

Tasmanian State Service Mindfulness at Work Pilot Study

Report of Findings December 2015

The purpose of this study was to assess whether a workplace-based mindfulness program would be acceptable, feasible and useful for reducing stress and improving related health and productivity outcomes for public sector employees, using a randomized controlled trial design.

What was the program?

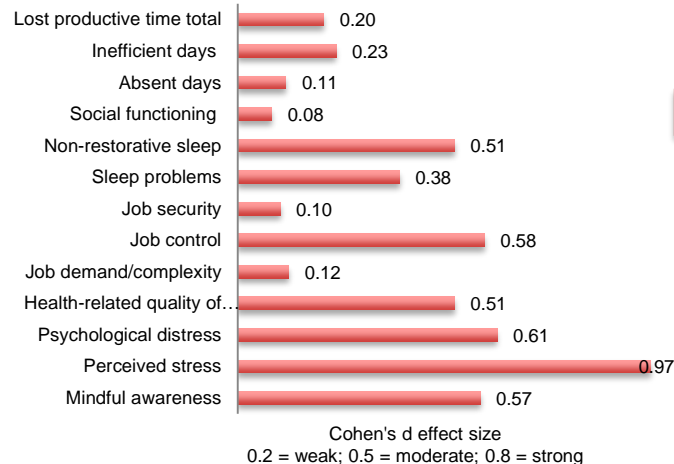
Five weekly 1.5 hour classes in group format with daily homework:

- Understanding mindfulness at work
 - 2 x 10 min body scan and breath meditation practice
- Working with the body in mind – stress physiology
 - 2 x 10 min body scan and breath meditation practice
- Mindful communication
 - 20 min body scan and/or breath meditation practice
- Working with difficult people and strong emotions
 - 20 min body scan and/or breath meditation practice
- Mindful working in times of change
 - 30 min body scan and/or breath meditation practice



What difference did it make?

When compared with people who were given self-help information about workplace stress, Intervention participants showed good improvement in various health and stress-related measures and small positive changes in productivity.



Did others notice these changes?

Colleagues, family members and friends observed improvements in:

- Relationships
- Attention
- Productivity
- Stress
- Emotional regulation

“Since attending the Mindfulness at Work pilot program, the person has demonstrated the ability to calmly review their responses before reacting to negative work situations.”

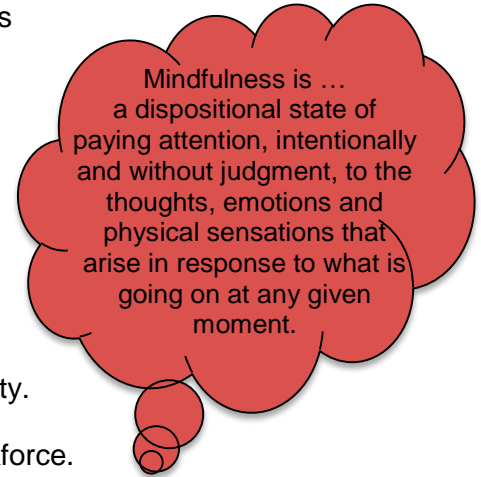
“... seems less 'flighty' and generally calmer. I would say the person seems more focused.”

“... now seems to recognise when there is a trigger for increased stress and tries to stop that from affecting ... generally seems less stressed.”

Background

partnering Healthy@Work evaluated the effects of a five-year workplace health promotion initiative for Tasmanian State Service (TSS) employees. A high prevalence of stress and distress (10%) was found amongst employees, who felt under-served by targeted and available workplace interventions.

Evidence suggests mindful awareness helps intercept the stress cycle, through the early detection of stress, which leads to greater response flexibility in the face of challenges. It can be cultivated through the regular practice of observing thoughts, emotions and sensations without reacting and has been taught for stress reduction in systemized class-based programs since 1979.



Only a handful of published studies have investigated causal links between *workplace* mindfulness interventions and mental health, and there is little evidence of its effect on other work-relevant factors including social functioning and productivity. No published studies report on acceptability, feasibility or usefulness of mindfulness interventions for a public sector workforce. To support local decision-making and contribute to the global research agenda in this field, researchers at the Menzies Institute for Medical Research evaluated the Pilot TSS Mindfulness at Work Program (MaWP).

Research

The study evaluated a pilot five-week MaWP for acceptability, feasibility and efficacy in reducing stress and related health, wellbeing and productivity problems for public sector employees. A parallel group randomized controlled trial with Intervention (MaWP) and Control (Information-only) was conducted. Data was collected from participants and informants pre- and post-intervention and qualitative and exploratory quantitative methods were used to assess observable changes.

Twenty (20) intervention participants, 66 control subjects and 59 informants completed the study. Results indicate a high degree of acceptability for the MaWP, although location and inflexible work schedules presented obstacles to feasibility. The primary outcome of mindfulness improved significantly as did perceived stress, distress and quality of life. Sleep, social functioning, job-stress and productivity all improved although not to the same magnitude. All of these outcomes were at least partly mediated by changes in mindfulness. Informants reported a positive change arising from the Intervention in observable stress levels and emotional regulation.

The MaWP pilot was shown to be acceptable and efficacious, with potential merit as a workplace mindfulness intervention. Further work is required to ensure equitable access across the widely diverse and distributed TSS workforce and to assess longer-term outcomes.

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Ethical approval was provided by the Tasmanian Social Science Human Research Ethics Committee H00147

