

Mindfulness as a Tool for Stress Management in Formal and Non-Formal Education

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Introduction/need for innovation or idea

Extension educators are under workplace stress due to increasing job demands and decreases in resources (Donaldson et. al., 2022). The *Stress in America 2023: A Nation Recovering from Collective Trauma* survey indicated that individuals across the lifespan are still recovering from the stress of the COVID-19 epidemic (APA, 2023). Extension educators and the general public need ways to more effectively manage their stress post-pandemic.

Many Extension educators already use or hope to implement mindfulness programming into their programs (Awan & Radhakrishna, 2024). Overall, educators are interested in learning more about how to integrate mindfulness into their existing programming (Awan & Radhakrishna, 2024). Due to these desires among Extension educators, and the need for programs and resources to better help people manage stress, the first author began piloting a mindfulness program series for Extension educators in Indiana. The workshops focus on stress management, mindfulness programming with youth audiences, and mindfulness programming with adult audiences. Workshop 1 introduces Extension educators to short mindfulness techniques that can be implemented to reduce work-related stress. Workshop 2 introduces developmentally appropriate and research-based approaches to teaching mindfulness to youth. Workshop 3 achieves the same tasks as Workshop 2 for an adult audience program context.

How it works/program phases

We began the mindfulness series with a workshop to help educators better understand mindfulness first because having a personal mindfulness practice helps a mindfulness instructor in developing as a mindfulness teacher (Shonin & Van Gordon, 2015). We implemented the first two workshops in 2022 and 2023 for Indiana Extension educators at the Purdue Extension Professional Development Conference and Indiana Extension Educators Association Conference with 70 (virtual) participants and 17 (in-person) participants, respectively. We implemented workshop 3 in 2024 at the Indiana Extension Educators Association Conference and had 20 in-person participants. Objectives for each workshop are shared below.

Workshop 1- “Intrapersonal Leadership Development: Mindfulness for Stress Management” learning objectives include the following:

- Define stress,
- Identify stressors,
- Define mindfulness,
- Learn why mindfulness reduces stress,
- Learn and practice 2 breathing techniques to reduce stress,
- Learn and practice guided imagery,
- Learn and practice 4 techniques to manage anxious and negative thoughts,
- Discuss how these practices can fit into daily life, and
- Learn about a goal setting-resource for mindfulness.

Workshop 2 – “Mindfulness Practices in Youth Extension Programming” learning objectives include the following:

- Define mindfulness,
- Identify the benefits mindfulness can provide to youth from the literature,
- Explain different approaches to incorporating mindfulness into youth programming

- Practice 2-3 mindfulness techniques, and
- Brainstorm ways to incorporate mindfulness into existing youth Extension programming in your county.

Workshop 3 – “Mindfulness Practices in Adult Extension Programming” (Was implemented April 2024 at the Indiana Extension Educator Conference. The workshop achieved the same objectives as workshop 2, with a focus on mindfulness for adult Extension audiences rather than youth audiences.

Results to date/implications

Extension educators participating in workshop 1, 2 and 3 shared positive feedback, indicating they were interested in learning more about mindfulness in the future and shared examples of how they might want to apply it in their programming for both youth and adults. These results are consistent with Awan and Radhakrishna’s (2024) work assessing mindfulness perceptions among Extension educators. Other states should determine if mindfulness is a topic of interest among their educators. If needs assessments in mindfulness indicate interest among educators, similar mindfulness series to ours could be adapted and replicated across states.

Our results may also be useful for our colleagues in formal agriculture education. The workshops could be adapted and replicated for school-based agriculture teachers as well as faculty members in school-based agriculture education, Extension education, agriculture communication, and agricultural leadership.

Future plans/advice to others

We hope to share the program with neighboring Extension systems as well as formal agriculture educators in the future, as there is value of mindfulness in both formal and non-formal program settings. We recommend that states and organizations interested in replicating our program first conduct a needs assessment to determine knowledge of and interest in mindfulness for stress management among employees. The opportunity exists for educators in consultation with the authors to offer workshops or trainings for the larger good of the Extension organization. Others completing this program in the future should add an evaluation for each session and a follow-up evaluation to the series to determine what Extension educators have learned and applied as a result of the workshop.

Costs/resources needed

The curriculum and the time to attend a train-the-trainer session would be needed for others to replicate this work. Both may be available from the authors upon request. Possibility also exists for a train-the-trainer session in the future.

References

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