

A Program Review of Trauma-Informed Mindfulness: An Alternative Treatment Program for Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted as part of the student’s senior field practicum experience at the Montgomery County Women’s Center (MCWC) during the Spring 2020 semester. Current literature identifies symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (such as stress and anxiety) to be consistent with symptoms experienced by survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV). As noted by Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk, a leading expert in the treatment of complex trauma, the goal in treating those who experience symptoms related to PTSD with mindfulness techniques is to help those individuals learn to live and function in the present, without being held captive to feelings associated with occurrences in the past. As additional substantiation regarding the effects of mindfulness techniques, and as noted by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA), trauma-informed yoga is a validated treatment for complex trauma.

The intent of the research conducted at the MCWC was to review the benefits of a trauma-informed mindfulness intervention that reduces symptoms of stress and anxiety experienced by program participants. The training was provided by a certified sexual assault advocate and registered yoga teacher. The intervention participants included 25 women who leveraged services at the MCWC facilities and who volunteered to participate in a 3-week trauma-informed yoga and mindfulness pilot program. Pre and posttest feedback from qualitative surveys was reviewed and analyzed for the agency project. The expected outcome was to provide the women with more effective coping mechanisms for managing stress and anxiety. Results indicate that the participants experienced fewer PTSD symptoms when involved in the trauma-informed mindfulness intervention.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- ☐ Determine the effects of a trauma-informed mindfulness intervention on participants’ levels of stress and anxiety.
- ☐ To assess the theoretical feasibility of a trauma-informed mindfulness intervention on survivors of IPV.
- ☐ To sustain trauma-informed mindfulness practices for interventions at the MCWC.

INTERVENTION AND CONCEPTUALIZATION

The program at MCWC was positioned within a conceptual framework consisting of: Strengths Perspective, Trauma Theory, Attachment Theory, Trauma-Sensitive Hatha Yoga Practice with an emphasis on body-based yoga forms and breathing techniques, and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy.

The 3-week pilot consisted of 60 minutes of group trauma-sensitive mindfulness training created in collaboration with the MCWC Director of Residential Services and taught by the student/volunteer who was also a registered yoga teacher and mindfulness practitioner.

PROTECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

Informed consent was obtained prior to conducting pre and post surveys during each weekly group session and throughout the length of the pilot program. The issues of diversity and at-risk populations were addressed in the study by ensuring the survey questions were representative of all demographics.

The nature of this study is identified as a student field practicum project. The tasks and responsibilities for the project were identified on the student’s learning plan, and the student was directly supervised by the MCWC Field Instructor. Other related student evaluations were monitored by the SFA Field Liaison and the SOCW 4290 Course Instructor. This type of study is acceptable in a field practicum assignment and no further review was deemed necessary (see University Policy 8.4).

PROGRAM INTERVENTION SESSION PROTOCOL

Step 1: Group leader set out materials needed for the session.

Step 2: Group members introduced themselves and group leader explained how often the group would be conducted at MCWC, and how long each session would last.

Step 3: Group leader discussed purpose of the research and explained the information collected was to be used as part of a research study. Group leader also mentioned that individual responses would be kept confidential, used in the final report, and leveraged for internal agency and group planning purposes only.

Step 4: Allowed participants the opportunity to ask questions.

Step 5: Leader invested a few minutes providing a level set regarding the group session format and explained that this was an interactive group.

Step 6: Group leader explained how the pre and post survey should be completed.

Step 7: Allowed participants another opportunity to ask questions.

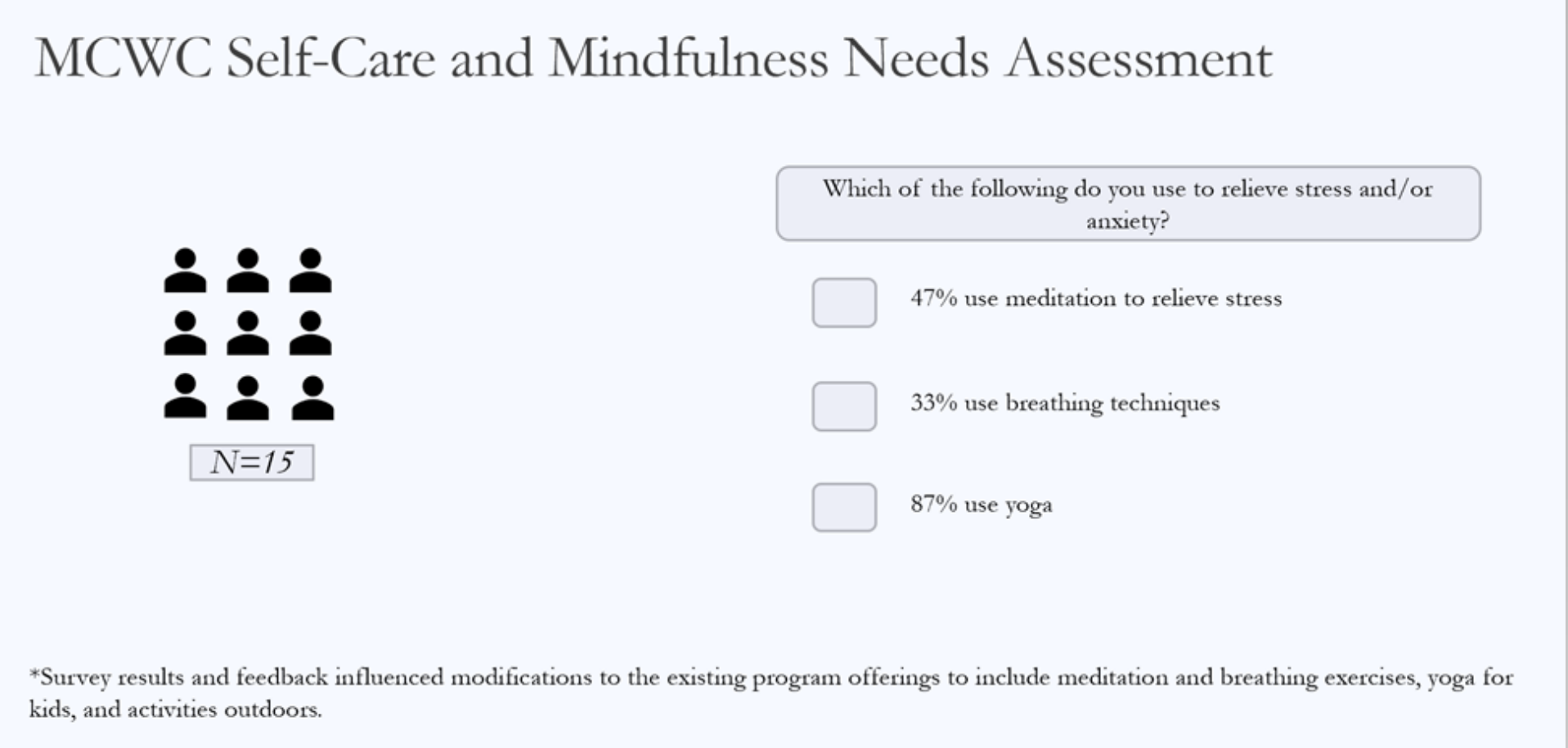
Step 8: Began group session by leveraging the session materials: DOVE candies, Hoberman Sphere, Yoga Pretzels Cards, Chair and/or Yoga Mats.



RESEARCH DESIGN

A pilot study was conducted using a pre-posttest survey design.

Pre-test Needs Assessment: By following a qualitative research design, the study implemented at MCWC began by first conducting a needs assessment through semi-structured interviews with 15 women who had previously participated in weekly exercise support groups at the shelter.



Measures: Pre-post session surveys included questions related to current stress and anxiety levels experienced by the participants, and the effects of trauma-informed mindfulness yoga training in treating their PTSD symptoms. The hypothesis was that subjects who received trauma-informed mindfulness training would report a decrease in PTSD related symptoms.

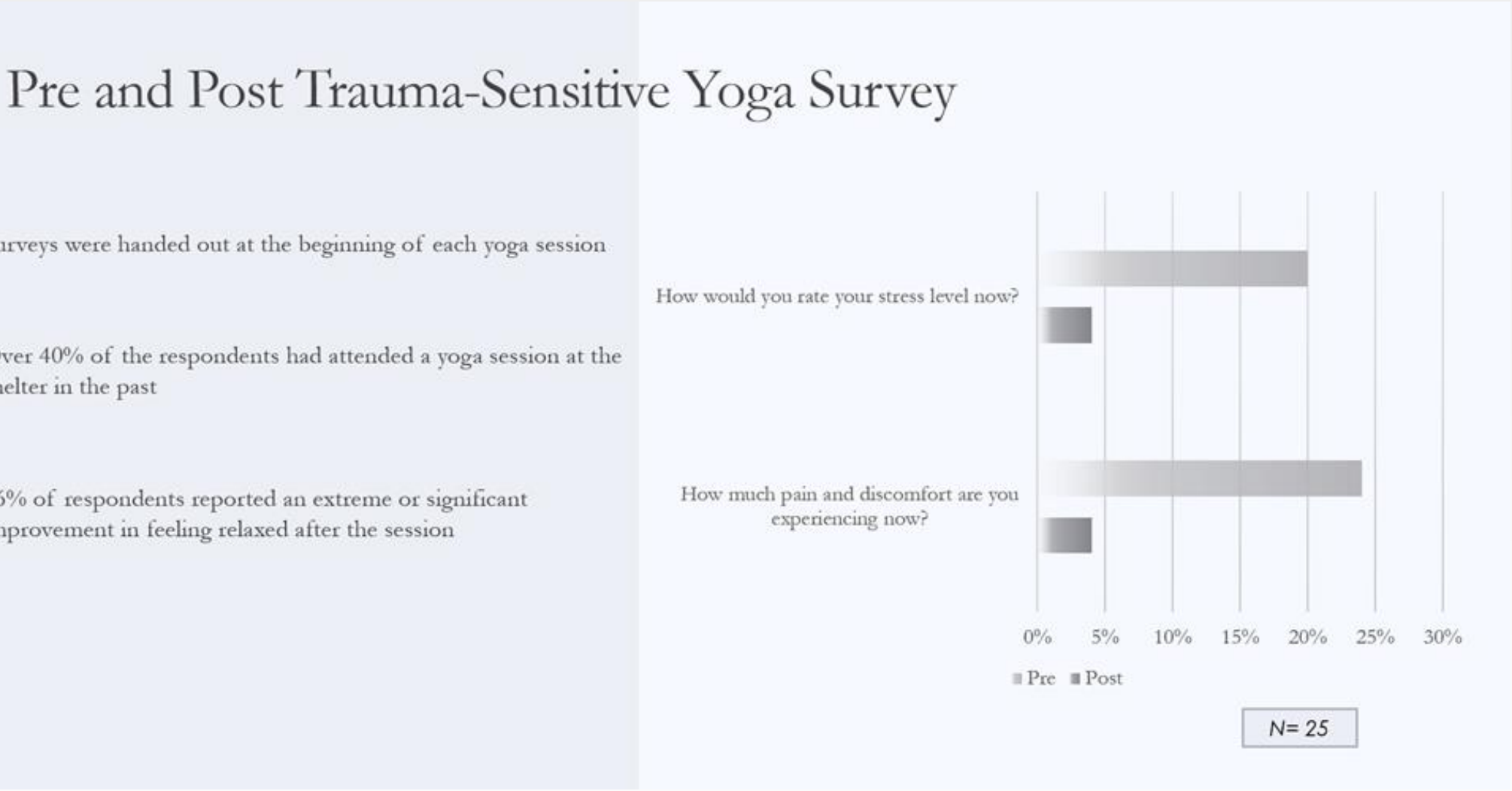
Data Collection: The data was collected from 25 women who leveraged services from MCWC over a 3-week period.

Analysis: Data from each session were collected then grouped in Excel to display the relationship between participation in the mindfulness group program and reduction of stress.

Post-program Evaluation: The post-program evaluation included a review of the data collected with the MCWC shelter management team. Based on the feedback collected, the program format was expanded to include mindfulness-based techniques involving journaling and arts and crafts activities.

RESULTS

Results indicated that overall, the participants reported experiencing fewer PTSD related symptoms when involved in the trauma-informed yoga and mindfulness intervention.



PARTICIPANT TESTIMONIALS

“Keep coming back. It works ☺”

“First Time. Loved It!”

“Very calming and different. NEW. Looking forward to yoga again.”

“I appreciate every tool, every lesson, every pose, and every interaction. I believe in what you do.”

SUMMARY

The three objective of the study were met with success. A summary is provided below:

- ☐ Determine the effects of a trauma-informed mindfulness intervention on participants’ levels of stress and anxiety.
 - ☐ Feedback received from the participants indicated that the trauma-informed mindfulness and yoga intervention provided an effective method of helping to reduce PTSD related symptoms for the survivors of IPV.
 - ☐ The Participants reported a greater ability to regulate their levels of stress and anxiety post-intervention sessions that positively affected communication in other program activities.
 - ☐ By positively impacting the environment, the staff was able to better address the needs of the clients.
- ☐ To assess the theoretical feasibility of a trauma-informed mindfulness intervention on survivors of IPV.
 - ☐ Consistent with support of trauma-informed interventions in current literature, participants with PTSD-related symptoms of stress and anxiety reported greater ability for self-regulation.
- ☐ To sustain trauma-informed mindfulness practices for interventions at the MCWC.
 - ☐ The MCWC has incorporated trauma-informed mindfulness interventions into its current practices.
 - ☐ Creation of a group manual including information on mindfulness related activities.
 - ☐ Creation of a Facebook “Mindfulness Matters Group” dedicated to teaching mindfulness techniques to the MCWC online community.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

While there have been significant strides in addressing the needs of those who experience IPV, there are also many gaps in knowledge regarding how to treat these individuals. It has become increasingly more important for social service and health care providers to lead the efforts in offering alternative treatment modalities. Future research should expand on the mindfulness treatment modalities available to women in rural areas and delve into a better understanding of how trauma-sensitive mindfulness techniques are being used and operationalized in shelter environments. There are also opportunities to include the introduction of this type of program in other environments, as well as include a more sophisticated analysis of additional data.

COMMENTS FROM THE MCWC PROGRAM DIRECTOR

“As the Director of Sheltering Oaks Emergency Shelter at Montgomery County Women’s Center it was an honor to work with Nicole on her Yoga Project. The idea of incorporating yoga and meditation into programming at the shelter immediately struck me as something I wanted to have Nicole work on. Mindfulness meditation is the practice of being present in the moment, which in turn trains us to become more mindful throughout the day, particularly during difficult situations.

The development of these skills are incredibly helpful for those who have experienced trauma, used to living in crisis mode, who do not understand good self care and who may have adapted unhealthy coping skills and unhealthy ways of resolving conflict.

We saw Nicole’s groups become a place where the women could come just BE with themselves, learn to listen to their bodies, understand their body and mind. It was a place where they could exist in silence, which is an uncommon, and sometimes uncomfortable, place for these survivors to be as they are used to chaos.

Nicole creatively incorporated the use of DOVE chocolates and the quotes inside them to spark conversations with the women about strength, courage and moving forward. Overall, the program is one of the best we have offered at shelter and we hope to be able to find a way to continue it in this post-COVID world. ”

-Melanie Jackman, Director of Sheltering Oaks Emergency Shelter at Montgomery County Women’s Center