

Preliminary Findings of a 90 Day Virtual Heartfulness Meditation Program to Improve Resilience Among Health Care Students

Background

Graduate students are more than six times as likely to experience depression and anxiety as the general population.¹ Health professional training, including doctoral training, is a challenging experience with graduate students facing unique stressors including intense academic rigor, long hours, feelings of inadequacy, social isolation, and accumulating student loan debt. Depression and anxiety may predispose students to professional burnout with studies suggesting that burnout begins during graduate training.^{2,3}

The COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the current unrest of social protesting, challenges matters further. Students are navigating even more social isolation, change, uncertainty, and loss. Strategies are needed to assist students to maintain balance during these turbulent times.

Resilience training programs have utilized various interventions including yoga, expressions of gratitude, journaling, and mindfulness meditation. Meditation has been shown to have benefits for body and mind.^{4,5}

Heartfulness meditation, a practice that connects one to the light and love of their heart, has been shown to improve burnout and stress among health care workers.²⁷ Yet to be determined is the degree Heartfulness meditation can improve resilience and to reduce depression and anxiety among the diverse health care student professions.

Because of the stay-at-home orders related to the COVID pandemic it was no longer feasible to have in person meditation sessions; although stay-at-home orders have been reduced, many schools continue to limit students' time on campus. However, Heartfulness trainers are providing on-line meditation sessions throughout this country and internationally, using platforms such as ZOOM. These virtual sessions have attracted people new to Heartfulness meditation who are seeking solutions to assist them to manage the stresses of today's environment.

Purpose

The purpose of this investigation is to determine feasibility, satisfaction and impact upon depression, anxiety, and resilience of Heartfulness meditation, delivered virtually, on health care students.

Methods

In a randomized and controlled mixed-method 90-day intervention study, treatment and control groups completed demographic questions and measures of anxiety, depression and resilience at baseline, 45 days, and 90 days. The intervention group also completed an interview about meditation goals and progress at baseline, 45 days, and 90 days and a satisfaction survey. The intervention included 1:1 weekly trainer conducted 30-minute meditation sessions, weekly trainer conducted group mediation sessions, and coaching to

develop a personal meditation practice. All meetings and intervention sessions were virtual on ZOOM.

Results

To date 20 students have enrolled in the study (12 intervention/8 control). Six have completed the meditation intervention. Aggregate scores for these six students have improved as measured by Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale. Depression average pre/post (4.7/ 2.2) anxiety average pre/post (12.2/6.5). Changes in resilience were equivocal.

Qualitative results have included reports of decreased anxiety, increased confidence with examinations at school and board exams, more enjoyable relationships, feeling more comfortable with emotions, and improved ability to be present.

No adverse events have been reported.

Conclusions

While a small number to date, results are promising. Should significant group differences be present consideration should be given to include meditation as a formal part of health care student education.