

Mindfulness and Employability: A Course on the Control of Stress during the Search for Work

O. Lasaga

Abstract—Defining professional objectives and the search for work are some of the greatest stress factors for final year university students and recent graduates. To manage correctly the stress brought about by the uncertainty, confusion and frustration this process often generates, a course to control stress based on mindfulness has been designed and taught. This course provides tools based on relaxation, mindfulness and meditation that enable students to address personal and professional challenges in the transition to the job market, eliminating or easing the anxiety involved. The course is extremely practical and experiential, combining theory classes and practical classes of relaxation, meditation and mindfulness, group dynamics, reflection, application protocols and session integration. The evaluation of the courses highlighted on the one hand the high degree of satisfaction and, on the other, the usefulness for the students in becoming aware of stressful situations and how these affect them and learning new coping techniques that enable them to reach their goals more easily and with greater satisfaction and well-being.

Keywords—Employability, meditation, mindfulness, relaxation techniques, stress.

I. INTRODUCTION

STRESS is an inherent component of today's life such that we are all, to a greater or lesser degree, exposed to it. Although the first thing to spring to mind, when asked to think of a stressful situation, is something usually negative (illness, looking for work, work-related problems, worries, difficult relationships...), positive situations or events such as moving house, a job promotion, or a new relationship, can also cause stress. Experiencing stress as something positive or negative depends the individual's assessment of the demands of the situation and of their own capacity to deal with such demands.

A review of the literature reveals that there is no single concept of stress. However, three theoretical perspectives can be found:

1. Authors who consider stress as a stimulus. [1]
2. Authors who focus on the response produced by the organism. [2]
3. Authors who focus on the interactive or transactional aspect, taking into account both the stressor and the individual's reaction. [3] This latter approach is the one adopted in the project presented here in which participants learn to control stress through mindfulness.

This project takes as its basis the definition provided by Lazarus and Folkman [4]:

“Stress occurs when an individual believes that what is

happening to him/her exceeds the resources he/she has and places his/her personal well-being at risk.”

From this perspective, the demands of the situation, the cognitive assessments, the effort required to cope with the situation and the emotional responses are interrelated and reciprocally influence each other. In other words, in response to an external stressful stimulus, the individual makes a cognitive assessment of the possible threat this situation represents and of his/her own resources or capacity to respond to such a stimulus. This evaluation determines the form and intensity of the emotional reaction in relation to the situation or stressful event. From this, it can be deduced that there are three responses when faced with a stressful situation: physiological, emotional and behavioural. From this biopsychosocial perspective, it has been scientifically demonstrated that stress can cause illnesses such as disturbances in sleep patterns, muscular tension, migraines, mental illnesses, digestive problems, high blood pressure, back pain, cardiovascular disorders, cancer and overall a fall in immune system response together with problems of mental health and a deterioration in interpersonal relations. This leads us to confirm that in order to avoid chronic stress or at the very least alleviate its effects, we need to work with a therapeutic model that reinforces a correct coping system and fosters a healthy lifestyle. For this, we need to promote a balanced diet, moderate physical exercise and relaxation techniques that help establish correct sleep and rest patterns.

Mindfulness enables us to pay attention to, and to focus awareness on, our body through breathing, on our mind through the observation of our thoughts, and on our surroundings through the senses. It enables us to experience the present moment.

When we apply mindfulness as a therapy for coping with stress, we are introducing a new way of perceiving that allows us to expand our awareness. It involves paying attention, from moment to moment, to what is happening in our lives, whatever it is, without trying to change it but simply observing it. This enables us to develop a greater level of intimacy with ourselves, with our body, with our feelings, emotions and experiences through acceptance rather than confrontation. We no longer fight to eliminate stress and we no longer live trying to flee our own lives but instead learn to recognise and become aware of the fact that stress and other negative situations in our daily lives have a reason and send us a message about our way of being and living. This enables us to increase our adaptive capacity to cope with change.

By changing our attitudes when faced with life's difficulties and recognising that pain and pleasure are passing states, we

O. Lasaga is Physiology Professor and Meditation and Mindfulness Instructor at Universitat Abat Oliba CEU, Barcelona, Spain (phone: +34 932540900; email: olasaga@uao.es).

have an opportunity to live our lives from a place of acceptance of, and coherence with, everything that occurs.

II. PROJECT JUSTIFICATION

The transition from university life to the professional world may result in periods of uncertainty and confusion in which it is important to stay focused on the proposed goals. When it becomes difficult to concentrate on labour insertion, looking for work or defining one's professional career, among others, it is easy to enter into a downward spiral of despair, confusion and even physical and mental stress.

The seriousness of the consequences of stress in terms of work was demonstrated by Brenner [5], who showed that long-term unemployment affected the mortality and morbidity of those who find themselves in such a situation. Similarly, a later study carried out in Sweden with women who had been unemployed for nine months [6] found a decrease in the response of the immune system. It is therefore important to provide university students or anybody in the process of looking for work with the efficient tools to acquire or enhance the personal skills and competences that enable them to cope with these situations and to improve the management of personal and professional challenges encountered in this transitional stage. The course on the control of stress during the search for work, described in the following section, facilitates the discovery of opportunities behind every challenge and the resolution of situations through the deployment of each individual's potential and resources.

III. COURSE DESIGN

A. Course Characteristics

The course consists of 12 class hours divided into two consecutive mornings or afternoons. The maximum number of students is 25 and a classroom with a projector, chairs that can be moved and meditation mats or cushions is required.

The course is funded by the Generalitat of Catalonia and the Ministry of Labour through the Employment Services of Catalonia.

B. Learning Goals

- To acquire the competences and skills in relaxation, meditation and mindfulness techniques.
- To reduce physical and mental stress that the search for work, job interviews, selection tests etc., can cause.
- To have greater mental clarity to focus and define professional objectives.
- To maintain better one's attention, concentration, imagination and creativity, enabling us to cope with the various situations arising from professional goals and the search for employment.
- To become more aware of one's behaviour, and to change and/or improve the vision and management of the process leading to professional success.
- To detect the emotions linked to stressful situations that prevent us from focusing on our goals, with the aim of facilitating correct work insertion.

- In situations of stress, anxiety, despair and mental blockage, muscular tension, etc., to apply techniques of relaxation, mindfulness and meditation in order to overcome them.
- To increase positive feelings, emotions and thoughts of serenity and happiness, living our daily lives and relationships with greater fulfilment and awareness.

C. Programme

1. What stress is and how it affects our lives, especially when we are looking for work or are experiencing conflict in the professional environment. Dynamics and self-assessment of stress.
2. What mindfulness is and how it can help us reduce stress. Dynamics, exercises and evaluation.
3. Relaxation techniques to cope with situations encountered during the search for work that cause stress: job interviews, defining the professional career, work and inter-relational conflicts, etc. Dynamics, exercises and evaluation.
4. Daily meditation as an indispensable tool to stay focused on our professional goals. Dynamics, exercises and evaluation.
5. Active listening and friendly talking for positive and effective communication. Dynamics, exercises and evaluation.

D. Method

An eminently practical and experiential course that combines theory, practical classes in relaxation, meditation and mindfulness, group dynamics, reflections, protocols for applying learnt knowledge and session integration.

E. Evaluation by Students

Students are asked to practice mindfulness, relaxation or meditation (whichever they feel most comfortable with) once a day for a week and, upon completion, to fill out the following form:

Day and date	Time	Thoughts, feelings, sensations and emotions that come up during the session and how you feel after it.
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Fig. 1 Seven days mindfulness practice form

IV. EVALUATION OF PILOT COURSE

The pilot course took place at the University of Barcelona on the 27th and 28th October, 2016 from 08:30 to 14:30, as a professional orientation activity promoted by the Student Support Service within the framework of the funded programme described in part A of the previous section. The pilot course was attended by 13 students, 12 women and 1 male. Of the total number of students, 12 were in the last year

of their degree course and one was a master’s student. Fig. 1 shows the distribution of the students according to subject. As can be seen, most were psychology students.

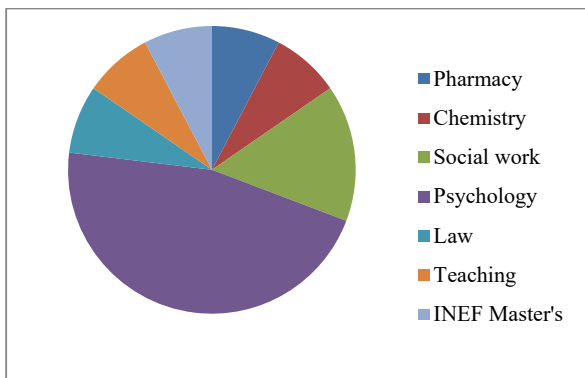


Fig. 2 Distribution of students according to subject

Parts 1 and 2 of the programme were taught on the first day, with the remaining three being taught on the second day. Each programme section combined lectures, practical exercises and discussions in small and large groups. Two teachers taught the course: one taught the relaxation module, the other, the remaining programme content.

At the end of the course, the students were given a questionnaire to assess the guided activity.

A. Quantitative Results

The students were asked to answer on a 10-point Likert scale two questions relating to the activity and one to the teaching staff. The results obtained are shown in Fig. 3.

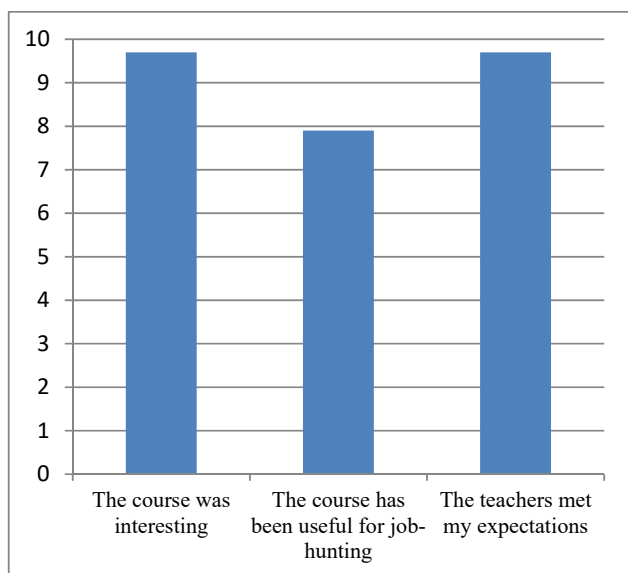


Fig. 3 Quantitative results of the evaluation of the activity

As can be seen, the students rated both the activity and the teachers highly, reaching 9.7. By contrast, the usefulness of the course for job-hunting, although received a rating of 7.9, is

not so high. The explanation for this can be found in an analysis of the comments made by the students in the qualitative section of the assessment form.

B. Qualitative Results

Six of the thirteen evaluation questionnaires highlighted the usefulness of the course in daily life: “It provided me with techniques to ‘survive’ day-to-day”; “It’s been a very practical, useful course and easy to put into practice in our day-to-day lives”; “We have been introduced to a very positive and relaxed way of life. I’m going to practice what I learnt on the course every day, changing the way I think and see the world”; “More than helping me to look for work, it’ll help me in my day-to-day life. I think mindfulness should be compulsory in all degree courses”. The all-embracing nature of the benefits of practicing mindfulness, relaxation and meditation noted by the students in part eclipses its usefulness in managing stress experienced during the process of looking for work, hence the lower valuation of this question in the quantitative section. However, the awareness reflected in the students’ comments will facilitate the incorporation of some of the practices into their daily lives, resulting in an improvement in their wellbeing.

Given the fact that students did not know each other prior to the course and that the activities are highly experiential, another notable result was the good atmosphere that was generated: “I think we have all felt at ease with the space created in the sessions”; “The atmosphere of the group was very enriching and was a very pleasant experience”.

With regards to whether the course was sufficiently long, of the six students to comment on this issue, one believed it could have been shorter, another that it was long enough, while the remaining four were of the opinion that it could have been longer. Indeed, two of these even believed it should be a course in its own right.

V.CONCLUSIONS

Having completed the training course and analysing the results of the assessment questionnaires, the dynamics proposed throughout the course and the data provided by the students in their end-of-course work, the following conclusions were reached:

1. All the students, without exception, were able to identify various sources of stress in their lives. Some of the stressors were related to the search for work and/or the definition of their professional career. However, others were related to exams and oral presentations and to tensions arising in family, partner or classmate relationships.
2. All of them could identify the consequences of stress, which in most cases result in sleep disruption (difficulties in getting to sleep or the feeling of not having rested), bad eating habits (greater consumption of coffee or Coca-Cola, skipping meals, compulsive eating etc.) and relationship difficulties (bad moods, not wanting to go out with friends, irritability etc.).
3. Although only one of the female students regularly

practiced meditation, most students had some knowledge or reference of mindfulness. This helped both their involvement in all activities and the generation of a good working atmosphere.

4. The explanation and practice throughout the course of different techniques, some linked to mindfulness (body scanner and conscious walking), relaxation (25 + 25 Breathing and techniques based on Jacobson's progressive relaxation methods and on Schultz's autogenic method) and meditation allowed each student to determine which of these techniques enabled them to cope better with stressful situations and to rid themselves of the stress accumulated during the day.
5. The daily practice of the techniques over the week following the course and recording what happened to them at the physical, mental and emotional level helped the students integrate what they had learnt and, more importantly, to incorporate into their daily routine of a small space to reconnect with themselves and to become more aware.
6. The experience was extremely positive and has been established as a professional orientation activity provided by the University of Barcelona.

In the future, these results will be expanded by the inclusion of the evaluations of subsequent groups. Moreover, we propose carrying out a survey three and six months after the course to determine whether students are continuing to practice the techniques learnt and their benefits.

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