

Post Pandemic Psychological Recovery in College-Aged Students

by

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Background

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools were forced to close their doors. This posed a threat to the well-being of students of all ages, but especially at a developmentally critical time such as new adulthood. Many students were deprived of social connection, mental health services, and support, which can have detrimental effects on the human psyche and long-term relationships and motivation (Moses & Villodas, 2017; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Best et al., 2021). Psychological studies that followed these trends saw an increase in depression, anxiety, suicide, and behavioral outbursts directly correlated with the measures of and stress from the pandemic (France et al., 2021; Albougami et al., 2020; Dyar et al., 2022; Kor & Shoshani, 2021). Psychologists worldwide were concerned for the mental health of all young people, and the American Pediatric Association released this article in late 2021: “Declaration of a National Emergency in Child and Adolescent Mental Health,” which alerted many organizations to consider the repercussions of the social death during the pandemic gravely. Psychologists found that the combination of the lack of peer support with the intense negativity and despair in the news cycle led to higher anxiety and depression, and an internalization of a “sense of doom” (Crosby et al., 2022). In a longitudinal study done on over 1,000 students in Israel, there were significantly higher levels of depression and even anxiety expressed to the point of panic symptoms as well as a decrease in important life necessities such as satisfaction with life, support from peers, and positive emotions (Kor & Shoshani, 2021). This study focuses on current college-aged students who most recently experienced the height of peer and community deprivation in regulations and rules from the COVID pandemic.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to implement an intervention with desired outcomes of increasing social connectedness, increasing happiness, and decreasing stress. Deep breathing and a loving kindness meditation will be used as the intervention to potentially produce these results (Germer & Neff, 2012; Breedvelt et al., 2019; Cameron et al., 2019). Kor & Shoshani, 2021, found that in their study with over 1,000 students, those who had higher baseline prosocial and mental health behaviors, the less drastic their negative scores were afterwards. This current study done with college-students is also preparing and equipping them with tools to increase their baseline of positive emotions and ability to connect with others so that in the event of further exposure to traumatic situations or stressful experiences there will be less damage. France et al., 2021 studied the reentrance to society and adolescents making decisions about peer groups and future success, with conclusions that preventative measures and mental health protections need to be in place as their minds and lives continue to recover. The three main areas from baseline data and for positive impact are perceived stress, subjective happiness, and social connectedness.

Methodology

The design for this study was a randomized, double-blinded, control trial. The instruments used were all validated and significant. The Campus Connectedness Scale consists of 14 questions, six of which are positively phrased and eight are negative, and uses a Likert scale of from 1-6, with 1 = Strongly Disagree and 6 = Strongly Agree (Lee, Keough, & Sexton, 2002). It has a Chronbach's alpha of 0.86, so it is reliable. The Subjective Happiness Scale has four questions in a 7-point Likert scale with one reversely scored question, and has a Chronbach's alpha of 0.79 (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). The Perceived Stress Scale consists of 4 questions in a 5-point Likert scale with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.69, which is acceptably reliable (Chan & La Greca, 2013). Students were asked to complete an initial baseline survey

and then were randomly assigned to a control or an experimental group. The control group was told to not change any habits over the course of two weeks, and they received the same survey at the end of that time period to control for any external factors affecting changes in scores. The experimental group was given an intervention of an audio recording including square breathing and a mindful self-compassion meditation. They were told to complete it at least three times over the next two weeks, and then they were also given the same repeat survey with questions to measure how many times they completed the intervention and subjectively whether they perceived a positive effect. Demographic data such as age, university department, grade, how much time was spent in online schooling, and familiarity and use of mindfulness meditations was collected for all participants.

The sample was all Point Loma Nazarene University students eighteen years and older. Participation in the surveys was voluntary, and recruitment was carried out through social media, email, word of mouth, and posted flyers with QR codes. There was a 76% retention rate, with $n=41$ participants who responded to the first survey and $n=31$ completed the second follow-up survey. Participants were randomly categorized into a control and experimental group. There were a total of $n=19$ students in the control group and $n=12$ students in the experimental group who completed the study.

Results

Demographics

Point Loma Nazarene University college students 18 and over were surveyed from a variety of different areas of study including the Departments of Communication, Sociology, Psychology, History and Political Science, Kinesiology, Art and Design, and Physics and Engineering, as well as the Schools of Education, Nursing, and Business (see Tables 1.1 and

1.2). The largest group of respondents was the seniors, totalling 41.9%, followed by 25.6% juniors, 18.6% sophomores, and 14.0% freshmen. Of the surveyed participants, 37.2% were moderately familiar with mindfulness practices in general (see Table 1.3). The most common kind of mindfulness reported to be used was breathing practices, which is incorporated into this intervention (see Table 1.4).

Table 1.1

Ages of Participants

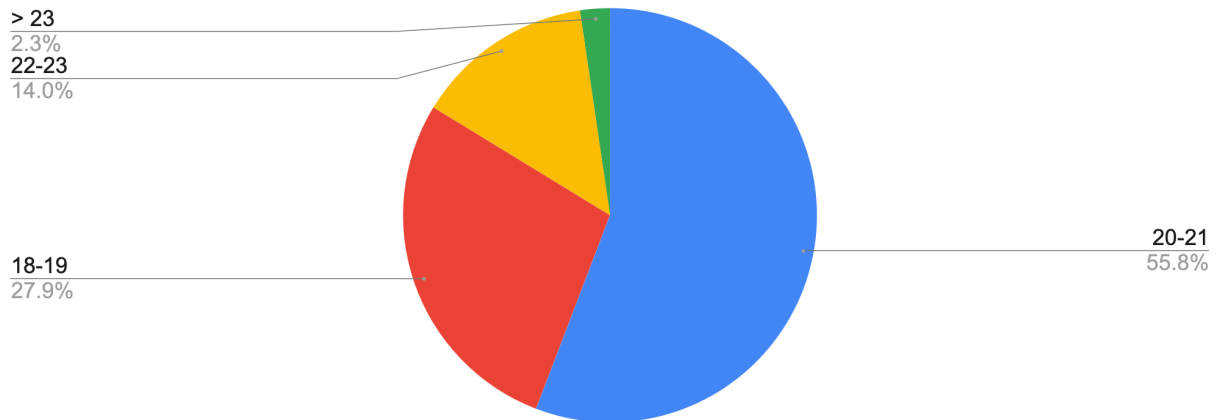


Table 1.2

Departments of Participants

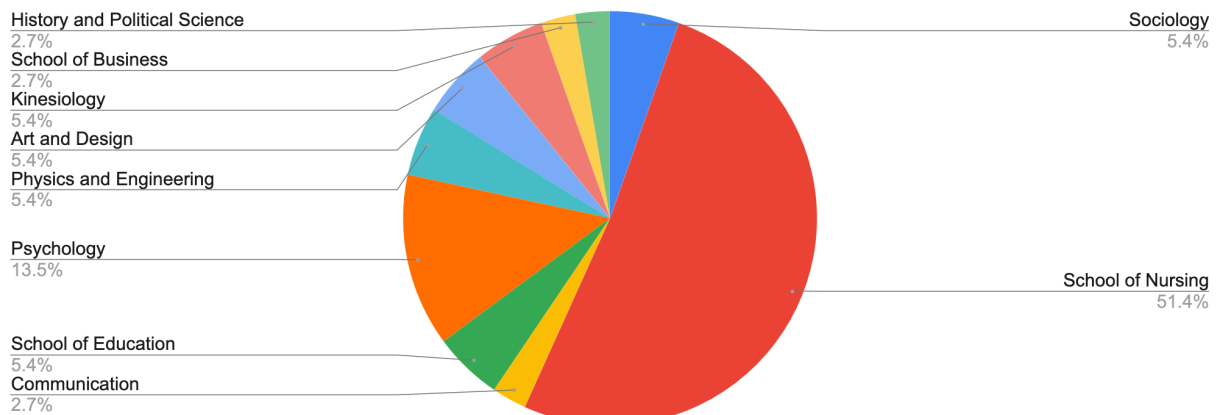


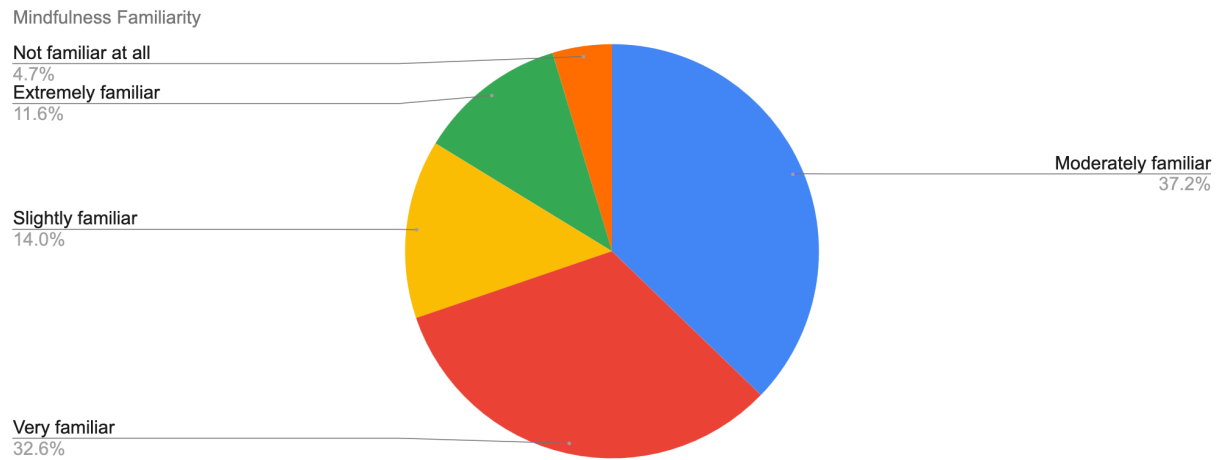
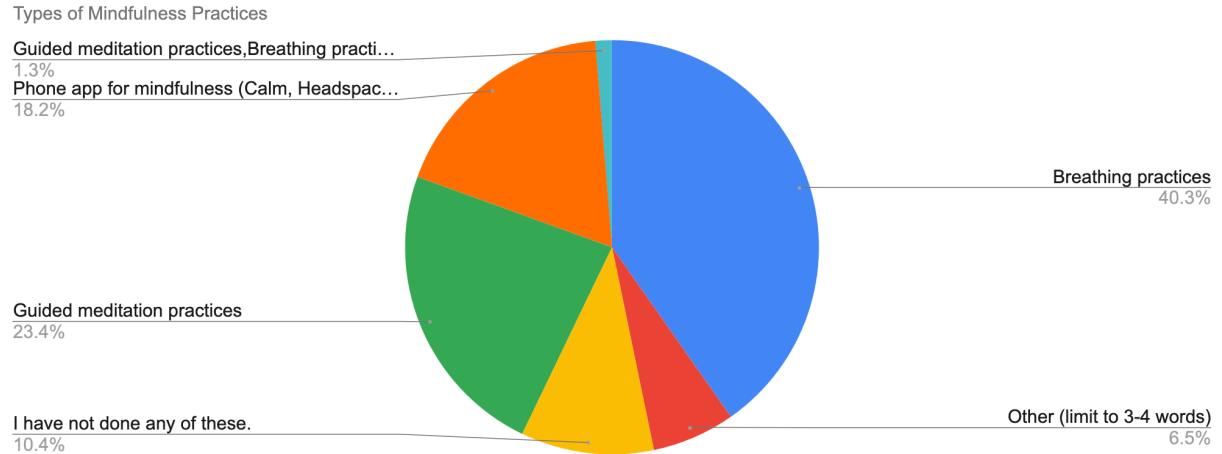
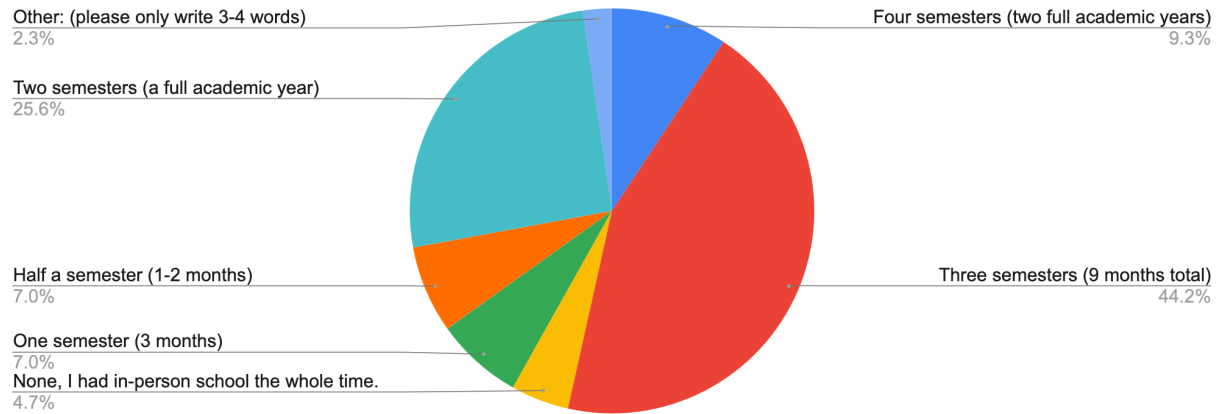
Table 1.3**Table 1.4**

Table 1.5**Length of Online Schooling****Conclusions**

Of the participants in the experimental group who followed the study's instructions and completed the intervention twice, 75% said that it was beneficial. 17% of participants only completed the intervention once, and 17% did not complete the intervention. Of all those who received the meditation, 75% said that it was beneficial and that they would continue to use the meditation.

Of the three tools used, none of the results proved to be statistically significant, however the experimental group showed lower levels of perceived stress and higher levels of subjective happiness and social connectedness. In addition the qualitative results from the experimental group supported these findings, showing improvements in stress, anxiety, and feeling overwhelmed. Some examples of positive experiences include feeling, "a better sense of control over my life," and helped with "physical symptoms of my anxiety," "slow down and focus on the present," and to "see past some of my current worries."

69.4% of participants had more than one semester online, with each semester being approximately 3 months (see Table 1.5). Of those, 44.2% had three semesters online. The average score for all students who completed the initial survey scored in the “high health concerns” category for the Perceived Stress Scale. Those who received the meditation and were surveyed two weeks later, had an average score in the “average health concern” category, demonstrating a decrease in perceived stress. The overall results for the Campus Connectedness Scale had an average connectedness score of 56 out of a total of 84 being the highest connectedness possibility. 24% scored towards the lower end of the Social Connectedness Scale, meaning they felt less connected in school with their peers. Dixon et al., 2021, concluded that students who took a fully online course compared to in-person or hybrid had lower connectedness scores. It was observed that students with higher amounts of online schooling seemed to have lower connectedness scores in this study.

Recommendations

This study, as a pilot test for this kind of intervention post-pandemic, recommends that a similar study be repeated. To be more effective and produce clearer results these studies should aim to have a larger sample size, higher retention rate, and potentially an intervention that is done through in-person means so there is a higher clarity of completion. These authors also recommend for the intervention to be brought into a broader variety of schools ranging from elementary to college students. This practice would be ideally implemented in-person in the classrooms with all willing participants. Another mode of effective data gathering would be to do the pre and post surveys of the measured tools immediately before and after the intervention.

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