

The Mindful Way Through the Semester: Evaluating the Impact of Integrating an Acceptance-Based Behavioral Program Into a First-Year Experience Course for Undergraduates

Sara B. Danitz
Michael K. Suvak
Susan M. Orsillo
Suffolk University

Preventing and reducing depression in first-year college students are crucial areas in need of attention and resources. Programs that are cost-effective and time-efficient, that have replicable benefits across samples, are sorely needed. This study aims to examine whether a previously studied acceptance-based behavioral (ABBT) program, the *Mindful Way Through the Semester* (MWTS), is effective in comparison to a control condition at decreasing levels of depression and enhancing acceptance and academic values when integrated into a first-year undergraduate experience course. The current study also sought to examine the association between change in acceptance, mindfulness practice, and values practice on outcomes. Two hundred thirteen students were assigned to either the MWTS workshop condition or the control condition (in which the first-year experience curriculum as usual was received). Results revealed that the workshop condition produced larger decreases in depression over the course of the semester relative to the control condition, but only for participants endorsing higher levels of depression at baseline. Further, for participants in the workshop condition, changes in depression were negatively associated with changes in acceptance (i.e., larger increases in acceptance associated with larger decreases in depression), an association that was not statistically significant in the control group. Lastly, for participants in the workshop condition who endorsed higher levels of depression at baseline, mindfulness and

values practice was associated with greater reductions in depression. Implications of these findings for future interventions are discussed.

Keywords: depression; college students; acceptance; mindfulness and values practice

PREVENTING AND REDUCING DEPRESSION in first-year college students are crucial goals in need of attention and resources. College students arrive at college with more severe and chronic mental health issues each year (Guthman, Iocin & Despina, 2010). A recent national assessment by the American College Health Association (ACHA, 2014) found that over the previous year, 32.6% of college students felt “so depressed that it was difficult to function,” 46.4% reported feeling hopeless, 62% felt very sad, and 86.4% endorsed feeling overwhelmed. Further, for a sizeable minority of students, these feelings escalate to clinical levels of distress and interferences. A national study of over 14,000 students found that 17.3% of college students screened positive for depression (Eisenberg, Hunt, & Speer, 2013), and 13.5% of undergraduates in the ACHA (2014) reported that depression affected their academic performance, causing them to receive a lower grade on an exam, an incomplete or drop a course, or significant disruption to research or practicum work. Not surprisingly, the National Institute of Mental Health has called for the implementation of interventions for this at-risk group (Buchanan, 2012).

Research has demonstrated the efficacy of both cognitive-behavioral and acceptance-based clinical strategies in enhancing wellness among college students (e.g., Pistorello et al., 2013; Vázquez et al., 2012); however, there are several limitations of extant research. For example, despite the number of interventions that have been shown to reduce depression among college students, there is a paucity of research replicating the efficacy of specific programs (Buchanan, 2012). The absence of pretests and control conditions in some studies (e.g., Boone & Manning, 2012; Buchanan, 2013; Caldwell, Harrison, Adams, Quin, & Greeson, 2010) makes it difficult to determine their relative efficacy. Additionally, a recent meta-analysis concluded that interventions for first-year students in particular have only modest overall effects (0.11), which is especially concerning since this group is at a higher risk for psychological distress than students who are further along in college (Conley, Durlak, & Kirsch, 2015). Further, many programs are resource and time intensive (i.e., ranging from 3 to 11 sessions; Ando, 2011; Boone & Manning, 2012; Canby, Cameron, Calhoun, & Buchanan, 2014; Pistorello et al., 2013; Vázquez et al., 2012), which may not be feasible given the high prevalence of depressive symptoms and the demands of college students' busy schedules. Finally, few studies to date have examined the mechanisms of change underlying effective programs. Identifying mechanisms of action could highlight the essential features of existing programs, which could enhance cost-effectiveness and ease dissemination. In sum, accessible, cost-effective, and time-efficient programs that reduce risk of depression and have been demonstrated to be effective in more than one sample are sorely needed.

We recently tested the efficacy of a one-session acceptance-based behavioral therapy (ABBT)-informed workshop, the Mindful Way Through the Semester, in a small, randomized controlled trial with first-year students (Danitz & Orsillo, 2014). The program, which encouraged students to use mindfulness to cultivate an accepting and compassionate stance towards painful emotions and to use values articulation to clarify what was personally meaningful to them about the college experience, was voluntary and offered to all incoming freshmen. Workshop participants reported significantly lower levels of depression and higher levels of acceptance at the end of the semester compared to those in the control condition. Further, workshop participants described an increase in their educational values, although this difference failed to reach conventional levels of statistical significance. Increases in acceptance of thoughts, emotions, and physiological sensations

over the course of the semester were significantly associated with decreases in depression, which lent support for acceptance as a potential mechanism of change. However, this study was limited by the low enrollment (5.5%) and high attrition rate (50%). We hypothesized that this may have been influenced by the study design, which required students to attend a workshop that could have conflicted with other elements of their schedule and to complete questionnaires online. Thus, we proposed that the program's reach might be improved if the workshop was offered in the context of regular programming, such as a classroom setting (Danitz & Orsillo, 2014).

The current study sought to extend our previous research in several ways. First, this study aimed to replicate findings from our prior study by demonstrating that the Mindful Way Through the Semester is effective in comparison to a control condition at decreasing levels of depression and enhancing acceptance and academic values in first year undergraduates (Danitz & Orsillo, 2014). We also aimed to replicate our finding that change in acceptance is associated with change in depression. Second, in an attempt to address the shortcomings of the previous study with regard to enrollment and attrition, we tested the efficacy of this program in the context of a first-year experience course. The first-year experience course is an optional one-credit course that meets once a week and is designed to aid in a successful transition to college during the first semester. This course provides students with an overview of campus resources and attempts to foster time management, organizational and academic skills, as well as personal development.

Finally, to identify factors that potentially enhance outcome, we examined how mindfulness and values practice following the workshop impacted functioning at the end of the semester. "Home" mindfulness practice has been shown to contribute to positive outcomes in psychotherapy trials (e.g., Vettese, Toneatto, Stea, Nguyen, & Wang, 2009) and thus it might be particularly relevant in single-session programs as they rely heavily on the application of skills outside of sessions. Therefore, we hypothesized that mindfulness and values practice would be associated with greater decreases in levels of depression for the workshop group.

Method

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 213 undergraduate students enrolled in a first-year experience course for College of Arts and Sciences students at a private university located in Boston, Massachusetts. Eligible participants were at least 18 years old. Participation in this study was voluntary, and participants did not

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/901148>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/901148>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)