Brown (2006) who define resilience as a lifelong process through which an individual accomplishes a positive adaptation while being exposed to adverse circumstances. Subsequently, we emphasise the process of resilience as an ability and outcome of a successful adaptation of an individual despite adverse or even dangerous conditions (Melillo, Suárez, & Ojeda, 2001; Gitterman, 1998). We state both of them as they are very close to one another.

1.2 Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a pragmatic method, it is not an esoteric trend. Mindfulness can be practiced in regular everyday activities. Research by Lazar (2014) shows that practicing mindfulness can even change areas of the brain that are related to improved cognitive functions and the ability to control emotions. “The reported improvement in the condition of the programme participants may be caused by changes in the brain structure, which means that people do not only feel better because they relaxed for some time (Lazar, 2014; Sinclair & Seydel, 2015, p. 25).” In the beginning of the 1970’s to mid-1990s, Jon Kabat-Zinn and his colleagues performed a study that examined the effects of the practice of mindfulness on twenty-two patients. The patients were recommended to the clinic with various medical diagnoses and further examinations showed a secondary diagnosis of generalised anxiety disorder and/or panic disorders. The study was performed because the research workers saw significant improvements in the condition of individuals who stated a high level of anxiety in their lives. Besides the patients’ statements that they had more control over their feelings of panic, they also showed a significant reduction in the level of experiencing anxiety and panic fear after the end of the programme (Kabat-Zinn, 2015; 2016). In recent years, there have been more and more scientific studies focused on the effects of “mindfulness” on the human brain and thus on emotions, behaviour, body and its functions. The studies show how mindfulness can effectively help in many difficult life situations, such as: anxiety, stress, problems with one’s physical appearance and so on.

Mindful mediation focuses attention on the breath, on how air comes in and out. When we focus in this way, it allows us to observe how thoughts are created and to accept the thoughts (Puig, 2013). Over the course of time, we find out that thoughts arise and disappear according to their own rules and that we do not always identify with the thoughts. Gradually, we grow to understand that thoughts and feelings (both pleasant and unpleasant) pass away. They come and go and it is us who can decide whether or not we will act upon them. Mindfulness means “observing without criticising” and being compassionate with oneself. It can help us to gain control over our lives. Mindfulness can bring a long-lasting change of mood. Scientific research and studies show that mindfulness does not only prevent states of depression, but it also has a positive effect on brain activity related to everyday stress, anxiety and irritation. The application of mindfulness on the mentioned states of anxiety enables the individual to observe the anxiety without criticism.

The practice of mindfulness teaches us to establish a connection with our deep internal sources of physiological relaxation and to use those sources. We can apply mindfulness even at times when we have problems, when our existence is endangered. When we learn how to (through gradual manageable steps), we can trust the stable inner core (firm, solid and reliable). Gradually, the stress, anxiety and worries become less obtrusive and weaker. The practise of mindfulness emphasises on
staying in a single moment and promotes awareness of the present without judgement. The aim of the practice is to learn to observe and be aware of one’s thoughts and emotions without responding to them. The daily practice then includes the perception of body processes, three minutes of breathing that helps us ally with the present moment. For the perfect practice, we need to get rid of any self-criticism and self-accusation. The task of the practice of mindfulness is to “let thoughts exist without judgement”. When we do this with all the thoughts that occur during the practice of mindfulness (regardless of their character, however, the negative ones in particular), they will seem to be less threatening. To be mindful does not mean that the individual is reactionless to his or her thoughts and feelings, but that the individual does not express himself or herself in full strength, it means that he or she acts with a clear mind and inner balance. When we change the relationship to thoughts by paying attention to the process of thinking, we may find that we ought to change the way we think and speak of our thoughts and feelings.

Any meditation tradition is grounded in everyday practice which helps to calm down our scattered mind. The most natural way to start is to focus on breathing. It is recommended to practice the mediation of breathing body for at least six days. Meditation takes 10 minutes (it might last longer, according to our ability and time) and it should be repeated at least twice a day. We can sit or lie down. However, it is good to experiment to find which position keeps us alert. We can also choose a place and time that is the most convenient for us. At the beginning, it is very hard to find time to meditate. Like with any other practice, the most difficult part is to “start” and then “keep going” regularly. Instructions (as used in our study) look as follows:

- Find a pleasant position. If you choose a chair, make sure it has a firm and straight back, so you can sit without touching the back and your spine can keep your body upright. If you have a medical problem that does not let you sit on the chair or lie down on your back, find a position that is comfortable and lets you stay alert at every moment.

- When sitting, let your back keep an upright and dignified position, without tension and comfortable. Do not cross your leg over the other, place your feet fully on the floor. You can close your eyes if it is comfortable for you. If you do not close your eyes, lower them and look about one meter away from you. However, do not focus on any particular point. When lying down, do not cross your legs but let them slightly move away from one another. Leave your arms freely along your body so that they do not touch your body.

- Now, become aware of your breath, how it moves in and out of your body and how your stomach rises and falls.

- Observe the changing physical perceptions while you inhale and exhale. Pay attention to a short break between inhaling and exhaling, and exhaling and inhaling.

- Do not control your breath, just let the body breathe on its own.

- After several minutes of observing inhaling and exhaling, start to expand your attention gradually until it includes your whole breathing body.

- Try to observe all the perceptions of the various parts of your body. Perceive the touch or pressure on your feet, knees or thighs, and the touch of your hands resting on your thighs.

- Pay attention to such perceptions as best as your attention lets you without losing contact with your breath and the perception of your whole body.

- If there is a strong tension anywhere in your body, you might find that it draws your attention and that it makes it difficult to observe your breath and your whole body. You can focus your attention on the place where the perception is the strongest for a while and examine its properties, what it is, where is it precisely, how it changes in time, how does it moves from place to place.

- You can also decide to change your position and if you do so, observe the movement and the perceptions that follow the movement.

- Try to let yourself to immediately experience all the feelings as they are, do not perceive them through thinking, do not create any explanations about what they might mean.

- Whenever you are taken over by the power of physical perceptions, thoughts, images and feelings, slowly return to the present moment by focusing on your breath and by perceiving your whole sitting (or lying) body.
Sooner or later, something will draw your attention away from breathing. Your mind will wander, thoughts, images, plans or daydreaming will appear. When your mind wanders off, it is not a mistake. That’s what the mind is like. Just be aware of where your mind is, then gently bring your attention back to the sensation of breathing.

Your mind will probably wander off again and again. Always remember that the aim is only to take note of where the mind “went” and gently bring your attention back to your breathing. It might be difficult, you might be frustrated that your mind is disobedient. Such frustration may create a lot of discomfort in your mind. Let yourself be compassionate with your mind when you lead it to the thing you wanted to focus on at the beginning. It is an opportunity to practice patience.

Our mind tends to hop from one thought to another so it might be very difficult to keep concentration. This simple finding is an important step in the development of mindfulness.

When you are meditating and your mind is wandering, you can discover something important. You will see the flow of thoughts. As in any other flow, the flow of thoughts will let you clearly see all the thoughts, feelings and memories that continuously flow through your mind for a short moment. Some will seem to be completely random. As if your mind were throwing away things from an old storage, checking whether or not you, or your conscience, might need any of that. You have the option to accept or reject the thoughts. However, we often forget about this option. We think that our thoughts are reality and we identify with our mind too closely.

Also, take note of how the thoughts are trying to draw your attention, or how you want to continue thinking. It may help to quietly name what occurs in your mind at the moment: “this is planning”, “these are worries”. Then, bring your attention back to breathing. When you become aware that you have been absorbed by thinking, it is not a failure. On the contrary, becoming aware of that means that you have taken a step towards mindfulness.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Study Procedure

Ungar (2006; 2004; 2008), Schoon (2006) and García & Gómez-Barris (1995) describe a qualitative approach as especially suitable for studying resilience and protective factors. They state the following reasons: it discovers unchanged processes, states that come to the surface by processing specific case studies, it helps describe the contextual specificity of the issue and describes the broad spectrum of life stories. For those reasons, we chose a qualitative longitudinal research approach. The students in the study group students first went through introductory interviews, on the basis of which a group of students with a common denominator was selected – in particular, defined problematic areas in the family. Then, they passed 8-week mindfulness training. Then, they performed mindful meditation for a period of 20 minutes at least once a day. We then did semi-structured in-depth interviews with each participant, at least one hour long, four times a year for a period of 17 years. All interviews were recorded and processed in the form of case studies and analysed using the ATLAS.ti.7 program. The final group included 97 people. The first objective was to determine how their behaviour, experience and thinking changed over time, particularly in difficult situations. At the beginning of the study, their reactions in emotionally charged situations were subjectively characterised by a lack of self-control, low self-confidence in terms of managing the problem, and perceiving conflicts as unsolvable catastrophic events. The second objective was to record how the participants perceived the effect of regular practice of mindfulness on experiencing difficult situations, and how the solution of such problematic behaviour changes as a result of meditation.

2.2 Study Group

The study group included a total of 97 participants. The sample included 53 men and 44 women. At the time of joining the study, the youngest participant was 23 years old and the oldest was 31 years old.

Table 1: Participants of the Czech study group:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Total number of participants</th>
<th>Duration of the study in years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Czechia</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Participants, university students of the Czech study group and the faculties they attended at the time they joined the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>CZ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In total</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Jobs held by the participants of the study group in 2018
3 attorneys, 18 university teachers, 16 personnel officers, 6 journalists, 21 building and mechanical engineering, 21 economists, 10 translators, 2 interpreters

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis. Research data acquisition method
Of the major types of in-depth interviews, we chose a semi-structured interview, based on a prepared list of topics. Four meetings per year (every three months) were organised with each participant for the purpose of the in-depth interview. In total, 6,596 interviews with 97 participants were done during the period of 17 years. We prepared a general framework of questions that were used as an “aid” for leading the interviews. The areas concerned were:

- **Experienced stressful situation**
  The first question in this area is essential and also very broad. How the participant approaches this question depends on the development of the beginning of the interview and on what the participant includes in the recollection: “How would you describe your very first experience of a stressful situation?”, “How did this experience change in the course of time (during the past three months we have not seen one another)?”, “What were your thoughts?”, “How did you perceive the situation?”, “Why do you perceive it as stressful?”

- **Initial reaction to the situation, manifestations in behaviour**
  “Describe your very first reaction to a stressful situation”, “How would you behave now?”, “Did your behaviour change after the first immediate reaction?”, “What did you think about the situation?”, “How did your thinking and reflections change?”

- **Solution, coping with stress**
  “What solution did you use immediately?”, “Did you look for any other solutions?”, “How did the solutions, coping with stress change in the course of time?”, “Did they change at all?”, “What helped you to change, to better, healthier reactions?”

- **Feedback**
  The feedback is for the researcher; recapitulation for the participant. It is also a verification of adherence to the ethical requirements. In case of any problems, it provides an opportunity to work them out so that all the topics opened during the study have been processed. “How did you find this interview?”, “How did you feel during this interview?”, “Which questions seemed to be too personal?”

2.4 Methods used in the analysis of the research material. Explanatory case study
We chose explanatory case studies to understand the method which each participant used to cope with his or her experience of a dysfunctional primary family and then the consequences of growing up in such a family. The studies should reveal the causal chain of the occurrence and interactions of the individual protective factors. The individual relations described by the participants do not have to seem important (at first sight) but even the smallest details in the lives of the participants contribute to the outcome of their current effect after several years of study. The data were analysed by the ATLAS.ti.7 program.
3 RESULTS

3.1 Summary of most frequent changes in the participants' behaviour in the case studies

- They are able to react faster to changes in work requirements and unexpected tasks.
- Better adherence to the daily work plan without the tendency to procrastinate.
- They created their own systems (different for each participant) of coping with recurring work-related stress.
- They react calmer to stressful situations, without experiencing paralysing anxiety.
- They concentrate on the solution of the current problems.
- They are prepared to deal with criticism (even when they are still sensitive to critical comments, it is a habit brought from the family, or at many work positions).
- In the course of time, their confidence grows, based on managing previous work tasks.
- The participants show an effort to achieve compromise in meetings.
- They are able to immerse in the studied text and concentrate longer during studies or work.

3.2 Specific determined protective factors, promoted by the practice of mindfulness

- Positive orientation towards the future
- Emotional stability
- Higher frustration tolerance

3.3 Manifestation of resilient personalities as a result of the effect of protective factors

- Self-efficacy – confidence in one’s own abilities – the participants strive to achieve the best possible results, they make their way toward the set objective.
- Ability to live with uncertainty – every participant has come to terms with their life situation, in their own way. All participants have described and are aware that their parents did not bring them up properly and that their behaviour is a negative model for them.
- Self-awareness – they are aware of their own individual existence. However, it is much more complex and includes the recognition of their own intellectual life, readiness for life, and their own experience that they are able to correctly reassess as “good” and “bad” and then use it in life.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The participants experienced significant risk factors in their primary families, including laying demands that were too high, emotional instability of the parents, or long-lasting family conflicts. The participants grew up under the influence of an adult authority, one of the parents, the father in most cases, who was not able to recognise the level of his influence. As a consequence, the participants experienced disorders in concentration, low emotional bond towards the parents and lack of respect to authority. Young adults experienced problematic situations repeatedly by not respecting the authority and they did not know how to behave in problematic situations and how to behave towards other people, even when they were at university (older). The study focused on the determination of the effect of the practice of mindfulness on the formation of protective factors. The protective factors have a positive effect on an individual; the more protective factors there are, the better manageable the life of an individual is. There are no universal factors that could be laid out for all individuals to the same extent. However, there are protective factors that recurred in the study participants: positive orientation towards the future, emotional stability and higher frustration tolerance. On the basis of the longitudinal study, we described the most frequently manifested characteristics of personality resilience of the participants: self-efficacy, the ability to live with uncertainty and self-awareness. One of the rules of
qualitative research is not to generalise the data, therefore we hereby emphasise that the stated protective factors and the manifestations of resilience cannot be considered generally applicable; however, the groundwork collected over the period of 17 years creates a sufficient portfolio for further work in coping with stressful situations and the declared improvement in the quality of life brought by the regular practice of mindfulness.

REFERENCES