



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Implementing the learning from the mindfulness-based social work and self-care programme to social work student practice during COVID-19:

Citation for published version:

Maddock, A & McCusker, P 2022, 'Implementing the learning from the mindfulness-based social work and self-care programme to social work student practice during COVID-19: A qualitative study', *The British Journal of Social Work*, pp. 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcac094>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1093/bjsw/bcac094](https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcac094)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

The British Journal of Social Work

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Implementing the Learning from the Mindfulness-based Social Work and Self-care Programme to Social Work Student Practice during COVID-19: A Qualitative Study

Alan Maddock ^{1,*} and Pearse McCusker ²

¹*School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College, the University of Dublin, Dublin, Ireland*

²*School of Social and Political Science, the University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland*

*Correspondence to Dr Alan Maddock, School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College, the University of Dublin, Dublin, Ireland. Email: maddocal@tcd.ie

Abstract

This is the first study which has explored how social work students have applied the learning from a bespoke Mindfulness-Based Social Work and Self-Care (MBSWSC) programme to their social work practice. A qualitative research design was chosen, and a realist ontological position taken. The qualitative data were collected from reflective journals from seven social work students on placement who had completed the MBSWSC programme. An inductive thematic and comparative analysis methodology was used to identify key themes. This study found that the MBSWSC programme supported students to cope with the stress and anxiety that manifested before and during their placement. Students highlighted how switching from an avoidant to an approach oriented coping strategy allowed them to alleviate any negative thoughts or feelings they were experiencing. Students identified that this allowed them to employ more positive responses when dealing with stress. Students outlined that the learning from the programme allowed them to develop increased self-awareness, empathy, reflection and reflexivity skills, all of which will likely enhance their capacity for anti-oppressive social work practice. It is clear that improved access to the MBSWSC programme will allow social work students to develop the skills necessary to practice sustainably over the longer term.

© The Author(s) 2022. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The British Association of Social Workers. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. For commercial re-use, please contact journals.permissions@oup.com

Keywords: approach coping, mindfulness, self-care, social work skills, stress, student social worker

Accepted: April 2022

Introduction

It is clear that social work students consistently experience unique stressors as part of their social work education, but rarely receive comprehensive training or education on how to regulate this stress, along with negative thoughts and emotions that can arise as part of their education (Turner, 2009; Gockel and Deng, 2016). The process of socialising to the role of social worker, during a student's placement, is a time when a student social worker is particularly vulnerable to stress (Maddock *et al.*, 2021). Students may be working with service users and distressing life scenarios for the first time and students may need to navigate the complex thoughts and emotions that can accompany practice in challenging environments (Lynn and Mensinga, 2015). During their placement, students are also particularly vulnerable to self-doubt as they attempt to practice the social work skills and develop the competencies necessary to be a professionally qualified social worker (Gockel *et al.*, 2013). When students engage in critical reflections on practice, self-doubt can lead to self-critical, worried or ruminative thinking about their performance, due to often unfair, negative self-appraisals of their practice, which can be compounded if they receive negative feedback, self-perceived or not, by their practice teachers (Gockel *et al.*, 2013; Maddock *et al.*, 2021). The more persistent these stressors, and negative thoughts, emotions and physical sensations that accompany them are, the more a student's self-awareness is likely to be hindered by negative thinking processes, for example, worry or rumination (Maddock *et al.*, 2021). These negative thinking processes can clutter a student's self-awareness and distract them from integrating the key learning from practice experiences, and also make it less likely that they will acquire and integrate key social work skills, values and competencies (Gockel *et al.*, 2013). If this stress is left unchecked, it will also likely lead to inevitable declines in their mental health and well-being (Maddock *et al.*, 2021).

Increasingly, social work educators are becoming more concerned with not just training competent practitioners but also practitioners who are self-aware, critically reflective, resilient and can practice sustainably in very challenging environments (Thomas, 2017; Maddock *et al.*, 2021).

Effective social work practice is predicated on a social worker's capacity for self-awareness, attention regulation, critical reflection skills and their capacity for cognitive and emotional self-regulation (Thomas, 2017). These key skills, which are all core trainable cognitive and emotional processes (Lutz *et al.* 2007) are needed, in order to help social workers to deal with and process stress reactions that may compromise the social worker's decision making, their capacity to be present with clients, the overall quality of care received by service users along with their own well-being (Thomas, 2017). It is particularly important for students to be supported to develop these skills, particularly when one considers that they will be entering a profession with very high rates of stress, burnout and attrition (Ravalier *et al.*, 2021). Mindfulness-based programmes (MBPs), strategies and techniques have been proposed within social work education as a means of training social workers to support their own self-care and to enhance social work practice (Thomas, 2017; Maddock *et al.*, 2021). MBPs may improve service user care by reducing social worker stress, burnout and/or improving resiliency (Braun *et al.*, 2019). Several studies of healthcare professionals (HCPs) have argued that the enhanced cognitive and emotional self-regulation competencies achieved through MBPs, were also mechanisms which could improve patient care outcomes including patient-centred care, HCP-reported patient care and patient treatment outcomes (Braun *et al.*, 2019).

Research on mindfulness training in social work education and its impact on social work skill and competency development is in its beginning phase. Although a number of papers have provided hypotheses about its potential benefits for skill and competency development, we know very little empirically about how engagement in an MBP might impact students' process of skill and competency development, and mechanisms by how these and self-care skills and capacities, as well as improvements in stress and burnout, mental health and well-being are attained (Maddock *et al.*, 2021). Most existing studies have explored or examined mindfulness training primarily as a self-care strategy rather than as a practice training strategy (Gockel *et al.*, 2013; Roulston *et al.*, 2018). This emerging evidence suggested that MBPs are effective at improving student stress, feelings of burnout, anxiety, mood, mental well-being and quality of life (Napoli and Bonifas, 2011; Roulston *et al.*, 2018; Maddock *et al.*, 2021). In an integrative review of the literature on whether mindfulness in HCPs (including social workers) improves patient care, Braun *et al.* (2019) found strong support for a relationship between mindfulness and HCP-reported patient care, highlighting significant potential for MBPs to improve HCP functioning and therefore patient care.

Kinman *et al.* (2020) have outlined the need to follow cohorts of students over a longer period of time to explore the long-term effects of mindfulness-based training for well-being and professional practice. Two social work papers by Thomas (2017) and Gockel *et al.* (2013) examined

the impact of very brief mindfulness exercises over the course of longer social work modules and then explored the experience of students who subsequently worked with service users. Thomas (2017) (100 min total mindfulness practice as part of a sixteen-week module) found no significant quantitative changes in mindfulness, emotional regulation or empathy. Thomas (2017) did, however, find that students were able to calm feelings of anxiety, stay present with the client for longer during difficult interactions and shift from rapid judgement of case material to a slower more reserved non-judgemental analysis. In Gockel *et al.* (2013) (ten minutes mindfulness practice per class over twenty-eight classes) found no significant quantitative changes in student well-being, but significant changes were found in the student's sense of counselling self-efficacy. Gockel *et al.* (2013) also found that students drew on mindfulness practices to increase their ability to be present, open and emotionally available and responsive to their clients in session, as well identifying their own internal affective reactions to clients in ways that allowed them to manage rather than act out these reactions. There have, however, been no studies which have explored how social work students have applied the learning from a bespoke social work MBP which focussed on supporting students to develop both self-care and clinical social work skills and values.

This study aims to help fill this research gap by exploring how student engagement with the Mindfulness-Based Social Work and Self-Care (MBSWSC) programme, a promising new MBP for social work self-care and practice, which has been found to improve student's feelings of stress, burnout, anxiety and well-being (Maddock *et al.*, 2021), might have impacted social work student self-care and their social work practice while on placement during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods

Design

A qualitative research design was chosen, and a realist ontological position was taken by the researchers (Rycroft-Malone *et al.*, 2012). The qualitative data were collected from reflective journals from social work students on placement who had recently completed the MBSWSC programme (Maddock *et al.*, 2021). Placements took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students kept the reflective journals for the duration of the placement. The journals contained prompt questions related to the MBSWSC programme which students were encouraged to consider but advised not to view as prescriptive and to feel free to reflect on salient aspects of their experiences. Questions addressed the application of the learning from the MBSWSC programme to the social work

students' practice during their placement, including, engaging with service users, managing stress and anxiety, developing approach-coping skills and supporting reflexivity and anti-oppressive practice. Students were asked to provide examples to evidence any claims they made for the impact of mindfulness.

Participants

The journal data were attained from a purposive and convenience sample of seven social work students, from two universities in the UK, who had completed the MBSWSC programme in November 2020 and were undertaking their placements between January–February and May 2021, each lasting seventy and sixty days, respectively. These placements provide opportunities for students to demonstrate their ability to engage with service users, carers and professionals and carry out the social worker role against professional standards. [Maddock *et al.* \(2021\)](#) details the MBSWSC programme and its format. The seven participants attended mindfulness booster sessions, once a month between January and May on MS Teams; online engagement provided a work around for COVID-19 restrictions, but also mitigated demands on students in terms of travel and time. The sessions were facilitated by both authors and lasted for one hour. They included discussion of the use of mindfulness practices in the participant's social work practice and then a group mindfulness practice. There were six female and one male participants, whose ages ranged from twenty to forty-nine (mean age = 31 years).

Procedure

The study was approved by the relevant ethics committees at both universities. After receipt of ethical approval, all of the twenty-seven students who completed the MBSWSC programme, outlined in [Maddock *et al.* \(2021\)](#) were invited to participate in this research project, verbally at the end of the programme and via email. The seven participants, who consented to being a part of this study, were requested to fill in journal entries of their experiences of using mindfulness practices and the learning from the MBSWSC programme as part of their social work practice as their placements progressed; as part of the ethics process all participants consented to material from their reflective journals being used in publications. Independent sample *t*-tests on the data from [Maddock *et al.* \(2021\)](#) found that there were no significant differences in the levels of stress, burnout, well-being, anxiety and depression experienced by the seven students who opted to participate in this follow-up study and twenty students who chose not to. The key learning objectives of the

MBSWSC programme for social work practice were to help students to improve self-care and social work skill and competency acquisition through increased self-awareness in the moment. This self-awareness being acquired through reduced worry and rumination, and by simultaneously fostering traits such as: (1) mindfulness, which is the awareness that emerges, by focussing on experiences that unfold in the present moment, non-judgementally (Kabat-Zinn, 2003); (2) acceptance of all experience including difficult thoughts, emotions and physical sensations (Hayes *et al.*, 2013); (3) self-compassion, which is the conscious offering of feelings of caring and kindness towards oneself during or after reflecting on difficult experiences (Neff, 2003); (4) attention regulation/decoupling, which is the ability to step back and observe thoughts and internal experiences objectively (van der Velden *et al.*, 2015); (5) non-attachment, which is the capacity to reduce one's over-engagement with difficult thoughts, emotions and physical sensations (Maddock *et al.*, 2021); and (6) non-aversion, which is the adjustment in how a person responds to difficult thoughts, emotions and physical sensations, from an initial disposition of avoidance to one of welcoming and approaching these phenomena (Maddock *et al.*, 2021). These traits are particularly relevant to social work practice, as they are likely to support social work skill and competency acquisition and integration, for example, through enhanced critical reflection, reflexivity, empathy, openness and interpersonal skills (Maddock *et al.*, 2021).

Data collection

The data were collected through student reflective journals. This data collection method was chosen due to their capacity to: foster reflective practice for learning and professional development (Andreina and Dell'Aversana, 2018); to allow students to capture their reflections-in-action (Holly, 1989); support the students to acquire greater self-awareness of the cognitive and emotional regulation strategies that they had learned in the MBSWSC programme and were now employing as part of their emerging social work practice; deepen the quality of learning from the MBSWSC through reflective practice, allowing greater connections between the theory and psychoeducation of how the MBSWSC might be applied to improve their self-care and social work practice going forward (Andreina and Dell'Aversana, 2018). In their journals, students were asked to reflect on experiences of applying the learning from the MBSWSC programme within their social work practice on placement during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their written reflections were complemented by discussions in the group mindfulness practice sessions in which they shared experiences of using mindfulness in their personal lives and in practice while on placement.

Data analysis

A realist methodological approach examined the semantic content of participants' descriptions of their experiences in their social work practice following participation in the MBSWSC group. The realist approach involves identifying causal mechanisms and exploring if they work, and under what conditions might they work or not (Rycroft-Malone *et al.*, 2012). Given the complex, multifaceted nature of the MBSWSC programme, which was developed in order to support social work student self-care and social work practice, and the current limited understanding of the mechanisms of action of how this programme might improve this outcomes in practice, the realist approach is particularly suited to the synthesis of evidence about how the learning derived from the programme might have been implemented in practice by the social work students who completed this programme during their placement (Rycroft-Malone *et al.*, 2012).

Key themes in the journal entries were identified and defined using an inductive thematic and comparative analysis methodology (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data. To analyse the journal entries, both authors read each journal entry several times and generated initial codes separately. The authors individually, continuously reviewed and coded the qualitative data on the basis of the capacity for specific journal reflections to capture something important which related to the research aim (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The authors then independently developed key themes from the data and met to discuss their findings. The authors then met, discussed and agreed what the key themes would be. This discussion allowed a hierarchical structure of overarching superordinate and sub-ordinate themes to emerge from the journal data, which were grounded in the verbatim journal text. As a final step, both authors considered the final themes in the context of how consistently and articulately they represented the complete data set and modified accordingly as required (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Results

The participants completed twenty-one journal entries in total. Participants 1 and 4 completed five journals each, with all of the other participants completing at least two journal entries. Two super-ordinate themes emerged from the thematic analysis of this data: (1) Stress and anxiety coping and (2) Support to emerging social work practice. Superordinate and subordinate themes are outlined in Table 1. These

Table 1 Summary of themes.

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
Stress and anxiety coping	Stress and anxiety management Approach coping
Support to emerging social work practice	The impact of tuning into their thoughts, emotions and physical sensations Supporting effective working practices, including dealing with adversity and uncertainty Mindfulness as an enabler for empathy, reflection and reflexivity

are described, interpreted and illustrated by relevant journal entries below.

Stress and anxiety coping

Stress and anxiety management

The student’s reflective journal entries consistently highlighted how the learning from the MBSWSC programme, and the consistent use of mindfulness practices, helped them to manage the stress and anxieties that could manifest during their placement. The students outlined how the learning from the programme made it more likely that they would approach sources of stress and anxiety in order to reduce its impact on their personal lives and their social work practice. All of the participants advised that they felt calmer and more grounded after they engaged in a mindfulness practice:

I really see the benefit of mindfulness practices, of tuning in to yourself, giving yourself permission to feel things and not to let the stress build up too much... Engaging in a meditation each morning has allowed me to centre myself and alleviate any worry that was holding me back. I have also found the 3-minute breathing exercises beneficial when in the placement site to deal with any mounting anxiety or stress...I feel that getting in this habit has be very beneficial as I am more at ease with myself and with the mounting responsibilities on placement. (Participant 1)

The mindfulness practices have definitely helped me tune in more to how my body is responding to stress. When I feel like I am getting stressed I take note (hunched shoulders, holding my breath or tightness in my chest) and practice mindfulness - whether that is taking a quick 3 min body scan on placement... or just taking time to notice all the small things around me - birds singing, lovely views, or listening to music...I am much more tuned in to it now and "check in" with myself to address it as it arises. (Participant 6)

Three students referred to the impact of COVID-19 during their placements and the use of mindfulness practices to cope with this. Two described significant reactions. One student commented on concerns about developing PTSD following the death of a friend from COVID-19 and feeling panicked about the risk of passing it on to others. They described mindfulness as supporting acceptance of these feelings but being less effective in managing the perceived consequences. They also reported using mindfulness to deal with the challenges of lack of face-to-face contact with service users due to COVID-19 restrictions in the early stages of placement, specifically, to focus on online learning and reading. The other students spoke of an 'overwhelming sense of fear' of passing the virus on to someone and how a compassion-based practice supported them to gain perspective. The third student also described using a compassion-based practice, in their case to acknowledge the difficulties of doing a placement during COVID-19 and gaining a better appreciation of their performance as a result.

Approach coping

The narratives from the journal entries illustrated how some students recognised tendencies towards procrastination or avoidance of certain tasks. The following quotes signal the emergence of a clearer understanding of the processes at play in avoidance and associated shifts towards more productive, proactive approach stress coping practices:

I find that I would often put things off, or not do them at all if it causes me worry, stress or anxiety. This is obviously something I can't do when I'm on placement. Over the last few weeks, I have been more self-aware of the things that make me feel uncomfortable and I have tried to ease this discomfort through reflection and mindfulness. This has made me realise that by putting things off, it only seems to make the worry and anxiety fester and grow. (Participant 1)

Yes, in general I had gotten myself in the way of avoiding a lot of things I felt were challenging or I felt would cause a disagreement or upset. But now "I bite the frog" and actually try to complete those tasks first and get them out of the way. I still get feelings of nervousness and auto pilot wants me to avoid, but I can rationalise with myself now and the thoughts and encourage myself to just complete that task first. (Participant 3)

I still leave things to the last minute...But overall, I think it [mindfulness] has helped me not shy away from things. Previously I would be like an ostrich and if something was too difficult, I would have my head in the sand but now I will keep working on something even if it is uncomfortable. (Participant 5)

A consistent theme was how the students used the learning from the MBSWSC programme and mindfulness practices to approach the

difficult thoughts, emotions and physical sensations that arose due to challenging experiences on placement. The students identified how approaching rather than avoiding the experience which generated the stress or anxiety they were experiencing, allowed them to develop a more centred understanding of what was operating for them, which then alleviated the repeated negative thinking that can occur due to stress, for example worry and rumination:

I started worrying that the placement was a failure...I felt terrible. I decided to do an acceptance body scan because I was stressing out...It helped me to delve into what exactly was my worry...When I broke down all my worries and negative thoughts I came to the realisation that I was stressed about being a financial burden to my parents who have already done so much for me...I felt so relieved when I realised what was causing me so much anxiety... (Participant 4)

I felt anxious about a case I was working on. I was worried that I would get too emotionally involved with this service user as I saw that this was the same as my family situation. I feel the mindfulness programme has helped me to give me balance, as well as help me to worry less about going into work in the following days... (Participant 5)

The increased approaching and reduced avoidance appears to have allowed students to increase their awareness of negative self-judgement and through this process employ the alternative adaptive approach oriented, stress coping responses, for example, self-compassion and self-acceptance that they had learned during the MBSWSC programme:

...In terms of sense of self, I feel that I have been more forgiving of myself for feeling stress and worry in relation to work, and the programme has made me realise strongly that it is okay and normal to feel these anxieties and by acknowledging them, in this way they then pass. (Participant 5)

I am currently on PLO [practice learning opportunity] with another student and find it difficult not to compare myself with them – in terms of personality and in our approach to practice. I had put off truly thinking about how this may be affecting my sense of self until after the first mindfulness session. After this session, I had spent some time reflecting on how this made me feel and the critical thoughts associated with it. As a result, I was able to respond to these feelings in a more compassionate manner, acknowledging that each person is different. (Participant 1)

Engaging with the mindfulness exercises has allowed me to be more accepting of myself and my unique qualities. It has made me more aware of the fact that although I may not be as confident as others, I have my own skills and traits that will help me to succeed in this PLO. (Participant 2)

Mindfulness as a support for social work practice

The impact of tuning into their thoughts, emotions and physical sensations

There was strong sense in the data of students approaching and becoming more aware of their thinking processes, emotions and related physical sensations at different stages of their placements. Their narratives revealed a mix of anxiety and excitement in the period leading up to and the initial phase of placement and how mindfulness practice enabled them to prepare for placement and manage their initial difficulties:

I was going through a very difficult time personally before Christmas and it [mindfulness] really helped me stay sane. It also helped me prepare mentally for starting placement and enabling me to take myself out of situations mentally. (Participant 6)

I have noticed myself becoming more stressed recently due to PLO worries that I am not good enough at the moment, concerns about COVID-19 and comparing myself to other students in the PLO. I have found that I am more dependent on the mindfulness exercises at the moment and have been practising every day. (Participant 2)

In addition to becoming more aware of how they felt, participant's narratives conveyed how mindfulness supported a process of preparing for contact, actively tuning-into and staying with their experiences. First, it drew attention to the potential impact of how their emotions and physical sensations might spill over and effect the quality of their interactions with service users:

Before meeting the boy, I was experiencing the typical physical sensations I attribute to being totally stressed. Rapid heartbeat, really sick feeling in my stomach, agitated and fidgety. Before I got ready to drive to the boy's home, I did a three-minute breathing exercise...it allows me to get my thoughts in check and focus on the home visit rather than worrying about how stressed I am... I was able to totally anchor myself and just concentrate on my breathing... I felt much more calm... The home visit went better than I could have hoped for. (Participant 4)

Students also attributed the process of tuning-in and acknowledging their own feelings using mindfulness practices with enabling them to be more centred and available to service users:

I would use mindfulness to help me calm down and focus my attention on what is ahead of me. It helps me tune into meeting people, staying grounded and not letting me dwell if I have had a bad morning. (Participant 6)

Relatedly, another student relayed how a mindfulness of breathing practice enabled them to bring mindful awareness rather than worry

about how they might be perceived by a service user, this allowed the student to attain a more balanced perspective, which in turn supported them to attend to the service user's needs more actively:

I had my first face-to-face contact with a child several weeks ago. I was worried about how he would perceive me and how he would act in my presence. My Onsite [supervisor] had visited the family several times prior and the boy wouldn't leave the bathroom to meet her. Prior to the visit, I had spent a few minutes completing a breathing exercise. This allowed me to centre myself and to fully interact with the child. This encouraged me to have a greater awareness of my presentation and how I may portray myself with others. I feel that this allowed me to interact with the child in a manner which was centred around his needs. (Participant 1)

Supporting effective working practices, including dealing with adversity and uncertainty

The journal data also pointed to a relationship between mindfulness practice and more effective working practices in the student social worker role. Again, students' comments indicated that greater awareness of thoughts, emotions and physical sensations had a key part to play in this process. The act of bringing attention to experience through mindfulness practice was found to improve concentration and ability to carry out the role:

I am more aware of my bodily reactions to stress (holding breath, raised shoulders and tightness). When I feel like this, I know that I have to relax more and, once I do it, it improves my work performance as I can concentrate better. (Participant 5)

Incorporating the mindfulness has helped me be more focused on work in that I would have tended to ruminate over things (more than I do now) ...Now I breathe and just put my mind to what I need to do. (Participant 6)

Throughout the journal entries, students highlighted a number of social work practice challenges, including dealing with adversity and uncertainty. They attributed mindfulness practice to affording them greater responsiveness in managing such challenges. As before, this rested on the increased awareness of thoughts, emotional reactions, willingness to tune-into and address these and then being able to move on:

I tend to deal with emotions as they come up and I know this has helped my resilience and given me confidence to move on from awful events more quickly than others. (Participant 6)

One student described this as the ability to stabilise their emotions in conflictual situations, with an associated improvement in concentration, decision-making and problem-solving:

The learning from the mindfulness programme encouraged me to identify and manage my own emotions...I found that my ability to concentrate improved as I was able to stabilise my emotions and remain calm in difficult and confrontational situations. By identifying my emotions, I found that it allowed me to make effective and balanced decisions and promoted more effective problem-solving solutions with service users. (Participant 7)

Another described how mindfulness might help them to manage the unpredictability of social work practice:

... you need to expect the unexpected (a shameful cliché). I feel as though the acceptance element of mindfulness will help me with this in the future. (Participant 4)

A number of participants recounted how they used mindfulness as a direct response when presented with distressing information about service users:

Yesterday I had to practice a 3-minute breathing exercise after reading a comprehensive psychological report of the sexual abuse of four siblings facilitated by their biological father. I am aware of the concept of secondary trauma, and I feel this is something I will have to be continuously conscious of in the future if I am to work in child protection/welfare long term. (Participant 4)

There was increased concern over the mental health of the service user and it was mentioned that she had increased suicidal tendencies and was self-harming more - she was to receive increased support...this made me quite anxious as a lot of the issues raised were very similar to one of my family members. I used mindfulness that evening when I went home - the 20-minute guided meditation. I also created a reflective diary to write down what I was feeling, and this benefitted me as I was able to switch off from the emotions of work which was helpful. (Participant 5)

Mindfulness as an enabler for empathy, reflection and reflexivity

The final sub-theme charts students' examples of where and, on occasion, how they felt mindfulness supported empathy, reflection and reflexivity. For example, in relation to empathy, Participant 2 stated that:

...the mindfulness programme has helped me to become more empathic and therefore a better practitioner in understanding clients.

Another participant acknowledged that increases in self-awareness gained through the mindfulness programme, had enabled them to be more conscious of service users and carers' experiences:

I think that considering the effects of stress and worry has on myself has made me more open and conscious of the experiences of service users and carers. I have found myself adapting more of a therapeutic role

when carrying out carers' assessments with parents, as opposed to the overly process-driven influence of the service. (Participant 3)

As with empathy, most students made a direct link between enhanced self-awareness and more reflective, reflexive and/or anti-oppressive practice. This centred on gaining increased insight through mindfulness into the values, views and biases they brought to their work with service users and the ability to lessen their potential effects:

I have a strong sense of myself since the Mindfulness Programme. It has made me aware of who I am; my likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses and my own judgements, which has enhanced reflexivity because I can reflect on every encounter with professionals, colleagues, family and friends, learn from it by questioning why I think it went well or badly and how I could make it better the next time, without reproach or avoidance. (Participant 2)

Participant 4 gave the most comprehensive analysis of the relationship between mindfulness and reflection and reflexivity. In the following example, they explored how being more in tune with their thoughts, physical sensations and emotions, enabled them to identify and make sense of a difficult encounter:

... my kneejerk reaction to seeing the parents was to focus on my breathing (deep inhale, deep exhale). This helped with the physical sensations I was experiencing (rapid heart rate, knot in my stomach). I was still left confused as to why I felt such negative emotions towards these people, especially when social work is a caring profession. It's an area I plan to research more. Someday I could be working face to face with people like these parents, so I do appreciate it's better to have these feelings of disgust now, rather than when I am working with them.

Participant 4 went on to correlate practising mindfulness with enhancing reflection and, in turn, reflexivity:

Practicing mindfulness has had a positive effect on my ability to reflect on situations. I think that engaging in consistent reflection about your own social work practice enhances your sense of reflexivity.

They elaborated further on the value of this mindfulness–reflection–reflexivity link, and the practice of journaling for bringing more attention to the role of power:

How was power being displayed and by who? Was autonomy/agency acknowledged and to what extent? Reflecting on these events can enhance your reflexivity... mindfulness and reflection have been so important for me in terms of practicing reflexively and in an anti-oppressive manner.

Discussion

This article has extended the limited knowledge available on the value of MBPs for social work student self-care and social work practice, by exploring the experience of how social work students applied the learning from a bespoke MBP for social work during their social work placements, which took place during COVID-19. This study's results indicate that students found that the learning from this programme helped them to manage any stress or anxiety that manifested before and during their placement. For three students, this included dealing with stress and anxiety related directly to COVID-19, some of which was significant. The journal entries highlighted how students had successfully integrated a number of the approach-oriented coping strategies, for example, self-compassion and acceptance, as part of this process (Maddock and McCusker, 2022). The learning from the MBSWSC programme also helped students to identify when they were stressed or anxious more quickly in order to apply these coping strategies as a part of their mindfulness practice. The students also observed how their increased capacity to tune into their thoughts, emotions and the physical sensations enhanced their social work practice, particularly during times of uncertainty or adversity. The students also highlighted how the mindfulness practices learned as part of the programme allowed them to develop increased capacities for empathy, reflection and reflexivity, all of which supported their capacity to integrate the learning from their placement and their emerging social work practice.

The finding that students who completed the MBSWSC programme felt that they were subsequently better able to manage the stress and anxiety that manifested as part of their social work practice is supported by Gockel *et al.* (2013) and Thomas (2017). Gockel *et al.* (2013) and Thomas (2017) found that students who took part, even in short mindfulness practices, as part of larger social work modules, reported feeling better able to manage the stress and anxiety that can manifest as part of their social work practice. The finding that this group of students felt a greater capacity to manage stress and anxiety through mindfulness practice is encouraging, as it will likely to improve the quality of support that they can offer service users. This is in line with Braun *et al.* (2019), who in an integrated review of the literature, found that one of the mechanisms through which MBPs improve the patient/service user care being offered by HCPs is by reducing the HCP's stress levels.

One of the key objectives of the MBSWSC programme was to support students to develop approach-oriented stress coping skills in order to improve feelings of stress, burnout, anxiety, mood, well-being and reflective anti-oppressive social work practice (Maddock *et al.*, 2021). It is clear from the student's journal entries that they had integrated the

learning from the programme and implemented it as part of their social work practice. The students appeared more able to identify avoidance behaviours they may have been engaging in which may have been contributing to feelings of stress and anxiety through increased negative thinking (Grabovac *et al.*, 2011; Maddock and McCusker, 2022). In the journal entries, students consistently identified that mindfulness practices supported their self-awareness and their capacity to approach the difficult thoughts, emotions and physical sensations that arose during their placement experience. The students identified that this not only reduced the negative thinking that they had experienced when engaging in avoidance behaviour previously, for example, worry and rumination, but it also allowed them to employ alternative beneficial responses to stressful situations, for example, self-acceptance and self-compassion, in line with Maddock and McCusker (2022). It appears that the integration of the learning from the MBSWSC programme, where students were able to develop increased capacities in adaptive stress coping, self-awareness, attention regulation, compassion (and self-compassion) and then integrated these as part of their practice, is also likely to lead to improved service user support. This is supported by Beach *et al.* (2013) who identified that increases in each of these capacity areas are key mechanisms in how MBPs help HCPs improve service user centred care.

It appears from the student's qualitative journals that the learning from the MBSWSC programme and the consistent engagement with mindfulness practices improved their self-awareness, concentration and their capacity to tune into their thoughts, emotions and physical sensations in the moment. In line with the work of Safran and Reading (2008), the student's increased approaching of their experience in this way, promoted greater affect tolerance and self-regulation of difficult, or stressful thoughts and emotions. This helped students to prepare for their placement and for contact with service users by actively tuning into their own and the service user's experience. Supporting the findings of Shapiro *et al.* (2007) and Gockel *et al.* (2013), this appears to have enhanced the student's capacity to be fully present, cognitively and emotionally during their engagements with service users, by reducing distractions which often manifested in the form of negative or self-critical thinking about their performance; as one student explained, using their breath and bodily sensations as anchors to stay with the service user, rather than being distracted by 'the overflowing to-do list in my mind'. The student's increased self-awareness, cognitive and emotional self-regulation skills and capacity to be fully present with the service users, complementing the work of McCollum and Gehart (2010) with marriage and family therapists, appears to have allowed students to navigate difficult moments in their placement and practice with service users. This allowed students, in a manner similar to that articulated by Safran and Reading (2008), to identify and stay present with any negative emotions that the service user

evoked in them and allowed them to respond, rather than react, with greater compassion and acceptance for themselves and the service users they worked alongside. The improvements in these areas are encouraging as compassion and emotional competencies have been identified as key mechanisms in how MBPs improve HCP empathy, patient care and patient outcomes (Braun *et al.* 2019).

The student's journal entries appear to highlight how the learning from the programme and the increased self-awareness that they attained from the use of a variety of mindfulness practices enhanced their capacities for empathy, reflection, reflexivity and anti-oppressive social work practice. This supports the work of Krasner *et al.* (2009) and Shapiro *et al.* (1998) who found that consistent engagement in mindfulness practices significantly increases empathy among HCPs and counsellors. In line with the work of Maddock *et al.* (2021), the learning from the programme and the consistent engagement with mindfulness practices, facilitated the student's capacity to reflect on and develop a deeper evolving reflexive understanding of their own lived experiences of oppression. The evolution of this understanding, when coupled with the increased empathy and compassion that students were experiencing, due to the mindfulness practices they were engaging in, appears to have allowed them to develop a clearer frame of understanding of the service user's experiences of oppression. This appears to have engendered greater empathic and compassionate emotional space for both themselves and service user, with both being seen as part of a common oppressed humanity (Neff, 2003). This space appears to have supported the student's capacity to simultaneously: (1) remain compassionate and empathically attuned to the service user and their needs, and (2) approach and attend to the negative emotions that service users' evoked, before allowing them to pass with self-compassion, acceptance and empathy, rather than engaging in avoidance due to fears of negative self-evaluation, for example, not seeing themselves as being good social workers for having these feelings (Maddock *et al.*, 2021). The more that student social workers can operate out of this emotional space and remain empathically attuned to the service user's needs, even in difficult encounters, the less likely they are to discriminate or oppress a service user by responding to them out of unconscious cognitive or emotional biases (Thompson, 2012).

Using qualitative methods allowed the deeper exploration of the individual experiences of social work students who completed the MBSWSC programme and then implemented the learning from this programme in their social work practice. This provided a clearer understanding as to what learning individual group participants found to have been most beneficial to their emerging social work practice. The results of this study should, however, be interpreted with caution due to several limitations. The data analysis for this study followed a systematic procedure to ensure a certain degree of intersubjectivity of the findings, however,

qualitative methodology remains a subjective approach that reflects the participants' experiences and is, therefore, prone to researcher bias. The participants in this study did not systematically differ from the students from Maddock *et al.* (2021) who choose not to take part in this follow up study. However, the fact that the seven students in this study opted into the follow-up MBSWSC booster sessions and consented to being a part of this study, indicates that these participants were positively biased. In order to provide a starting point for students to begin their personal reflections, it was necessary to include prompt questions for students to consider, which related to the application of the learning from the MBSWSC programme to their social work practice. The participants were encouraged to feel free to offer any reflections that they felt might be relevant, however, these questions may have limited the scope, and accentuated some of the reflections offered. Using purposive sampling and a single group of potentially positive biased participants means that the findings from this research cannot be generalised to a larger population of social work students (Grinnell and Unrau, 2011).

Notwithstanding these limitations, this study provides some promising preliminary evidence that the MBSWSC programme might be a useful social work self-care and practice training programme for students. It shows how students developed adaptive approach-oriented stress and anxiety coping skills as part of this programme and how they later implemented these skills to manage adversity and uncertainty in their emerging social work practice. This study also highlighted how the learning from the MBSWSC programme allowed students to develop increased self-awareness, empathy, reflection and reflexivity skills, all of which will likely enhance their capacity for anti-oppressive social work practice. Social work educators could consider the implementation of the MBSWSC programme (which is structured and manualised) as part of their social work degree or master's programmes. The improved access to MBSWSC may allow social work students to develop the skills necessary to be able to practice sustainably over the longer term, within a profession with very high rates of stress, burnout and attrition.

Acknowledgements

None declared.

Funding

None declared.

Conflict of interest statement. None declared.

References

- Andreina, B. and Dell'Aversana, G. (2018) 'What shall I pack in my suitcase': The role of work-integrated learning in sustaining social work students' professional identity', *Social Work Education*, **37**(1), pp. 34–48.
- Beach, M., Roter, D., Korhuis, P., Epstein, R., Sharp, V., Ratanawongsa, N., Cohn, J., Egly, S., Sankar, S., Moore, R. and Saha, S. (2013) 'A multicenter study of physician mindfulness and health care quality', *Annals of Family Medicine*, **11**(5), pp. 421–8.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, **3**(2), pp. 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, S., Kinser, P. and Rybarczyk, B. (2019) 'Can mindfulness in health care professionals improve patient care? An integrative review and proposed model', *Translational Behavioral Medicine*, **9**(2), pp. 187–201.
- Gockel, A., Burton, D., James, S. and Bryer, E. (2013) 'Introducing mindfulness as a self-care and clinical training strategy for beginning social work students', *Mindfulness*, **4**(4), pp. 343–53.
- Gockel, A. and Deng, X. (2016) 'Mindfulness training as social work pedagogy: Exploring benefits, challenges, and issues for consideration in integrating mindfulness into social work education', *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, **35**(3), pp. 222–44.
- Grabovac, A. D., Lau, M. A. and Willett, B. R. (2011) 'Mechanisms of mindfulness: A Buddhist psychological model', *Mindfulness*, **2**(3), pp. 154–66.
- Grinnell, R. M. and Unrau, Y. A. (2011) *Social Work Research and Evaluation: Foundations of Evidenced-Based Practice*, 9th edn, Oxford, England, Oxford University Press.
- Hayes, S. C., Levin, M. E., Plumb-Villardaga, J., Villatte, J. L. and Pistorello, J. (2013) 'Acceptance and commitment therapy and contextual behavioral science: Examining the progress of a distinctive model of behavioral and cognitive therapy', *Behavior Therapy*, **44**(2), pp. 180–98.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (2003) 'Mindfulness-based interventions in context: Past, present, and future', *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, **10**(2), pp. 144–56.
- Kinman, G., Grant, L. and Kelly, S. (2020) 'It's my secret space': The benefits of mindfulness for social workers', *The British Journal of Social Work*, **50**(3), pp. 758–77.
- Krasner, M. S., Epstein, R. M., Beckman, H., Suchman, A. L., Chapman, B., Mooney, C. J. and Quill, T. E. (2009) 'Association of an educational program in mindful communication with burnout, empathy, and attitudes among primary care physicians', *JAMA*, **302**(12), pp. 1284–93.
- Lutz, A., Dunne, J. and Davidson, R. J. (2007) 'Meditation and the neuroscience of consciousness: An introduction', in Zelazl, P. D., Moscovitch M. M. and Thompson E. (eds), *Cambridge Handbook of Consciousness*, New York, NY, Cambridge University, pp. 449–551.
- Lynn, R. and Mensinga, J. (2015) 'Social workers' narratives of integrating mindfulness into practice', *Journal of Social Work Practice*, **29**(3), pp. 255–70.
- McCollum, E. and Gehart, D. (2010) 'Using mindfulness meditation to teach beginning therapists therapeutic presence: A qualitative study', *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, **36**(3), pp. 347–60.

- Napoli, M. and Bonifas, R. (2011) 'From Theory Toward Empathic Self-Care: Creating a Mindful Classroom for Social Work Students', *Social Work Education*, **30**(6), pp. 635–49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2011.586560>
- Maddock, A., McCusker, P., Blair, C. and Roulston, A. (2021) 'The mindfulness-based social work and self-care programme: A mixed methods evaluation study', *British Journal of Social Work*, Bcab203, available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcab203> (accessed January 10, 2022).
- Maddock, A. and McCusker, P. (2022) 'Exploring the potential mechanisms of action of the mindfulness-based social work and self-care programme', *British Journal of Social Work*, bcac066, available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcac066> (accessed April 29, 2022).
- Neff, K. D. (2003) 'Self-compassion: An alternative conceptualization of a healthy attitude toward oneself', *Self and Identity*, **2**(2), pp. 85–102.
- Ravalier, J. M., McFadden, P., Boichat, C., Claburn, O. and Moriarty, J. (2021) 'Social worker well-being: A large mixed-methods study', *The British Journal of Social Work*, **51**(1), pp. 297–317.
- Roulston, A., Montgomery, L., Campbell, A. and Davidson, G. (2018) 'Exploring the impact of mindfulness on mental wellbeing, stress and resilience of undergraduate social work students', *Social Work Education*, **37**(2), pp. 157–72.
- Rycroft-Malone, J., McCormack, B., Hutchinson, A. M., DeCorby, K., Bucknall, T. K., Kent, B., Schultz, A., Snelgrove-Clarke, E., Stetler, C. B., Titler, M., Wallin, L. and Wilson, V. (2012) 'Realist synthesis: Illustrating the method for implementation research', *Implementation Science*, **7**, 33.
- Safran, J. D. and Reading, R. (2008) 'Mindfulness, metacommunication, and affect regulation in psychoanalytic treatment', in Hick, S. and Bien, T. (eds), *Mindfulness and the Therapeutic Relationship*, New York, NY, Guilford Press, pp. 122–40.
- Shapiro, S. L., Schwartz, G. E. and Bonner, G. (1998) 'Effects of mindfulness-based stress reduction on medical and premedical students', *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, **21**(6), pp. 581–99.
- Shapiro, S. L., Brown, K. W. and Biegel, G. M. (2007) 'Teaching self-care to caregivers: Effects of mindfulness-based stress reduction on the mental health of therapists in training', *Training and Education in Professional Psychology*, **1**(2), pp. 105–15.
- Thomas, J. (2017) 'Brief mindfulness training in the social work practice classroom', *Social Work Education*, **36**(1), pp. 102–18.
- Thompson, N. (2012) 'Anti-discriminatory practice: Equality', *Diversity and Social Justice*, 5th edn, New York, NY, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Turner, K. (2009) 'Mindfulness: The present moment in clinical social work', *Clinical Social Work Journal*, **37**(2), pp. 95–103.
- van der Velden, A. M., Kuyken, W., Wattar, U., Crane, C., Pallesen, K. J., Dahlgaard, J., Fjorback, L. O. and Piet, J. (2015) 'A systematic review of mechanisms of change in mindfulness-based cognitive therapy in the treatment of recurrent major depressive disorder', *Clinical Psychology Review*, **37**, pp. 26–39.