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Mindfulness and Occupational Health in Higher Education

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Session outline



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- About the service and me
- Background to mindfulness based interventions
- Description and brief experience of mindfulness practice
- What we've done
- How it works and fits within an Occupational Health agenda in a Higher Educational setting

Staff Counselling and Psychological Support Service



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- A separate service within the Occupational Health Service
- Supports the strategic aims of the University of Leeds by augmenting the psychological health and resources of staff

SCPSS AIMS



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- To provide timely psychological consultation and support to staff experiencing stress, distress or psychological challenges and enabling them to function more effectively.
- To facilitate the development of emotional and social competencies for staff in leadership or management roles or any staff who have particular psychological challenges in their work or working relationships.
- To proactively promote psychological health at work through consultancy and training events.

What is Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction?



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- MBSR is a structured training course that was developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn in 1979 at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center.
- An initiative to integrate mindfulness meditation into mainstream medicine and health care. It was used initially with patients with chronic pain and later to broader and general populations.

Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy



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- Developed by British psychologists in the 90's synthesising Jon Kabat-Zinn's MBSR and cognitive theories of modes of mind and meta-cognition.
- The ability to experience thoughts and feelings as passing events rather than facts about the self.
- Research – relapse prevention for depression

Mindfulness



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‘Mindfulness is the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose in the present moment and non-judgmentally to things as they are’. Jon Kabat-Zinn, 1994.p4

Key features of mindfulness practice



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- Focussing on present moment
- Non- judgemental/impartial awareness – observational skill
- Differentiating direct experience from thinking about experience
- Body awareness and understanding the layers of experience
- Managing impulses to change, avoid, control or hold onto thoughts and feelings.
- Cultivating compassion and acceptance
- Developing self discipline, commitment and intentionality



Mindfulness training

- Practices and develops attentional skills, mind body awareness and compassion.
- This may be augmented with psycho-education and input about specific issues and difficulties.
- It helps people to relate more effectively to their experiences, regulate affect and stress arousal and respond to difficult experiences rather than be taken over by them.

How does it work



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- Turning down stress reactions
- Reducing secondary stress
- Softening self criticism and developing self compassion
- Building tolerance of stress reactions and emotions
- Developing approach orientation and reducing experiential avoidance + worry

Interventions through SCPSS



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Suitable for all

- Within 1-1 Consultation, counselling and coaching
- Short workshop in Personal Resilience suite
- Bespoke workshops for teams

For staff who don't have current life crisis or acute problems

- 8 week courses MBSR-Mindfulness at Work

MBSR Mindfulness at Work

Pilot courses feedback



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- **What do you think you have learned or benefited from by doing this course?**
- Range of mindfulness awareness and skills
- Stress awareness and ways to respond and reduce reactivity
- Self care / compassion
- Taking time out - taking a breathing space
- How not to let stress take over and become harmful
- Self awareness and being able to cope under pressure

What do you think you will action back at work?

- Be aware of where my attention is and focussing it on what is needed
- Awareness of others and of my reaction to them – the ability to tune in – or out
- Greater understanding of others perspectives
- Step back and reduce reactivity – especially when things are tough
- Bring colleagues into the present at the start of meetings

Key research findings (Shapiro et al, 2008)

Mindfulness has a growing evidence base



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Physical and psychological well-being and mental health

- develops body awareness and the capacity to tolerate discomfort and pain
- reduces stress, anxiety, and depression
- encourages better emotion regulation and the development of positive psychological states

Cognitive and Academic Performance

- enhances the ability to maintain preparedness and to focus attention
- improves information processing ability

Mindfulness in Occupational Health



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Mindfulness training can be helpful across the whole spectrum of staff groups.

Working at the interface of the relationship between work and health and health and work; supporting positive attendance and engagement.

- Personal/domestic and work-related stress and common mental health problems
- Stress related physical conditions, IBS, headaches etc
- Coping with physical conditions and health anxiety

Mindfulness and positive psychological health



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- Improving individual effectiveness
- Optimizing self-awareness and skills for work
- Managing attention and working with the brain in mind
- Personal and corporate responsibility -working safely, reducing accidents and mistakes
- Building emotional and social competencies, working relationships and leadership qualities

Linking with academic colleagues in a research institution



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Explosion of research across a broad range of health
and other disciplines into the effects of mindfulness

New developments this year

- Joint project with the Psychology Department here to evaluate the 8-week courses and develop a broader project on mindfulness at work
- New inter-disciplinary interest group on mindfulness and research