Chapter for the edited book:
Mindfulness in Positive Psychology: The Science of Meditation and Well-being

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Title:
Mindfulness-Based Strengths Practice (MBSP) for Enhancing Well-Being, Managing Problems, and Boosting Positive Relationships

Abstract:
Character strengths are often referred to as the backbone of positive psychology. Mindfulness has, at its essence, character strengths (e.g., self-regulation and curiosity) and numerous correlates and outcomes relating to character strengths (e.g., kindness, perspective, creativity) are associated with mindfulness practices. Mindfulness-based strengths practice (MBSP), a manualized approach that integrates these practice areas, emphasizes how each practice can mutually enhance the other. Character strengths can be woven into mindfulness practices in order to combat meditation barriers (e.g., mind wandering; scheduling problems; body discomfort) that participants report when attempting to maintain a mindfulness practice. In turn, mindfulness practice helps individuals to be more tuned in to social situations and to inner phenomena to assist in optimal character strengths expression.

Popular character strengths practices such as strengths-spotting, developing signature strengths, and targeting specific strengths are supported by the open and accepting nature of mindfulness approaches. At the same time, individuals can become more engaged and adept at mindful living practices such as mindfulness in relationships, mindful listening, mindful eating, and mindful walking by deploying their strengths. This chapter will review the MBSP program as well as the links between mindfulness, character strengths use, and positive outcomes. While the science of MBSP is young, preliminary research and case examples from MBSP programs with participants across multiple countries show promise and are presented.
“We can’t understand what is happening to ‘something’ if we aren’t looking. But nothing is going to happen to that ‘something’ if we don’t look deeply. That’s why so many things with incredible potential go unnoticed because nobody bothers to look.”

-Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu, director of 21 Grams (2003), Babel (2006), Biutiful (2010), and Birdman (2014)

The Science of Mindfulness and Character

Positive psychology has two natural bedfellows that, despite some overlapping routes and similar benefits when practiced, have grown up separately over the centuries. These are mindfulness meditation and strengths of character. Each has a number of misconceptions associated with it so we begin by clarifying terms and offering some brief research findings before delving into their integration.

There are many ways to define mindfulness. Each author, researcher, practitioner, and thought leader has their own take on it. The lack of a common, consensual definition poses problems for researchers and practitioners in terms of understanding what is being discussed, studied, and practiced. It is for this reason that a large group of mindfulness scientists gathered at the turn of the century to derive a consensual, operational definition. What emerged was a two-part definition for mindfulness (Bishop et al., 2004): Mindfulness involves the self-regulation of attention with an approach of curiosity, openness, and acceptance.

Ultimately, mindfulness is not about getting relaxed or achieving a particular state, rather mindfulness refers to being present to what is happening in the unfolding moment to moment experience, without pre-conceptions or judgments. Mindfulness meditation practices and mindfulness-based programs have been associated with many positive outcomes. Meta-analyses have found clear evidence for the positive effects of meditation on well-being (Sedlmeier et al., 2012) and that meditation is beneficial for both clinical and non-clinical populations (Grossman et al., 2004).

Character is another term that has traditionally lacked a consensual definition. Character has typically been viewed over the decades in a narrow and myopic way – conceived of as a solitary construct such as honesty or integrity or characterized by a random selection of four or five qualities such as responsibility, respect, loyalty, and kindness. Studies of such groupings of character frequently found in character education programs have typically lacked scientific rigor (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007). A new science of character emerged at the turn of the century. In 2004, a common language emerged for understanding these positive aspects of our personality. This was catalyzed by a 3-year project involving 55 scientists, significant cross-cultural work, and extensive research finding 24 character strengths to be universal in human beings (Biswas-Diener, 2006; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). This groundbreaking system of character strengths and virtues is known as the VIA Classification (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), which can be seen in detail in Table 1. The accompanying scientific measurement tool to assess these 24 strengths is widely known as the VIA Survey. (The word “VIA” in these instances was formerly an acronym for “values in action.”) The VIA
Survey, a free, online tool (accessed at www.viacharacter.org) has been taken by over three million people reaching every country around the globe. There are over 200 peer-reviewed publications on character strengths, the majority emerging in the last several years.

Character strengths are core, positive, trait-like capacities for thinking, feeling, and behaving in ways that help us achieve our best potential and bring out the best in others. These character strengths have been found to correlate with many of the valued outcomes that humans pursue. Reviews and examples have been published elsewhere (Niemiec, 2013; Peterson, 2006; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), and include the link between creativity and posttraumatic growth (Forgeard, 2013), the connection between curiosity and intimacy (Kashdan et al., 2011), the alignment of humility with generosity (Exline & Hill, 2012), and the connection between the strength of appreciation of beauty and well-being and self-transcendence (Martinez-Marti et al., 2014), to name a recent few.

There is good reason to explore and deepen the synergy of these exciting positive psychology domains. Mindfulness has been found to provide greater exposure to our internal environment (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007), to help overcome our blind spots in self-knowledge (Carlson, 2013), and to align our actual self (who we think we are) and our ideal self (who we would like to be; Ivtzan, Gardner, & Smailova, 2011). In practical terms, mindfulness helps people to look within, sift through the judgments, comparisons, distortions, etc., and clearly see who we really are (i.e., our authentic self; our core strengths).

Positive psychology – and its countless researchers and practitioners – strives to not only bring a more careful examination of what is best in people (e.g., positive traits, positive emotions, resilience) but also to use what is best to confront, manage, and/or transcend what is disordered, afflicting, or discomforting (e.g., human suffering, disease, conflict, problems). Mindfulness and character strengths each address these two points and it is suspected that the synergy between the two provides an additive benefit for helping humans to not only champion what is best in them but also to face and manage suffering.

Mindfulness and Character Strengths Integration: Past and Present

Until recently, minimal attention had been given to synergies of the universal character strengths of the VIA Classification (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and mindfulness-based practices. Previous synergies had been piecemeal (e.g., focusing on one strength), indirect, or non-inclusive. We outline previous and current approaches.

*Indirect focus:* The most popular mindfulness-based programs to date, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn, 1990) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2013), do not directly target character strengths. That said, one is not hard-pressed to discover character strengths being addressed throughout these programs. For example, MBSR places emphasis on cultivating attitudes such as patience, openness, and letting go; the character strengths of self-regulation, curiosity, judgment/open-mindedness, and
forgiveness are closely linked with these MBSR attitudes. The newest edition to the MBCT manual (Segal et al., 2013) places an explicitly stronger emphasis on targeting love/kindness/compassion. In addition, projected benefits and focus areas in MBCT are as follows (our observation of the matched character strengths are in parentheses):

- Observe negative thoughts with curiosity and kindness (curiosity, kindness, judgment/critical thinking, self-regulation).
- To accept themselves and stop wishing things were different (forgiveness, perspective).
- To let go of old habits and choose a different way of being (forgiveness, bravery, perseverance).
- To be present in the moment and notice small beauties and pleasures in the world (curiosity, appreciation of beauty & excellence).

**Single strength integration:** To be sure, many scientists and practitioners have studied, aligned, and taught about the connection between meditation and mindfulness and particular character strengths. Kindness and the recent surge of loving-kindness meditation and compassion practices is one of the more prominent examples. Indeed, entire programs have been created around mindfulness practices and this strength (e.g., Germer, 2009; Gilbert, 2010). Other examples that have merged mindfulness/meditation with a specific strength include creativity (Langer, 2006), spirituality (Ivtzan, 2014), hope (Hanson, 2013), forgiveness (Kornfield, 2008), and gratitude (Brach, 2003). Related to this type of integration, researchers have frequently found correlations between individual character strengths and mindfulness practices. For example, nonreactive and nonjudging elements of mindfulness predicted perseverance (Evans, Baer, & Segerstrom, 2009), authenticity/honesty correlates positively with mindfulness (Lakey et al., 2009), and vitality/zest is not infrequently found to be an outcome of mindfulness (Reibel et al., 2001).

**Buddhist philosophy and religious approaches:** Buddhism, specifically Tibetan Buddhism, has a rich history of meditation teachings, approaches, and metta (loving-kindness) practices. Substantial emphasis is placed on meditation avenues aligned with compassion and wisdom, i.e., the character strengths of kindness and perspective (e.g., Chodron, 1994; Dalai Lama, 2006). Meditative practices in Christianity date back at least to the early desert fathers centuries ago (Carrigan, 2001) to centering prayer advocates (Keating, 2006) to contemporary theologians (Rehg, 2002) and who have linked mindfulness with Christian spirituality, where it is easy to see additional links with open-mindedness/judgment, love, perseverance, and humility.

**Total strength integration:** Prior to the publication of *Mindfulness and Character Strengths* and the launching of Mindfulness-Based Strengths Practice (MBSP), there were three publications that discussed an integration of mindfulness and the universal VIA Classification of character strengths (see Baer & Lykins, 2011; Niemiec, 2013; Niemiec, Rashid, & Spinella, 2012). MBSP, like other mindfulness-based programs, provides a “scaffolding” or “launching pad” to invite cultivation (Kabat-Zinn, 2003) of core positive qualities and attention in participants. MBSP enhances the inclusiveness and depth of previous approaches to virtue, strength, and character by encompassing the following:

- The plurality of our character (e.g., Peterson, 2006): Each individual has a unique constellation of character strengths that are uniquely expressed in different combinations,
to different degrees, dependent on the context. Mindfulness practices support the complexity and idiosyncratic nature of these individual differences and contextual issues.

- Exploring over prescribing: A descriptive and exploratory approach to character strengths discovery and application is prioritized over a prescriptive approach that focuses on a handful of strengths that all people must develop (see Linkins et al., 2014, for a full explanation of this difference).
- Targeting strengths: Indeed, single strength integration approaches have been fruitful in boosting up specific strengths, thus this was viewed as an important approach to integrate into MBSP. A mindful targeting of specific strengths, chosen by participants themselves, creates the opportunity for the enhancement of any of the 24 character strengths. Participants sometimes attempt to boost a character strength because it is low in their profile and they wish to build it up; they may be confused by it, disagree with its placement in the rank-order, or simply wish to expand and deepen their understanding and application of the given strength.
- The new science of character: Since the publication of the VIA Classification, peer-reviewed science on character has ballooned to over 200 publications in a short period of time. These contemporary strengths areas are therefore addressed in MBSP, for example, applying mindfulness to signature strengths, overuse and underuse of strengths, the golden mean of strengths, strengths appreciation, strengths constellations, using strengths with problems, and setting goals with strengths.

The Mindfulness-Based Strengths Practice (MBSP) Program

MBSP is the first of its kind in many respects. It represents the first manualized program to help individuals understand and build their character strengths and is the first program to integrate these two popular areas of positive psychology. It is one of the first mindfulness programs to explicitly target something positive – those characteristics which are strongest in human beings.

MBSP integrates the latest science and best practices involving mindfulness-based approaches and character strengths knowledge. The 8-week, manualized MBSP program underwent numerous iterations based on expert feedback, scientific findings, and early cross-cultural, pilot research of eight groups involving advanced practitioners applying the MBSP program in six countries. These culminated to the version of MBSP outlined in Niemiec (2014). Sessions 1 and 2 offer primers on mindfulness and character strengths, respectively, while the remaining six sessions explore the integration and application of mindfulness and strengths. Table 2 provides the core themes covered in each of the eight sessions.

[Insert Table 2]

The underlying, basic assumptions of MBSP reflect many of the core themes that are practiced. These include that individuals can improve upon their mindful awareness and character strengths; that these lead to valued outcomes such as developing or enhancing mindfulness in relationships; that mindfulness in particular can enhance character strengths awareness, deployment, and balanced use; and that character strengths can support individuals’ practice of meditation and mindful living and assist in maintenance of mindfulness in the long-run.
To help participants understand and experience these tenets, there is an optimal structure within each MBSP session that incorporates meditation experiences, mindfulness/strengths integration exercises, group and dyadic discussion, and lecture input. Table 3 provides the breakdown of a typical MBSP session.

[Insert Table 3]

As viewed in Table 3, there are a number of activities participants engage in each week. In an attempt to provide the reader with a sense of some of the priority focus areas each week, Table 4 offers an example of the centerpiece activity (main exercise) for each of the MBSP sessions. The table offers rationale for each activity.

[Insert Table 4]

There are two overarching ways in which mindfulness and character strengths can be integrated. One approach is to focus on strengthening one’s mindfulness practice, mindful living, and consistency and maintenance of meditation. This can be achieved by deliberately bringing in one’s naturally-occurring character strengths, referred to as “strong mindfulness.” The other approach is to bring mindful awareness to the understanding, exploration, spotting, appreciating, balancing, and deployment of one’s character strengths. The bringing of mindfulness to one’s character strengths is referred to as “mindful strengths use.”

There are many activities that participants engage in within group experiences and in home practice that involve integrating these practices. To review all of them is beyond the scope of this chapter. Therefore, a sampling of activities is covered in Table 5, along with their research base and/or source.

[Insert Table 5]

At its best, the practice of mindfulness is strengths and the practice of strengths is mindfulness. They cannot be separated. To practice mindful walking or mindful eating is to exercise self-regulation as well as many other strengths. To express a curious and kindly openness to the unfolding present moment experience is to practice mindfulness. When we deploy character strengths in a mindful way we are strengthening our mindfulness, and when we strengthen our mindfulness we are nurturing the conditions for virtuous behavior and balanced character strengths use (Niemiec, 2014).

As this chapter’s opening quote suggests, so much potential in human beings goes unnoticed because people either don’t know to look, don’t know how to look, or don’t look deeply. Mindfulness and character strengths provide a mechanism for looking and a common language for what to look for. When merged synergistically, the result is deep looking – both inwardly and outwardly – and the potential for constructive, authentic, and altruistic action unfolds.

**MBSP Pilot Research and Reports from the Field**

_Pilot research_
Niemiec (2014) conducted some initial studies of MBSP to determine the efficacy of the intervention program, to attain cross-cultural feedback, and to assist in making improvements to the program. One small non-randomized, controlled study found substantial improvements for the experimental group and when compared with controls. Improvements for flourishing, engagement, and signature strengths use were the strongest effects. In addition to the United States, the program was piloted in 5 countries by practitioners who met strict criteria in terms of mindfulness knowledge, personal practice, and application and character strengths knowledge and practice. Feedback from these practitioners and their MBSP group participants was unanimously positive and assisted in improving the program. Feedback forms were distributed among all groups with reported improvements in overall well-being, sense of identity, meaning in life, sense of purpose, engagement with life tasks, stress management, quality of relationships, sense of accomplishment, and management of problems. This trend toward a host of positive outcomes has continued with the implementation of online MBSP programs offered by the first author and by additional MBSP leaders across several countries (including the second author).

Core areas participants report they are able to do as a result of the MBSP program include the following:

- Greater awareness of signature strengths (an element of “mindful strengths use”) and using strengths more often.
- Deepening of a previously existing mindfulness practice (the element of “strong mindfulness”).
  - For experienced meditators, this benefit appears to be related to another reported outcome – the overcoming of obstacles in the practice of mindfulness. For new meditators, this outcome is particularly important because in many instances mindfulness barriers are what prevent new meditators from maintaining their practice.
- Using both mindfulness and character strengths to deal with problems and difficulties.
- Both spotting and appreciating strengths more frequently in others.
- When piloted in the workplace, MBSP helped staff develop a common language with one another, and was useful in resolving tension and disputes.

Another study (Briscoe, 2014) involved a non-randomized controlled model with participants in the experimental condition (N=19) completing the MBSP program and a waitlist control condition (N=20) that did not receive an intervention. The intervention group was delivered online, which is becoming a popular, successful trend for delivering mindfulness programs as many studies are revealing positive effects with online delivery (e.g., Aikens et al., 2014; Boggs et al., 2014; Cavanagh et al., 2013; Gluck & Maercker, 2011; Krusche et al., 2012; Morledge et al., 2013). This study, with groups equivocal in age and gender, used a number of measures including the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), Flourishing Scale (Diener, Lucas, Schimmack, & Helliwell, 2009), engagement questions (a subscale of the Positive Psychotherapy Inventory [Rashid, 2008]), and questions on signature strengths use and its link with flourishing, work, relationships, and community (Niemiec, 2014). Questions from the latter include: “My greatest fulfillments in life occur when I express those parts of myself that are core to who I am” and “My work is an expression of who I am at my core, not just something I do well,” “My personal relationships give me the opportunity to express the best parts of myself,” and “My activities in my community are vehicles by which I
express my best self.” Even though the experimental group had initially higher baseline levels of all measures compared to the control group, all well-being variables (life satisfaction, flourishing, engagement, and signature strengths use) in the experimental group showed significant increases. The control group demonstrated a significant increase only in life satisfaction. This study offers support for the theoretical and conceptual foundations of MBSP and the initial MBSP pilot study.

These studies are also consistent with preliminary findings from other researchers who found that more time spent using strengths correlates significantly with mindfulness (Jarden et al., 2012), and early results from a Dutch study (Alberts, 2014) of MBSP elements using a correlational and experimental design that found positive correlations between strengths use and life satisfaction, strengths use and authenticity, strengths use and mindfulness, and strengths use and acceptance.

Positive relationships: A standout finding in MBSP groups

One meta-analysis of meditation discovered that the strongest meditation effects were found for emotionality and relationship issues (Sedlmeier et al., 2012). Positive relationships are critical to well-being and are one of the most important pathways to greater happiness (Diener & Seligman, 2002a; 2002b). There are countless factors that may contribute to the creation, rekindling, bolstering, and/or maintenance of positive, healthy relationships; it goes beyond the scope of this chapter to explore the various dynamics and activities therein. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that one of the more striking, overarching findings we have observed in leading MBSP is the benefits participants experience in the domain of positive relationships. Following MBSP, participants are asked a question anonymously if MBSP had a direct positive effect on one of their relationships and if so, to describe the impact. Nearly every participant who has completed MBSP to date is able to draw a direct connection between MBSP and positive changes in one of their relationships. There are a number of activities in MBSP that may account for this salient impact on participants’ relationships, such as the strengths interview, the Character Strengths 360, weekly strengths-spotting and strengths-appreciating practice, weekly mindful listening and mindful speaking practice, and character strengths meditations that are “other-focused,” to name a few examples.

A sampling of cross-cultural examples across several MBSP group experiences reveals participants experiencing both incremental changes that are meaningful over time as well as transformative changes. Here are several examples relating to the domain of positive relationships:

- I decided to renew contact with my estranged son of 15 years. I deliberately used mindful listening and speaking and strengths-based dialogue in the conversations.
- A couple who had been married for 35 years reported the following: MBSP has enhanced our communication, pulled us out of automaton responding to one another, and helped us renew and appreciate the joys and strengths of our marriage.
- I appreciate other people’s strengths more and tell them that. I have written a forgiveness letter to my brother with whom I have a difficult relationship and I asked him to forgive me for always wanting to try and rescue him.
• During the program, I started making mindful visits to my 75-year-old dad who lives in a nursing home. His condition is difficult and very sad. Character strengths reflections and mindful walking to his residence cultivated joy and peace within me so I was able to approach him fresh and with mindfulness. The first days he looked at me in the same way, then over time, he became more affectionate with me. He took my hand and kissed it for the first time. My mindfulness visits had touched his soul.

• I am friendlier with myself. And therefore am now expressing more love toward my wife and daughters.

• I have slowed down my thought processes, learned to recognize my strengths and strengths in others. I am a calmer, happier, more joyous person with my friends, family, and colleagues. I am not afraid to face interpersonal challenges or life’s obstacles. In fact, I welcome them!

• A new channel of communication has opened with my husband. The Character Strengths 360 deepened our connection as well as my relationships with friends and family. I feel more appreciated by my kids and friends because of the feedback they gave me and in turn I am easily reciprocating.

• A worker at a nonprofit reported: During these weeks I’ve had the opportunity to practice mindfulness and strengths-spotting in my co-workers. The results have been very positive because communication flows easily now. The huge problems of the past have now become manageable situations. The tools we have now as a team help us to not be defensive, and I’m aware that we are now showing results at every level. Day by day, our actions are slowly improving our workplace.

• One MBSP practitioner, working with young, impoverished teen mothers, gathered feedback at the end of the program from each participant on three areas – “new discoveries about myself,” “my use of strengths,” and “my use of mindfulness.” Each teen clearly articulated benefits in all three domains, without exception. One teen’s example follows:
  o “I overuse my bravery. I need to use the golden mean of character strengths in order to not harm myself” (new discovery);
  o “I can use my bravery with love and these two strengths together can help me serve others” (strengths use);
  o “Through mindfulness practice, I realize now that I can feel OK with myself and who I am and that this use of perspective can help me make decisions” (mindfulness use).

Case discussions of MBSP

[Authors note: For confidentiality purposes, the identifying information and other elements discussed in the following cases have been edited while maintaining core themes/outcomes of the MBSP experience.]

“Supporting Teams in the Workplace”

Background: A small marketing firm located in a suburb of Melbourne, Australia and co-owned by two middle-aged, male executives, invited one of the authors [JL] to meet and discuss possible solutions to perceived problems within the organization. One executive, the CEO, was
interested in exploring and implementing mindfulness as a tool for enhancing awareness within the organization. Initially, the other executive, the CFO, did not want to participate, saying that the staff will benefit, but he doesn’t need it. Following discussions around the importance of pursuing greater transparency and unity among all the members of the organization, and the potential of MBSP to be a catalyst for this change, the leaders changed their mind and both openly participated.

*Description of the Problem:* This small business consisted of 2 teams, each with its own manager who then reported to one of the owners. Each team addressed different functions but the intention was that they work alongside each other, supporting mutual goals for the organization. Political differences between the two teams had previously led to competition between the teams rather than collaboration. This was, in turn, leading to increased levels of staff stress and claims of workplace bullying. Tension was often high in the workplace environment. Prior to the implementation of MBSP, one of the owners described concerns that the levels of stress, anger, and frequent employee disengagement within the organization seemed to be unusually high when compared with other companies in the same sector. The owners had previously attempted to address disengagement and presenteeism with outside consultants, webinars, incentives, and other methods without success. The goals in bringing MBSP to their firm were twofold:

1. Help staff manage personal and work-related stresses.
2. Build greater team cohesion within the organization.

*Implementation:* 87% of staff (including the two owners and two managers) commenced MBSP, which was conducted over 10 weeks due to travel/work commitments of senior management. Homework was completed by half of the participants with all participants doing at least a minimal amount. Participation was generally guarded, but 80% of commencing staff completed the 8-week course. The owners were interviewed after 4 weeks and all staff completed pre- and post- questionnaires.

*Results:* The owners perceived significant changes in staff interactions between the first and last weeks of the program. A common and positive language encouraged teams to focus on individual and group strengths, instead of focusing on competition and flaws (building their strength of perspective). One of the owners observed: “the VIA Survey and character strengths work was used to effectively solve disputes and successfully resolve tension on four occasions. We all spoke the same language and took an objective perspective.” A participant commented that what struck her most about the course was the “positive, here and now focus; looking for the good; and appreciating others’ strengths.” Another said that “MBSP provided us with a shared experience that was honest and open, and it allowed us to better understand and value each others’ strengths.”

There were 2 key departures from the organization within six months of completing the course and both of these were individuals who had embraced the program and the ongoing practice of
mindfulness. It is possible that the insight afforded to these individuals through the program and ongoing mindfulness practice gave them the clarity to see they were the wrong fit for the organization (or the organization was the wrong fit for them). One person who also embraced the program sought additional coaching support following completion of MBSP. Her resilience continued to improve and after mindful deliberation, decided to stay with the organization and build her strength of leadership.

One-hundred percent of staff who attended every session (80% of commencing staff) gave feedback that the program had helped them better manage stressful situations, both within and outside of work. The MBSP program helped them recognize, appreciate, and prioritize the character strengths of their colleagues, rather than ruminate and fault-find. These improvements proved to be critical factors in improving team cohesion and boosting the strength of teamwork.

Conclusion: The owners were very satisfied with the engagement and positive outcomes of the program. In particular, they stated that, as a multi-week program with ongoing support over 2 full months, MBSP was more valuable to them than other courses they’ve provided to their staff. Discussions are currently underway for a monthly maintenance program.

“Prevention is Better Than Cure”

Background: A busy restaurant business located near the central business district in Sydney, Australia was looking to support its staff with a stress management program. Staff mentioned they were interested in learning to meditate, so to enhance commitment and attendance to MBSP, the middle-aged business owner requested that each of his staff participants contribute a weekly co-payment to attend the program.

Description of the Problem: The owner became aware that his staff were having difficulties in managing their stress levels. Although there were no serious issues at present, recent legislation regarding duty of care for the health of staff (including mental health) meant that he was driven to teach them skills that would prevent any major problems arising due to the stressful nature of the work. All staff were under 30 years of age and single, often switched on to phone and social media and experiencing the everyday stressors of 21st century living in a fast-paced city. In addition, nearly every employee worked long hours, usually standing or walking for most of their shift, without structured meal breaks, and experienced the implicit demands that come with working with the public such as having to maintain an upbeat façade even when feeling tired, unwell, or unhappy. The owner felt that staff were distracted and not present enough with the clients.

Implementation: Weekly, two-hour sessions were conducted before the restaurant opened for business. All 17 staff members (including the owner) commenced and completed the MBSP program. They were committed to the program, always on time and the majority completed the recommended homework activities, including journaling and meditating.
Results: The owner was impressed with the group participation and engagement and with the application of concepts from MBSP into the workplace setting (e.g., using the character strengths verbiage; displaying mindful listening to one another). The feedback from staff was that the group experience “got better each week” and that it “exceeded expectations.” The program theme that helped them most was “Mindfulness of the Golden Mean,” which emphasizes using mindfulness for balanced character strengths expression, including context sensitivity, the use of character strength constellations, and managing strengths overuse and underuse. Staff were especially engaged in learning and practicing the loving-kindness meditation and building their strength of perspective when meditating on a problem. During discussion they expressed their strength of gratitude, saying they “felt proud” that they were participating in the course. The owner, a protective and nurturing man who readily displayed his signature strengths of kindness and love, enjoyed seeing the personal growth that took place each week among his staff. He felt that he had provided an opportunity for staff to learn important life skills (e.g., a new way to practice leadership), and observed that even the quieter staff had gained greater confidence (e.g., realizing they could turn mindful attention to their signature strengths during the busy restaurant hours). One participant in particular who was struggling with a difficult personal situation was able to step back with his perspective strength to view his stressors in a different way, his bravery strength to face his problems directly, and to manage his suffering through self-kindness.

At the conclusion of the program, the staff requested MBSP booster sessions on a bimonthly basis. The booster sessions, arranged as an interactive and informative experience, were particularly valued and gathered a full attendance at each session. These have supported the staff in maintaining their MBSP practices.

“Encouraging Self-Care for Enhanced Clinical Care”

Background: A grant was received by a large city children’s hospital in the United States to provide a well-being training for a multidisciplinary team, including case workers, nurses, therapists, and administrative staff. The MBSP program was capped at 20 participants and a co-payment was made by each participant to ensure their commitment for the full 8 weeks.

The program coordinator who managed logistics each week explained that the staff needed to learn better self-care to help avoid burnout. Offering wellness programs for staff (e.g., physical fitness programs) had been used in the past with only modest success. On this occasion, the coordinator and team believed that an optimal match might be found in a staff “mental fitness” program.

Description of the Problem: Staff working with medically ill children may experience more than the usual amount of workplace stress as they manage the expectations and fears of the parents, handle a variety of administrative requirements, and attend to the emotional and physical needs of the children. This particular staff explained how these stressors are compounded when their own professional and personal stress loads are factored in.
**Implementation:** The program was open to both clinical and non-clinical staff. The staff who engaged in the opportunity were either working in direct care or administrative roles. No physicians enrolled in the program and while this was not investigated it was suspected that scheduling was the main barrier. Although the program was funded by a grant, a nominal co-payment was requested to encourage full participation and attendance.

**Results:** Sixteen of the 20 staff (80%) who originally enrolled in the program attended 100% of the sessions. Verbal participation in class was initially guarded as there were concerns about confidentiality between co-workers. Once this was addressed with open discussion, participation improved. For home practice, several participants kept journals and engaged in a routine mindfulness meditation practice, finding that it helped them feel happier, less stressed, and more in control both at work and at home.

One man attending the course had a terminally ill child that the team was caring for, and when the child passed away he explained that her chronic and terminal illness was the reason he had decided to attend the course and that it helped him enormously in terms of acceptance, coping, letting go, and strengths expression (e.g., love, forgiveness, hope, bravery). He also described a positive carryover effect to family members who had not attended the course.

Another participant had a chronic skin condition that visibly and profoundly improved over the eight weeks. Such effects have previously been documented by Kabat Zinn et al. (1998) who concluded that mindfulness meditation delivered by audiotape during ultraviolet light therapy increased the healing rate of lesions in patients with psoriasis.

The group expressed interest in two types of MBSP booster sessions: monthly follow-up that reviewed and reinforced core concepts from MBSP, integrated in additional ideas (e.g., positivity), and continued engaging in practices; second, the group decided to meet between themselves as an open group for 15-30 minutes once per week to practice meditation with one another prior to work.

**Conclusion:** The majority of participants stated that MBSP gave them the skills they were seeking when they enrolled in the course. Some of these skills were put to the test of life in a significant way (e.g., with the death of a child). Those that attend the booster sessions benefit from the regular connection, support and knowledge they gain.

**Future Research**

MBSP, while based in the science of mindfulness-based practice and the emerging science of character, is a new program and therefore the opportunities for further research are significant. We, and other MBSP leaders, have observed boosts to well-being, engagement, meaning, strengths use, mindfulness practice, purpose in life, problem management, emotional resilience and positive relationships improvement, but encourage more rigorous studies of MBSP that would involve randomization and follow-up analyses over longer time periods examining these
outcomes. We suggest researchers study the effects of MBSP with other populations (e.g., disabilities, psychological disorders, chronic illness, youth, geriatric) and settings (e.g., medical, business, psychiatric, education, defense, corrective services). Also, what are the mediating variables in the MBSP program? Are the benefits and mediators consistent with what is found in other mindfulness-based programs? Are there unique benefits of MBSP in particular?

Delivering MBSP in the business context raises additional research questions relating to productivity. For example, research conducted by the iOpener Institute in the UK (Pryce-Jones, 2010) found that employees who are happy at work stay up to four times longer in their job, are at least twice as focused on task and take one-tenth of the sick leave that their less happy colleagues. Studies have shown that both mindfulness and character strength expression can increase a person’s well-being. It would therefore be of interest to measure whether MBSP, which combines both of these, could be as, or more effective in increasing productivity at work than other work-based employee engagement programs.

The integration of mindfulness and character strengths programatically in lecture points, discussion themes, meditations, and homework practices is a novel contribution. But what is the additive effect of integrating these areas of positive psychology? Does the integration lead to greater maintenance of meditation practices (i.e., termed “strong mindfulness”)? What is the role of signature strengths in overcoming meditation barriers? Does the integration lead directly to more balanced and sustained character strengths expressions (i.e., termed “mindful strengths use”)?

We are also interested in different delivery mechanisms for MBSP. In addition to the initial successes of face-to-face and online delivery to groups and to individuals, what additional modalities might be utilized? One of the authors (RMN) is beginning the adaptation of a self-guided MBSP process by use of a workbook and CD. Would this lead to additional or distinct benefits for participants? Might other web-based and smartphone app mechanisms be another route of delivery that would reveal positive benefits?

As noted in the case discussions, we find that the integration of mindfulness and character strengths is strikingly empowering in helping participants to manage problems effectively and improve relationships. Further analysis of the underlying factors and mechanisms for each is warranted.

References


Carlson, E. N. (2013). Overcoming the barriers to self-knowledge: Mindfulness as a path to seeing yourself as you really are. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 8*(2), 173-186.


The Virtue of Wisdom – cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge

- **Creativity** [originality, ingenuity]: Thinking of novel and productive ways to conceptualize and do things; includes artistic achievement but is not limited to it
- **Curiosity** [interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience]: Taking an interest in ongoing experience for its own sake; finding subjects and topics fascinating; exploring and discovering
- **Judgment** [open-mindedness; critical thinking]: Thinking things through and examining them from all sides; not jumping to conclusions; being able to change one's mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly
- **Love of Learning**: Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one's own or formally; related to the strength of curiosity but goes beyond it to describe the tendency to add systematically to what one knows
- **Perspective** [wisdom]: Being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself/others

The Virtue of Courage – emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal

- **Bravery** [valor]: Not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain; speaking up for what’s right even if there’s opposition; acting on convictions even if unpopular; includes physical bravery but is not limited to it
- **Perseverance** [persistence, industriousness]: Finishing what one starts; persevering in a course of action in spite of obstacles; “getting it out the door”; taking pleasure in completing tasks
- **Honesty** [authenticity, integrity]: Speaking the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way and acting in a sincere way; being without pretense; taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions
- **Zest** [vitality, enthusiasm, vigor, energy]: Approaching life with excitement and energy; not doing things halfway or halfheartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated

The Virtue of Humanity - interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others

- **Love** (capacity to love and be loved): Valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing & caring are reciprocated; being close to people
- **Kindness** [generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, "niceness"]: Doing favors and good deeds for others; helping them; taking care of them
- **Social Intelligence** [emotional intelligence, personal intelligence]: Being aware of the motives/feelings of others and oneself; knowing what to do to fit into different social situations; knowing what makes other people tick
The Virtue of Justice - civic strengths that underlie healthy community life

- **Teamwork** [citizenship, social responsibility, loyalty]: Working well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one's share
- **Fairness**: Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness & justice; not letting feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance
- **Leadership**: Encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done and at the same time maintain good relations within the group; organizing group activities and seeing that they happen.

The Virtue of Temperance – strengths that protect against excess

- **Forgiveness** [mercy]: Forgiving those who have done wrong; accepting others’ shortcomings; giving people a second chance; not being vengeful
- **Humility** [modesty]: Letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves; not regarding oneself as more special than one is
- **Prudence**: Being careful about one's choices; not taking undue risks; not saying or doing things that might later be regretted
- **Self-Regulation** [self-control]: Regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one's appetites and emotions

The Virtue of Transcendence - strengths that forge connections to the universe & provide meaning

- **Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence** [awe, wonder, elevation]: Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in various domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience
- **Gratitude**: Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen; taking time to express thanks
- **Hope** [optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation]: Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about
- **Humor** [playfulness]: Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people; seeing the light side; making (not necessarily telling) jokes
- **Spirituality** [religiousness, faith, purpose]: Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose & meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort

Table 2: Core Topic Areas of MBSP (Niemiec, 2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Core Topic</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mindfulness and autopilot</td>
<td>The autopilot mind is pervasive; insights and change opportunities start with mindful attention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Your signature strengths</td>
<td>Identify what is best in you; this can unlock potential to engage more in work and relationships and reach higher personal potential.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Obstacles are opportunities

The practice of mindfulness and of strengths exploration leads immediately to two things – obstacles/barriers to the practice and a wider appreciation for the little things in life.

Strengthening mindfulness in everyday life

Mindfulness helps us attend to and nourish the best, innermost qualities in ourselves and others, while reducing negative judgments of self and others; conscious use of strengths can help us deepen and maintain a mindfulness practice.

Valuing your relationships

Mindful attending can nourish two types of relationships: relationships with others and our relationship with ourselves. Our relationships with ourself contributes to self-growth and can have an immediate impact on our connection with others.

Mindfulness of the golden mean

Mindfulness helps to focus on problems directly and character strengths help to reframe and offer different perspectives not immediately apparent.

MBSP ½-day retreat

Mindful living and character strengths apply not only to good meditation practice but also to daily conversation, eating, walking, sitting, reflecting, and the nuances therein (e.g., opening the refrigerator door, turning a doorknob, creating a smile). This day is therefore, a practice day.

Table 3: Standard Structure of MBSP Sessions (2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part</th>
<th>Focus Area</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Opening meditation</td>
<td>Start group with “practice,” allows for letting go of preceding tension and ushers in a different focus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>Discussion: whole group or multiple small groups</td>
<td>Review participants’ practice from last week with the following catalyst: What went well?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>Lecture/input</td>
<td>Offering new material aligned with</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
core themes.

IV Experiential Core practice with mindfulness and character strengths is experienced.

V Virtue circle Structured, respectful approach for mindful listening/speaking practice and strengths-spotting/appreciating practice.

VI Suggested homework Review of focus areas in between sessions.

VII Closing meditation Letting go of session to come fully into present moment; mindful transitioning to the next part of the day.

Table 4: Novel practices across the 8 MBSP sessions (2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Core Practice</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Raisin exercise/mindful eating</td>
<td>Eating one raisin as if “for the first time;” eating with all 5 senses.</td>
<td>Poignant practice in beginner’s mind; offers a microcosm by which mindfulness can be applied into daily life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Strengths-spotting</td>
<td>In pairs or triads, participants share recent positive experiences and practice steps involving the spotting of strengths.</td>
<td>Offers a shift in how we perceive stories and how we typically approach conversations; combats strength blindness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Statue meditation</td>
<td>Participants engage in a challenge involving holding up their arms and facing the mental &amp; physical obstacles and discomforts that ensue.</td>
<td>Facing meditation obstacles and reframing difficulties and stressors that arise as “obstacles” that can be targeted with any of the 24 character strengths and mindful breathing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mindful walking/movement</td>
<td>Practicing standing and walking meditation, and spotting strengths that arise and that are used during walking.</td>
<td>Strengthening mindfulness in daily life; bringing strengths to a task often taken for granted; deepening the experience of mindfulness thru strengths.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Loving-kindness meditation (targeting strengths)</td>
<td>Practice of traditional meditation focused on cultivating warmth and compassion; followed by an open meditation on a strength of the participants’ choosing.</td>
<td>Experiencing the potential to target any of the 24 strengths; distinction of 2 different types of meditation in doing so.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Character strengths 360</td>
<td>Review of feedback of a</td>
<td>Offers numerous mindfulness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2-5 minute survey in which participants receive feedback from several people on his or her character strengths.

opportunities involving strengths awareness, blindness, potential opportunities, appreciation, and handling feedback; implications for positive relationships.

| 7 | Best possible self and defining moments exercise | Structured exercises involving a choice of envisioning a future best self or reflecting on a defining moment. | Mindful reflection or mindful envisioning with strengths; linking goals, identity, and strengths. |
| 8 | Golden nuggets | Sharing key insights and long-term practices. | Linking current experiences with next steps; use of positive cueing. |

Table 5: A Sampling of 10 Integration Activities in MBSP (2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Practice</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Type of Integration</th>
<th>Research Base or Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signature strengths use</td>
<td>Bring attention to the use of one of your highest strengths in a new way each day.</td>
<td>Mindful strengths use</td>
<td>Gander et al. (2012); Seligman et al. (2005).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengths-spotting</td>
<td>Spot strengths in another person’s sharing; spot strengths in your daily routines; spot strengths in the media (e.g., movies, books).</td>
<td>Mindful strengths use</td>
<td>Linley (2008); Niemiec (2013); Niemiec &amp; Wedding (2014).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengths appreciation (also called the “Speak Up!” exercise)</td>
<td>Share the value and impact that someone else’s strengths expression had upon you.</td>
<td>Mindful strengths use</td>
<td>Adler &amp; Fagley (2005); Algoe, Gable, &amp; Maisel (2010); Bao &amp; Lyubomirsky (2013).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facing meditation obstacles</td>
<td>Name one barrier to your meditation practice (e.g., mind wandering; noises; scheduling, discomfort), and describe how each of your top strengths could help you face or overcome it.</td>
<td>Strong mindfulness</td>
<td>Brahm (2006); Kornfield (1993); Lomas et al. (2014); Niemiec (2014); Niemiec, Rashid, &amp; Spinella (2012).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bring strengths to mindful living</td>
<td>Identify one area of routine that you could bring mindfulness to (e.g., driving, eating, listening, walking). Notice the strengths that are already present in the experience. How might the experience be invigorated with additional strengths?</td>
<td>Strong mindfulness</td>
<td>Nhat Hanh (1979); Nhat Hanh (1993); Niemiec (2013).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Body mindfulness meditation</td>
<td>Pure present moment mindfulness while using strengths to explore, maintain attention, and be gentle to oneself.</td>
<td>Strong mindfulness</td>
<td>Call, Miron, &amp; Orcutt (2013); Kabat-Zinn (1990); Kabat-Zinn (2005); Mirams et al. (2012); Ussher et al. (2012).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Find balance by attending to strengths overuse and underuse</td>
<td>Examine life situations for strengths overuse and underuse and consider how other strengths can bring balance.</td>
<td>Mindful strengths use</td>
<td>Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, &amp; Minhas (2011); Grant &amp; Schwartz (2011); Niemiec (2014).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Targeting specific strengths</td>
<td>Use meditation to explore and boost any of the 24 strengths.</td>
<td>Mindful strengths use</td>
<td>Amaro (2010); Brach (2003); Fredrickson et al. (2008); Salzberg (1995).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character strengths breathing space</td>
<td>Mindfulness practice involving the use of curiosity, self-regulation, and perspective.</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Bishop et al. (2004); Niemiec (2014); Segal, Williams, &amp; Teasdale (2013).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>