

A Review: Mindfulness for Young Black Women Series



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Date: October 18, 2021

This review is providing an overview of the Mindfulness for Young Black Women (MFYBW) five-week series that was offered in partnership with Elizabeth Fry Toronto, Planned Parenthood Toronto, and the Centre for Mindfulness Studies during the month of June 2021. This project was a closed group for women between the ages 18-29.

To begin, I will outline some brief insights into mindfulness as a practice, as it is important context for the processes involved in creating and facilitating the curriculum for MFYBW and to unpack this project's impact.

What is mindfulness practice?

A very simplified definition of mindfulness practice is to practice one's ability to be present and aware in their life. To be aware of your thought patterns, the language you use, how your emotion can show up in your body, how you manage situations and how you consciously decide to move forward (or not) in any given situation. Essentially, the practice of mindfulness is choosing not to rely on the automatic; but instead, choosing to be present for your life. Mindfulness is not a way to escape feelings or emotions. It is not a way to avoid these feelings or bury them. Mindfulness is actually a way to get better at feeling.

When should mindfulness be practiced?

Ideally, mindfulness should be practiced every second and every minute of the day. But this level of commitment comes with practice. For the beginner, starting with small but meaningful activities are advised. For example, you can decide to be mindful when eating your breakfast instead of automatically chewing and swallowing like many of us do as we hurry to start our day. You can also start with a mindful walk. This is simply being present during your walk, and not just placing one foot in front of the other until you arrive at your destination. Noticing your surroundings. Noticing nature or buildings. Even noticing the sensations that are coming up in your body as you walk. Mindfulness is being present and aware while you live your life.

Where should mindfulness be practiced?

The beauty of mindfulness is that it can be practiced anywhere while doing anything. It's you, the practitioner, who decide where and how you want to work with the discipline. You have the option of carving out time in your day to practice mindfulness techniques or you can just incorporate mindfulness in things that you would normally be doing throughout your day. You can do it in your home, at work, at the grocery stores, and even in the bathroom while you take care of yourself. Ideally, and with practice, mindfulness should become a way of life. Being present for your life and being aware of your emotions and how you are interacting with the world will happen (and is happening) whether you are aware of it or not. Of course, this can be difficult for many of our clients to do on their own because of mental health barriers. But with the right support, even individuals with mental health barriers can practice mindfulness. Mindfulness can help to put you in the driver's seat of your life whenever and wherever you want.

How is mindfulness practiced?

The practice uses many tools to help us cultivate the skills needed to become more present in our lives. The mindful practitioner incorporates formal practices like awareness of breathing, body scanning, mindful eating, and mindful meditation. We also use informal practices such as paying attention to our senses when we are doing things like walking, brushing our teeth, getting dressed, communicating, driving, etc. Mindfulness practices also pay attention to our attitudes and our emotions, as well as how we respond to people and situations in our lives. While these examples are not the only ways in which mindfulness can be practiced, these are some of the core, readily available features of the practice.

Why practice mindfulness?

We practice mindfulness so that we can be in better control of ourselves. Strong emotions can catch us off-guard at times, and can result in responding in a way we usually would without a second thought. Many times we regret our response while being in this state. However, mindfulness enables us to choose what we bring into action and what habits and behaviours we can let go. Mindfulness helps us to become masters of our mind, emotions, and bodies instead of it being them being in control of us. How many of us are guilty of going to the bathroom at the end of the night while getting ready for bed and automatically washing our faces and brushing our teeth without a second thought? We've done this action so many times that muscle memory takes over and allows our minds to rest. And how many other activities do we perform throughout the day this way, being not really present because our body knows what to do and does it for us? We practice mindfulness and its different facets so that we snap out of living in the automatic and live in the present, if this is something you desire.

MFYBW Context:

In 2019, the Center for Mindfulness Studies offered a three-year mindfulness facilitator training opportunity to non-profit agencies and mental health workers in Toronto and the GTA. Approximately twenty agencies participated, and four staff members from Elizabeth Fry Toronto enrolled, one of which was able to complete the entire program.

This program was designed to support youths through the framework of mindfulness. According to Kim Ronaline B. Salvador, the Community Program Coordinator, when asked why the Centre offered this program, this "intensive training was designed to help support those who face economic and social barriers by providing affordable and effective mindfulness-based mental health services through community program." The training was thorough, and broken up into two segments: Mindfulness-Base Wellbeing which gave trainees the opportunity to become familiar with mindfulness as practitioners, and Mindfulness Base Intervention where trainees were taught how to design and facilitate mindfulness programs.

Mindfulness for Young Black Women Series:

Among the many social networks that were establish, I had connected with Lorena Murialdo from Planned Parenthood Toronto. She had expressed an interest in facilitating a mindfulness group for young Black women, however this idea was not realized until 2021.

The COVID-19 pandemic hit in December 2019, and by March 2020 most of the world was under stay-home orders and lockdown. In the midst of this pandemic, George Floyd was murdered at the hand

police officer Derek Chauvin on May 25, 2020 in Minneapolis, USA, which ignited yet another wave Black Lives Matter protests across the USA, Canada and eventually many parts of the world.

While George Floyd's murder took place in the USA, Canada and the world at large were also negatively impacted. Both our staff and clients here at Elizabeth Fry Toronto were affected in way or another, along with other non-profits across the province. In addition to anxieties and frustrations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the isolation caused by lockdowns, and feelings of fear and panic because of the unknown, our mental health has waned as a society. However, there was an added layer of frustration and trauma for members of the Black community, especially when it came to the impact of Black Lives Matter protests and its many implications. This added layer of trauma highlighted the need for mental health support specifically for members of the Black community. It also highlighted the importance of providing resources to equip member of the Black community with tools that will help to unpack, process, and manage their relationship with themselves, their struggles, and Race-Based Trauma. This was when Lorena and I revisited the idea to facilitate a mindfulness group for young Black women.

Methodology & Design:

The preparation process was grueling, and I partnered with Sarah Wade from our Exit Doors Here program to meet regularly with Lorena Murialdo from Planned Parenthood Toronto starting in May 2021. We started by simply brainstorming on what our objectives and deliverables would be, including revisiting standardized curriculum and workbooks to see how we could tailor the material for a young Black women demographic. We realized that additional research was needed so that the series would be authentic in addressing barriers faced by members in the Black community, to ensure the series would not feel like a "cookie-cutter" approach that slapped the label "Black women" on it while failing miserably to provide cultural and racially relevant and meaningful support for Black women. This additional research we conducted to provide the race-based trauma framework and the media resources we compiled were successful in mitigating most of our concerns.

MFYBW series was the result of a multi-agency collaborative effort, and we leaned on the Centre for Mindfulness Studies' staff and mentor for support, including the Community Program Coordinator, Kim and mentor and instructor, Rose Mina Munjee. We met with Rose Mina in particular because of her focus on race and intersectionality in hopes that she would provide feedback on the curriculum and approach. We also received directives on focus areas and possible triggering 'hot spots' on which she felt we should be mindful.

Centre for Mindfulness Studies committed to providing the program's flyers, and all three agencies met multiple times to make sure we landed on the correct imagery. We wanted it to be inclusive while moving away from stereotypical notions of what Black women and Black femininity looked like. Planned Parenthood Toronto provided the registration forms, and Elizabeth Fry Toronto managed the registration process and data collection.

We advertised the series within our agencies and other professional networks for two weeks, and during the first week saw low numbers of enrollment. However, both agencies decided to include a ten-dollar incentive for each week a person attended, which meant each participant would receive twenty dollars for each group they attended. We saw an overwhelming response after that.

Series Facilitation:

The group ran on every Tuesday in the month of June between 3pm -5pm. Lorna and I continued to meet weekly to refine or adjust our facilitation based on what we learned during previous session, including doing a mock run through of the session before we facilitated. Fourteen women completed registration forms, and an average of nine women attended most of the sessions.

The series covered a range of topics, such as: defining Mindfulness, race-based trauma and why mindfulness for young Black women, mindfulness and stress, mindful behaviours, mindful communication through difficult conversations, and mindful self-care. We used the Center for Mindfulness' standardized workbooks to help the women unpack the different emotions, behaviors, and mindful, and mindset. We had to tailor some activities to support the intersections of Black womanhood, Black motherhood, gender, anti-Black racism, and economic currency. We also ended up covering the topic "tensions between mindfulness and anti-Black racism activism," as requested by one of the participants.

Week one: session introduced mindfulness practice, what it is and what it is not. We created the community code and guidelines, shared our goals and objectives for this series, and gave a guideline for the next four weeks.

Week two: session focused on mindfulness and stress, looking into how mindfulness can be a helpful tool in stress management. We also unpacked the different kinds of stress and techniques that can be used while in stressful situations to maintain control of mind and body.

Week three: session continued the theme of mindfulness and stress, by looking into the ways in which we can change our relationship with stress. We did this by lifting the veil of stress and its relationship between emotion and reactions. This revealed the pattern of responding automatically to stressful situation instead of being present and aware while evaluating the situation and responding according. The women found these exercises useful and enlightening.

Week four: session focused on finding self-compassion. It is common to end a series with self-compassion, however Lorena and I felt that a self-compassion facilitation was necessary based on the responses from the women in previous weeks. This session focused on learning how to recognize when you are going through a hard time, what self-kindness, connectedness and self-compassion looks like. This was a difficult session, and a few clients felt triggered during the "loving Kindness" meditation because it was difficult to relate.

Week Five: the final session focused on connecting mindfully (or as I like to call it, mindful communication), including practicing mindful listening. We dove deep into mindful communication and used the context of the "angry black woman" label to frame how communication can work to silence or empower. We placed an emphasis on exercises that help us development the ability to assess situations and how it affects our emotions so that we can respond in an effective and clear way. We also paid attention to mindfulness speech with regards to how we spoke to ourselves.

MFYBW Benefits:

Women expressed the need for a sense of community during this time. The isolation caused by COVID-19 as well as the race-based communal trauma created a need for a space where they could freely speak about their mental health and the impact of the pandemic and anti-Black racist encounters. Being able to do so without policing or monitoring their language around racial tensions and its implications on their lives was significant. A few of the women shared how different it felt being a space that was created for Black women compared to being in multi-racial groups in general, including when it came to these kinds of discussions.

The women also expressed their appreciation for receiving simple mindfulness tools that can be applied in their daily lives. They shared that they were now able to see how their automatic responses helped to contribute to a breakdown of relationships in their formal and informal lives. Some women asked if there was a series on just mindful communication, and I saw that there was an expressed need to have this program be continued.

Another benefit of this project is that new partnerships were made, as Elizabeth Fry Toronto, Planned Parenthood Toronto and the Centre for Mindfulness Studies collaborated successfully and benefited greatly from this project. In order to complete the three-year training course offered by the Centre for Mindfulness Studies, trainees must use what has been learned to design and facilitate a curriculum for youths. This gave Elizabeth Fry Toronto and Planned Parenthood Toronto's trainees the opportunity to complete the needed requirements to become certified Mindfulness Facilitators. Our Exit Doors Here program also registered each woman who participated in this project as our community clients, and received a few referrals for our general counselling programs, as a result of this series.

This project also benefited the Centre for Mindfulness Studies, as one of the reasons for training new mindfulness facilitators was to ensure that youth who experienced marginalization had access to more diverse mental health support. With more front-line and mental health workers becoming certified mindfulness facilitators, the Center becomes closer to achieving this goal. MFYBW was an evidenced-based project, and the data collected from facilitations will be used to help provide insights on whether or not the program works. The data will shine a light on areas that need adjustment, and allow the Centre to meet their service deliverables dictated by funders. Also, the fact that this project was the only one that facilitated a mindfulness program for and to a race and gender specific demographic, means the data collected from facilitators and participants will have a unique perspective and feedback.

Project Drawbacks:

With one facilitator withdrawing from the project days before was schedule to start, the distribution of the work load was challenging to be done by only two people. We frequently had to design our weekly facilitation based on what occurred the week prior, revamp the previous script and approaches based on the group dynamic, and at times move away completely from what we had previously constructed. In short, the work load was overwhelming.

We also offered a total of \$20.00 gift card for each session attended for only those women who attended for the entire session, not just for a few minutes. There were tensions around what motivated a few of the women who had their camera's off during sessions and who rarely responded when directly

asked a question. Was mindfulness important for them? Were they getting the access to any of the benefits mindfulness had to offer?

While most of the women who attended weekly did participated and become engaged in the process, there were a lot who had their cameras and audio off. This meant it was difficult for the facilitators to know if participants were actually present. This impacted the engagement throughout the session because mindfulness is a “doing” practice in opposed to being a “being” practice – just being in the sessions does not guarantee that mindfulness is being practiced. Otherwise, the rest of the women participating learned a lot in the process and the overall series was a success.

Feedback and Findings:

Since we were the only facilitators who facilitated sessions for young Black women, our findings were unique and some feedback spoke directly to racial tensions. The Centre for Mindfulness Studies conducted a pre-group and post-group evaluation. We asked all registered participants to complete a mindfulness evaluation survey at the beginning and end of the series and the Centre also provided a twenty-dollar gift cards to each woman who completed both surveys. Some of the feedback from the Centre’s evaluations were shared Elizabeth Fry Toronto and Planned Parenthood Toronto facilitators. Fourteen women submitted completed registration forms, an average of nine women attended sessions frequently, and ten women completed the Centre’s evaluation forms.

The program was rated on a scale of 1-10 (1: ‘strongly disagree’ to 10: ‘strongly agree’). Some of the findings are as follows:

Overall, how would you rate this program?

Three gave a rating of 8, and one rated our program a 6. Four of the women who gave a rate of 10 shared that they gave that rating because the program was clear, they learned a lot of tools they will incorporate in their daily lives, and one shared it they saw a value in sharing this program with their friends and family. One of the woman who gave a low rating felt the program needed more room for talking.

How helpful has this program been for you?

Five women gave a rating of 10 when asked how helpful this series was, two women gave a rating of 9 and 8, while only one gave rate of 7. Six women elaborated in this section, in including one who said it was helpful that they were able to express themselves. Three women shared that the program was helpful because it was “eye opening” and “informative”, while another felt this series could have been offered for Black mothers and Black women with post-secondary education.

What is the most valuable thing you learned from this program?

There was no scale attached to this question, and four women felt like mindful communication was the most important take away. This came in the form of compassionate self-talks, knowing how to stand up for themselves in uncomfortable race-based interactions and mindful connecting and sustaining relationships. One women shared that it was helpful that I brought my own lived experiences in as examples mindfulness in practice, and another felt it was helpful to know she was not alone in the race-based struggles she was experiencing.

I am better able to deal with stress.

Three women gave a rating of 9 with regards to their ability to manage/deal with stress, two women rated an 8, one woman each gave a rating of 5, 6 and 7. Finally, two gave a rating of 4 on the scale of being able to manage or handle their stress.

I am more able to accept myself.

Four women felt confident in their ability to accept themselves and gave a rating of 4, while two women gave a rating of 9. Two gave a rating of 7, and two women were not as confident in their ability to accept themselves, by giving a rating of 4 and 5, respectfully.

I am more able to take care of myself better.

Three women strongly believed they could better practice self-care and gave a rating of 10, and two women followed suit with a grade of 9. Two other women felt they landed on an 8 and two fell on the range of 6, while only one rated low at 4.

The above responses and ratings are some of the noteworthy feedback that the Centre shared with us, that can shine light on the impact the series had on some of these women. In general, the women gave positive and valuable feedbacks, and a few of the women felt a continuation of this program was necessary. A few of the women of the women felt as though more meditation practices were needed or even wanted the sessions to be longer. As a facilitator you will always find things you would have done differently after the fact, but Lorena and I are both satisfied with the project's outcome.

Our decision to facilitate a series for young Black women is significant, especially because of the social climate as it relates to anti-Black racism and discrimination, in the wake of the last wave of Black Lives Matter protests. What this series meant for people who were grappling with race-based communal trauma, including their intense need for a way to unpack and manage this dynamic and its nuances, should not be underappreciated. We set out to provide support to young Black women using mindfulness as a possible healing and coping modality, and we were successful. I also feel as though mindfulness is best practiced in-person, however we were still able to facilitate and move beyond the many limitations of virtual sessions to provide the needed support for young Black women in the end.

One of the concerns we had was managed well because of the structure of the GROW mindfulness in and of itself. We wanted to make sure this series would address issues or barriers experienced by women in the Black community, and we worked to ensure we were designing a program for the targeted population. While this effort was not without merit, I found that inquiries that are intrinsically embedded in the mindfulness standardized workbooks were able to authenticate the exercises by using the women's lived experiences.

Inquiries occurred when we worked through their home mindful practices, or through simulations where we used their lived experience to make meaning of the mindful practices and exercises. When our women were able plug their lived experiences into mindfulness practices, the information these inquiries revealed served to make them more relevant and authentic. The research and theory worked predominately to provide a framework, and the inquiries worked to make the workbook exercises racially and cultural relevant.

Lastly, one of our women asked us to explain the tension between mindfulness and activism. I explained that mindfulness is not asking us to replicate Mahatma Gandhi's approach, nor does it require

you to turn the other cheek. Mindfulness is simply asking us to become better at feeling and being able to identify those feelings so that we can act consciously. I explained that practicing mindfulness with activism will make activism even more powerful, and race related conversation and activism is often difficult and hurtful. A lot of times our emotions in these settings can become overwhelming.

Some ways this feeling of overwhelming emotion can manifest itself in getting tongue-tied and flustered when communicating, or becoming angered and frustrated by the injustice you are trying to combat. Mindfulness works well with activism because it allows us to be able to notice the sensations/emotions in our body in advance, have the ability to control our emotions so that we do not “flip the lid”, and be able to move forward with control and confidence in our actions. I explained there is no tension between mindfulness and activism, and in fact, mindfulness activism has the potential to be more powerful and more effective than not.

Next Steps:

I will be facilitating an eight-week mindfulness series for women through Elizabeth Fry Toronto, beginning on November 2nd 2021. The closed group will be offered every Tuesday between 3pm – 5pm until December 20th 2021, and will incorporate more meditation practices and inquiries.