

Mindful Ambassador Program: An Acceptable and Feasible Universal Intervention for College Students



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Submission: April 09,2021; **Published:** April 22,2021

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Keywords: Mindful ambassador; Stress; Depression; Anxiety; Well-being, College student

Mindful Ambassador Program

The majority of college students report significant distress. For example, a recent survey found that 82% struggled with anxiety, 63% suffered with depression, and 60% had difficulty coping with stress in a healthy way [1]. Although college student distress is caused by multifaceted contextual and socioeconomic variables that require systemic changes; mindfulness interventions stand out as a promising way to reduce distress. Several studies have found significant effects of mindfulness interventions that are similar in magnitude to individual therapy for improving distress, depression, anxiety, and well-being [2]. Considering the pervasiveness of the distress among college students, universal mindfulness interventions (i.e., mindfulness training for all college students) could have sweeping effects on college campuses. With this in mind, the authors developed the Mindful Ambassador Program (MAP) to foster the well-being of college students in a feasible and cost-effective way that can engage large numbers of students.

A unique aspect of MAP is that it specifically targets the developmental needs of a diverse population of college students. Accordingly, MAP is designed to cultivate self-awareness with respect to thoughts, emotions, and values pertinent to young adulthood; improve self-regulation skills to cope with stressors commonly experienced by college students; and promote systemic awareness to foster meaningful civic engagement.

These targets of intervention by the MAP program are currently under investigation.

The present brief report describes the acceptability, feasibility, and effectiveness of MAP for reducing college student distress, which is a critical first step when developing universal interventions.

The workability of MAP was iteratively developed over three years of investigation that followed the principles of action research [3]. Acceptability and feasibility were established along the course of two pilot and three effectiveness studies, engaging a total of over 500 students. Based on student participation rates, the best way to deliver MAP was via a set of brief (i.e., 10 to 15 minute), interactive mindfulness lessons provided by peer facilitators (i.e., Mindful Ambassadors) during scheduled class time. This programming resulted in over 90% participation in MAP, with at least 80% of the diverse student population at our university giving positive ratings of the relevance, practicality, and helpfulness of the lessons [4]. The strategy of delivering the mindfulness lessons in class time brought about an absolute advantage over the other models, such as voluntary participation in virtual MAP lessons, which had less than 15 to 20% participation.

The implementation fidelity procedures of the classroom based MAP provided evidence that the intervention was

feasible to implement with high fidelity by unpaid volunteers who were recruited, trained, and supervised by a research lab in partnership with a student organization [4]. Furthermore, there is preliminary evidence on the long-term effectiveness of the MAP. For instance, the distress levels of students were kept at a stable level during the semester they received MAP and at the five-month follow-up. On the other hand, the control group reported significant increases in distress toward the end of the following semester [4].

In sum, MAP, a universal mindfulness program delivered by peer-volunteers during class time, is a promising approach to address the high levels of distress among college students. The negative association of distress with academic achievement [5] is critically important because failed classes lead to drop out [6], eventually saddling many students with high debt but no degree. College administrators should seriously consider adopting universal, classroom-based programs like MAP, as our research group has found that individually self-scheduled approaches to mindfulness are unlikely to get sufficient participation for positive results.

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DOI: [10.19080/JYP.2021.08.555748](https://doi.org/10.19080/JYP.2021.08.555748)

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