

Mindfulness as Perceived by Extension Educators in Ohio, Pennsylvania and Indiana

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Introduction/need for research

Mindfulness involves paying attention to the present moment without judging your experience (Kabat-Zin, 2012). Mindfulness can have many benefits for those who practice it, including stress reduction (Chiesa and Serretti, 2009). There have been studies of mindfulness perceptions among educators in formal educational settings. For example, one study found that not all teacher participants had a complete understanding of the definition of mindfulness, yet most of them viewed mindfulness practices positively and were willing to implement them (Wigelsworth & Quinn, 2020). Another group of elementary teachers indicated that while it can be challenging teaching young children mindfulness in the classroom, they found it to be beneficial (Piotrowski et. al., 2017). Both of these studies were qualitative, and there was a lack of quantitative studies with large sample sizes examining mindfulness perceptions among educators.

Conceptual framework

The search “mindfulness perceptions among Extension educators” yielded no relevant results using the Google Scholar search engine. A search of “mindfulness perceptions” in *The Journal of Youth Development*, *Journal of Human Sciences and Extension*, *Journal of Agriculture Education*, and *Journal of Extension* yielded no relevant results. Articles related to Extension mindfulness programming for youth and adults were identified, but no studies assessing Extension educators’ perceptions of mindfulness were found. Therefore, a gap in the literature was identified. The present study worked to address this gap. To develop a new instrument to assess mindfulness among Extension educators, we drew from Wigelsworth and Quinn (2020) and Piotrowski and colleagues’ (2017) studies of mindfulness perceptions among formal classroom educators. Wigelsworth and Quinn (2020) identified several themes of mindfulness perceptions and mindfulness barriers among formal classroom teachers that informed the development of the instrument, including mindfulness for stress management, mindfulness as it relates to religion, and potential benefits of mindfulness for learning. Piotrowski and colleagues’ (2017) identified challenges and benefits of mindfulness also helped inform the instrument.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to explore mindfulness perceptions among Extension educators in three states. Specific objectives were to determine: 1) Extension educators’ general perceptions of mindfulness, 2) Extension educators’ perceptions of current mindfulness practices in Extension programming in their state, and 3) Extension educators’ perceptions of integrating mindfulness practices in Extension programming.

Methodology

The study used a descriptive design. The target audience included Extension educators in 3 states (blinded for review purposes). Census was used; the survey was sent to all Extension educators in each state. Dillman et. al.’s (2014) contact and follow-up method was used to recruit study participants. To address research objective one, a Qualtrics survey instrument with both Likert-scale and open-ended questions was used. Fourteen (14) items to assess general perceptions of mindfulness were created. A faculty member and graduate student in Extension education survey design reviewed the instrument to help establish face validity. The instrument had a Cronbach’s alpha level of .867. To address objective 2, we asked an open-ended question: “*To your knowledge, what mindfulness programs or efforts is your state Extension program involved in? Please list them here. If you do not know of any, you can write “none.”*”. To address objective 3,

we asked: “Do you think the concept of mindfulness could be applied to Extension programs like 4-H youth STEM education programs or ANR Master Gardeners, or others? Please share up to 3 thoughts below.” Quantitative items were entered into SPSS 29 and analyzed using descriptive statistics. Open ended questions were entered into NVivo and analyzed for common themes among responses.

Results/findings

Educators’ general perceptions of mindfulness ($n=363$) indicated that educators generally understand what mindfulness is ($M=4.02$, $SD=.482$). The top 5 items for mindfulness perceptions included, *Can help people manage stress* ($M=4.46$, $SD=.739$), *Is only for people who are calm* (reverse coded; $M=4.36$, $SD=.749$), *Can be therapeutic* ($M=4.31$, $SD=.772$), *Can help people focus* ($M=4.31$, $SD=.675$), and *Can make people healthier* ($M=4.29$, $SD=.793$). The lowest 5 items included, *Is related to religion* ($M=2.33$; $SD=.975$), *Is a state of being* ($M=3.67$; $SD=.844$) *Must involve an activity such as meditation* (reverse coded; $M=3.71$, $SD=.930$), *Can help people learn* ($M=4.04$, $SD=.767$), and *Involves managing thoughts* ($M=4.08$; $SD=.739$). Overall, 10 out of fourteen items had an $M>4.00$.

Overall, most educators ($n=134$) were not aware of Extension mindfulness programs in their state. However, educators with program responsibilities in 4-H and Family and Consumer sciences had more awareness of mindfulness programming. When examined by state, most Extension educators in Indiana indicated 4-H youth development was the type of mindfulness program they knew about ($n=41$). In Ohio, Family and Consumer Sciences programming was the top answer ($n=41$). In Pennsylvania, the Calm app subscription funded by Extension administration was most mentioned ($n=38$). In all 3 states, many educators mentioned they were not aware of Extension mindfulness programs in their state at all (Indiana $n=61$; Ohio $n=49$; Pennsylvania $n=24$).

In Indiana, 88% of respondents thought mindfulness could be applied in Extension programming like Master Gardeners and 4-H STEM. In Ohio, 81% agreed. And in Pennsylvania, 93% of educators said they were interested in integrating mindfulness into programming.

Conclusions

Overall, Extension educators understand what mindfulness means (Overall $M=4.02$, $SD=.482$). They seem split in their awareness of mindfulness programming, as some are not aware of any at all, though many others shared examples. The results suggest most educators across all 3 states support integrating mindfulness into Extension programming (Overall Percentage $M=87\%$).

Implications/recommendations/impact

Because there was variability across each of the states examined, this study should be replicated in different states to better understand Extension’s value of mindfulness. Our instrument could also be adapted and used by state formal agriculture educators’ associations. Variability in mindfulness is understandable given the diversity of Extension programs in these states and would be expected in other states. Further study should be conducted to assess the variable perceptions related to mindfulness and also assess factors that are contributing to these differences. We recommend a mindfulness programming awareness campaign within Extension on a state-by-state basis to increase awareness of mindfulness programming.

References

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