

Addressing Burnout Among University Faculty with Mindfulness Practices and Activities: Preliminary Study

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Abstract

Workplace burnout, a growing concern in academic contexts, negatively affects student outcomes, teacher satisfaction, and teaching quality, often leading to disengagement and attrition. Recent research highlights mindfulness practices as an effective tool to mitigate burnout. This preliminary study involved eight full-time university faculty members participating in a one-month mindfulness program addressing burnout-related experiences using library-provided mindfulness activities. Participants completed pre- and post-program surveys assessing six aspects of burnout: exhaustion, cynicism, detachment, ineffectiveness, lack of accomplishment, and stress/anxiety. Data was analyzed using the Wilcoxon sign-rank test, revealing statistically significant differences between pre- and post- program survey scores in feelings of lack of accomplishment. While improvements in post- program survey scores were noted in all burnout aspects, statistical significance could not be determined. The study's findings suggest mindfulness practices can positively impact faculty's experience of aspects of burnout, and support the need for a larger-scale study to further validate them.

Keywords: Burnout; faculty; higher education; mindfulness; mindfulness practices; university.

1. Introduction

The need to address burnout has emerged as a persistent topic in the scholarly literature as a response to the many reports of increased burnout among higher educators. Burnout is a serious global problem that affects both the mental and physical health of employees and the effectiveness of organizations (Constantino et al., 2013). Maslach and Leiter (2017, p. 37) define burnout as “an overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and detachment from the job, and a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment”. Although burnout in the workplace

has received considerable attention over the years (e.g. Waddell et. al., 2023), only recently has burnout research focused on academic burnout (e.g., Becker, et al., 2020; Hagerman et. al, 2023). Educational professions are associated with providing effective academic support to learners, thus becoming emotionally demanding and overwhelming for teachers and lecturers. Studies have shown that academic burnout syndrome negatively impacts student outcomes and teaching quality, and can lead to dissatisfaction, disengagement, and intentional teacher attrition (Huberman and Vandenberghe, 2006). Academic burnout also negatively impacts student-teacher interpersonal relationships (Yoon, 2002) and leads to a decline in academic motivation and self-efficacy. In these cases, burnout is viewed as a consequence of increased demands and stress in an academic environment. It is also regarded as a result of individual personality characteristics and environmental factors (Kourea et al., 2023). Overall, studies have found the leading role of the environment over the individual as a leading factor in the occurrence of this phenomenon.

Mindfulness, viewed as awareness and non-judgmental acceptance of experiences in each moment, is accepted as an effective tool against professional stress and burnout – excessive thinking, anxiety, tension, fear, anger, and the tendency to avoid, suppress, or over-engage with thoughts and feelings that lead to distress (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 2021; Ergas & Hadar, 2019). A growing body of scholarly literature suggests mindfulness practices and activities as a successful approach in addressing burnout (Luken & Sammons, 2016; Janssen et al., 2018; Marie & Cook-Cottone, 2022; Waddell et al., 2023). Mindfulness practices have been found to be associated with higher levels of life satisfaction and vitality, self-esteem, autonomy, personal competence, and positive affect (Brown & Ryan, 2003), better personality (Giluk, 2009), empathy (Dekeyser et al., 2008), as well as with reducing job stress and burnout (Luken & Sammons, 2016; Goodman et al., 2019). This in turn raises the question of how and to what extent mindfulness practices and techniques, which are proven effective in dealing with life challenges, can be applied in academia with the aim of preventing and reducing the experience of burnout among higher educators. There is no consistency in the implementation of programs related to mindfulness practices across the United States, Canada, or among different countries in Europe. Some programs aimed at increasing mindfulness among teachers and academics have shown promising results. Specifically, Maria Napoli introduced a pilot program for mindfulness training among teachers (Napoli, 2004). She trained them in specific techniques such as: conscious breathing; body scanning; awareness of movements; focus on the senses; feedback. As a result of the program, participants reported significant improvements in their teaching approaches and personal lives. Educators declared that they use the acquired mindfulness techniques to focus students on key ideas; to manage conflicts in the classroom and reduce test anxiety; and apply mindfulness techniques in their personal lives, which helps them maintain balance and reduce stress. In other words, the program can be considered as a prevention of burnout.

A systematic review by Emerson et al. (2017) presented narrative synthesis of 12 quantitative and qualitative studies on the topic of mindfulness among teachers in England, the USA and Canada. Some studies used mindfulness-based interventions to reduce stress or burnout and showed a positive effect on teachers' emotional regulation and their perceived effectiveness, while reducing professional stress. The review discussed possible implications for educational practices and future research, emphasizing the importance of stress reduction approaches and their potential role in improving educators' well-being and the quality of education in general.

A comprehensive in-depth review by Ergas & Hadar (2019) of 447 articles, published 2002 - 2017, on the topic of mindfulness in education outlined that while mindfulness in education was a significant and important topic, it was still in its early stages of development. The review confirmed the importance of mindfulness practices among teachers for enhancing social-emotional competencies, physical and mental well-being, and enhanced cognitive functioning. It also provided new direction on the topic by highlighting the potential of mindfulness as a transformative factor for education.

A systematic review on mindfulness approaches for addressing burnout in higher education settings by Baker and Karadjova-Kozhuharova (2024) was focusing on research articles (2018-2024) in relation to educators. This review confirmed mindfulness practices and activities for addressing burnout as follows: meditation, mindful eating & dieting, breathing techniques, gratitude practices & reflection, and relaxation through mindful movement & yoga. Almost all studies outlined positive impact from addressing burnout with mindfulness practices and activities. The results of the review also revealed that more research is needed to reinforce the evidence for positive effects of mindfulness approaches in addressing burnout in higher education settings in relation to educators.

Overall, research increasingly emphasizes the need to develop and implement more comprehensive training programs for the prevention and management of academic burnout, however, the creation of comprehensive programs addressing all aspects of burnout by assuring flexibility through the availability of a variety of mindfulness practices and activities is necessary to be effective in a long run. This preliminary study explores the effectiveness of such a program provided by the Brain Booth Initiative at the University Libraries.

2. Hypothesis

Participants will report positive improvements in their experience of aspects of burnout as a result of engagement with self-guided mindfulness practices and activities.

2.1. Null Hypothesis

For the purpose of data analysis, the null hypothesis states that participants will report no change in their experience of aspects of burnout as a result of engaging with mindfulness practices and activities.

3. Methodology

The methodology included a quantitative approach using pre- and post-program Qualtrics surveys, administered to evaluate the effects of a 1-month experiential program, and based on engagement with mindfulness practices and activities offered through the Brain Booth Initiative.. The Brain Booth, located at the University Libraries, is an experiential space to learn about the mind-body connection, reduce stress, and optimize academic performance. The second part of the study will include a focus group with participants to further explore the results of the program. This paper reports on the findings of the first part of the sequential mixed-methods study.

Participants in the study were full-time faculty at Georgia Southern University. Participants were invited to participate in a 1-month program during which they were invited to visit the Brain Booth two times per week at times convenient for them and engage with Brain Booth activities for approximately 15 minutes per visit. Additionally, they were invited to engage for approximately 15 minutes, during their personal time and at a location of their choice outside of the workplace, with a preferred activity or one described in the Brain Booth Tip of the Week.

The recruitment email described the study's purpose, listed potential benefits of participation, and described the time commitment and expectations for participation in the study. The email included a link to a pre-program survey. To participate, recipients clicked the link, reviewed and digitally signed an informed consent, and completed a six-question survey in which they rated their level of experience of six aspects of burnout on a 1-5 Likert scale with 1 representing "None" and 5 "Extreme". The six aspects included exhaustion, cynicism, detachment, sense of ineffectiveness, sense of lack of accomplishment, and stress/anxiety. These aspects are derived from components included in Maslach and Leiter's (2017, p. 37) description of burnout. The researchers then reached out to respondents (n=8) to schedule a 1-hour orientation session at the Brain Booth.

One of the researchers was present at the Brain Booth during each orientation to introduce participants to the space, demonstrate the mindfulness activities available to choose from, and provide an overview of the benefits of engaging in brief, low-impact mindfulness practices, as outlined in the literature. Following their orientation, participants self-managed their engagement with mindfulness activities and practices at the Brain Booth, or a location of their choice outside of it.

After the 1-month study period, participants completed a post-program survey which asked them to assess their experience of aspects of burnout using the same six Likert-scale questions used in the pre-program survey.

A participant focus group interview will be conducted in the near future as a second part of this study. The qualitative data collected during the focus group will provide more information about which activities participants preferred, how closely they were able to follow the study's requirements, and how each participant's engagement with mindfulness practices and activities affected their experiences of different aspects of burnout.

3.1. Data Collection and Analysis

The pre- and post-program surveys were built in Qualtrics and included six Likert-scale questions designed to measure the level of each participants' experience of aspects of burnout. The scale ranged *1. None, 2. Minor, 3. Moderate, 4. Major, and 5. Extreme*. Each participant was emailed the questionnaire to respond to both before and after completing the 1-month program.

Survey responses were analyzed in SPSS using a Wilcoxon sign-rank test. This test was used because the data was not normally distributed, as shown by Shapiro-Wilk test results. The null hypothesis assumed no improvement between pre- and post-program survey responses. Participant responses were tested at a 0.05 confidence level to determine if reported improvements in each aspect of burnout were statistically significant. Improvements were evidenced by negative mean differences between pre- and post-program survey responses.

4. Results

The results of the study indicated a positive effect of engagement with mindfulness practices and activities on faculty members' experiences with six aspects of burnout. Table 1 collects results from the Wilcoxon sign-rank test including mean values, standard deviation, test statistic (w), average response differential, and significance (p) for participant responses to the pre- and post-program surveys. Mean ratings of post-program survey responses showed overall improvement in all six aspects of burnout. However, results of the Wilcoxon sign-rank test indicated statistically significant improvements in only one aspect: lack of accomplishment. While the average differential between pre- and post-program survey ratings in exhaustion, cynicism, detachment, ineffectiveness, and stress/anxiety also showed improvement over pre-program survey ratings, the results of the Wilcoxon sign-rank test did not indicate those changes as statistically significant.

Exhaustion received the highest pre-program survey rating in severity of experience across the sample. Lack of accomplishment at work received the lowest pre-program survey rating, but the

results of the Wilcoxon sign-rank test found the changes between pre- and post- program survey responses to be statistically significant. The average differential between pre- and post-program survey ratings indicated that sense of detachment and stress/anxiety were the most-improved aspect of burnout experienced by faculty, but the results of the Wilcoxon sign-rank test did not find those changes to be statistically significant.

Table 1. Wilcoxon Sign-Rank Test Results.

Aspect	Pre-Test Mean	Pre-Test S.D.	Post-Test Mean	Post-Test S.D.	W	Avg. Diff.	p
Exhaustion	3.8	0.89	2.9	0.83	2.5	-0.9	0.084
Cynicism	3.4	0.92	2.6	0.52	1.5	-0.8	0.098
Detachment	2.9	0.83	1.9	0.64	3.0	-1.00	0.054
Ineffectiveness	2.5	0.53	1.9	0.35	0.0	-0.6	0.059
Lack of Accomplishment	2.4	0.5	1.6	0.5	0.0	-0.8	0.034
Stress/Anxiety	3.6	0.9	2.6	0.7	4.0	-1.00	0.086

5. Discussion

The study’s findings show that brief, low-impact mindfulness practices and activities such as those available at the University Libraries Brain Booth alleviate faculty members’ experience of workplace burnout. The participants in this study experienced benefits such as increased energy and focus, reduced ruminative thinking and stress, enhanced patience and satisfaction with work, and improved overall well-being. These findings show promising outcomes with the designed approach at academic settings and are corresponding to similar results in other fields, such as nursing (Hagerman et al. 2023; Montanari et al., 2019). The benefits of this study to society include the contribution of valuable data in support of a growing body of research focused on the benefits of mindfulness practices in the workplace.

5.1. Limitations

Since this is a preliminary study to help with finalizing the research design for a full study, a small sample size (n=8) was accepted. However, the small sample size limits the reliability of detecting statistical significance in participant responses. The chance that outliers (e.g. a participant’s memory of prior responses, significant changes in workplace or life circumstances, etc.) influenced how pre- and post-program survey responses were reported is also increased due to the small sample size. A larger sample size would have afforded the use of a parametric test of greater statistical power to achieve more reliable results.

6. Conclusion

Burnout has been identified and remains a significant obstacle to productivity in the workplace. This preliminary study addresses the continuing need for mindfulness training programs to address burnout in academic settings through the lens of a library service: the Brain Booth. The findings indicate that a full study with a larger sample size is needed to substantiate the positive results. The next step for the researchers will be to conduct the second part of this preliminary sequential study, namely, the focus group with participants to be able to explain further the results, and be able to adjust the research design as needed to conduct a full study on the topic with a much higher number of participants. The overall goal of this multi-step research project is to design, develop and implement a flexible program that will successfully address burnout with mindfulness practices and activities, and will be replicable in any higher education setting.

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