Online 4-week skill-based mindfulness program to mitigate frontline healthcare worker's burnout during COVID-19

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1. Context: Why are we doing this?

Burnout faced by healthcare workers compromises their capacity to provide care, thus endangering the stability and quality of patient care. With COVID-19 rendering in-person delivery impossible, Waypoint has enacted a 4-week online version of the mindfulness program for all health care workers. Mindfulness programs embody acceptance-based practices and promote empathy and resiliency that may help reduce burnout. First, however, its efficacy must be examined and shared to guide future institutional efforts to mitigate burnout. This study used a mixed methodological approach to examine the efficacy of a brief mindfulness program mitigating burnout and explore the facilitator and participant experience.

2. Organizational Framework: Retooling services

Why mindfulness at Waypoint? Mindfulness became an integral part of the organization's mental health strategy as a service and training opportunity designed to build resilience. The Mindfulness Ambassador Program (MAP) developed by Mindfulness Without Borders has been embedded in the organization's wellness and leadership programming. In response to the pandemic, the MAP program was retooled to provide an in-time wellbeing service to healthcare workers and the community.

Retooling the MAP program morphed a face-to-face, 12-week and 12-hour program into a virtual, 4-week, 2-hour skills course. The modified MAP skills course was designed to provide a compassionate-based self-care service. Arrive and take what you need. In addition, the modified course supported forming habits while requiring a significantly smaller demand on time. By practicing together, a safe space to feel a connection was fostered.

3. Methodology

One hundred thirty-one consenting healthcare workers (mean age 31-50 = 53.8%; female = 93%) participated in the surveys: pre-survey, administered before the program began; post-survey, right after they completed the program; and follow-up survey, 4-weeks after they completed the program. The surveys asked questions on their demographic information (pre-survey only), their resiliency (Nicholson McBride Resiliency Questionnaires), empathy (Interpersonal Reactivity Index), and burnout (Maslach Burnout Inventory). Fifty percent of participants reported working in healthcare for 0-10 years; 53% reported working directly with patients, and 64% of participants had no previous mindfulness experience. Participants reported practicing mindfulness 1-3 times per week in both the post and follow-up surveys (post, 65%; the follow-up, 69%). To examine time-changes in burnout, a linear regression model was estimated using the generalized least squares (GLS) via the maximum likelihood approach, using Stata SE 16.

4. Quantitative findings

Burnout status: We found that almost half of our healthcare workers felt a high level of emotional exhaustion. Most of the healthcare workers felt personally accomplished nonetheless and did not show cynicism, which may indicate a significant commitment to their role in caring for the vulnerable population.

Time-changes in burnout: 4-week online mindfulness program significantly reduced emotional exhaustion and cynicism and remained effective after 4 weeks.
Factors contributing to the changes in burnout: The number of mindfulness practices was a significant predictor for reducing burnout. Perspective-taking and empathic concern and a Strong and exceptional level of resiliency significantly contributed to reducing burnout (i.e. emotional exhaustion and enhancing professional efficacy).

5. Qualitative findings

The findings of the qualitative portion of this study were shared, providing insight into the participant and facilitator experience. Healthcare workers sought out the mindfulness program as an introduction to mindfulness, better understanding the practice as a clinician, or as a support to renew or continue the individual practice. Participants shared a common challenge of committing to practice yet shared the varied ways they integrate mindfulness into everyday life. Participants and facilitators shared the importance of connection and compassion in building an ecosystem of wellbeing and provided unique insight into the benefits and challenges of brief online mindfulness programs. Facilitators shared how the opportunity to lead and support educational mindfulness programs amps up their own employee engagement. These findings resulted in actionable suggestions for instructional and curricular programs looking to spread and scale frontline worker wellbeing initiatives in healthcare and beyond.

6. Recommendations and take-home message

Brief mindfulness programs can move the needle on wellbeing. In summary, even with the continuous, ongoing stressor that COVID-19 presents, the brief online Mindfulness Ambassador program helped to teach and develop skills to help alleviate burnout symptoms such as emotional exhaustion. The participant and facilitator experiences shared suggest that the program should continue and should be expanded to offer more robust and lengthier sessions to those looking to grow their skills and to support continued practice. It is important that participants' challenges with practicing and developing a regular practice be further explored from the lens of program improvement to better scaffold their development of sustained practice and mitigate the barriers and challenges with practicing. Programs similar to the MAP should be considered in health studies education and early career development training. As such, further research should investigate the potential effects of this program on healthcare students and new professionals and measure their experience in relation to intentions to quit and professional retention. Longitudinal studies exploring the long-term maintenance effects should be considered. Finally, comparative studies should look at condensed programs (e.g., 4-week skill-based MAP) versus standard-length programs (e.g., 12-week MAP).

7. Contact us: for more information or any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out!

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