Article

Strengths Perspective: How Social Work Students Use Mindfulness as a Self-Care Strategy

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Abstract: (1) Background: As helping professionals, social workers are more susceptible to compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, and burnout due to regular exposure to clients' trauma, traumatic situations, and heavy caseloads. Social work students also face similar experiences during their field placement as they prepare to enter the profession. In addition, stress, a significant factor affecting academic performance, is prevalent among social work students. Prolonged stress can lead to chronic health conditions, emphasizing the need to develop effective stress management practice techniques. (2) Objective: To examine the impact of a four-week mindfulness strengths-perspective synchronous series and the impact on social work students' personal strengths, self-care, stress, and coping strategies. (3) Methods: The purpose of this study was to examine social work students' experiences with using mindfulness from a strengths perspective. Twenty-three (*n* = 23) social work students participated in a four-week synchronous mindfulness series that incorporated a strengths perspective, focusing on stress reduction and self-care practices. The series consisted of weekly mindfulness activities and writing prompts, concluding with a focus group in the final week. A thematic analysis was utilized to identify key themes. (4) Results: The researchers identified six themes: consistency and commitment, affirmations and self-love, a caring community, mindfulness strategies, physical restoration, and enrichment and learning. (5) Conclusion: Students were able to develop a better understanding of self-care and the benefits of taking time to incorporate practices for their health and wellness.

Keywords: mindfulness; strengths perspective; online education; social work students; stress

1. Introduction

It has become increasingly imperative for professional leaders in higher education to support student's emotional well-being, to ensure success and prevent burnout. College students have been well-documented to experience specific stressors such as financial obligations, parental expectations, changes in living conditions, time management, academic rigor, busy lifestyles, exams and assignments, and sleep deprivation (American College Health Association 2012; Misra and McKean 2000; Peer et al. 2015; Ratanasiripong et al. 2010; Regehr et al. 2013; Wichianson et al. 2009). Online educators are also particularly challenged with adapting to various fluctuations, while also providing a learning environment that is mindful of student stressors (Viverette et al. 2023).

While recognizing these stressors of college students, it is known that social work students are further exposed to stressors, as they navigate the completion of coursework and their required field practicum placements. It comes as no surprise that college is stressful for many students, and a sizable number of minority students experience social barriers and mental health challenges related to institutional adversity. A 2018 study conducted by the WHO World Mental Health International College Student Project surveyed 19 colleges in eight countries (Australia, Belgium, Germany, Mexico, Northern Ireland,

South Africa, Spain, and the United States), using web-based questionnaires to estimate common mental health disorders of college students. The results, from 13,984 respondents, found that one-third of first-year college students were positive for one common DSM-IV anxiety, mood, or substance abuse disorder (Auerbach et al. 2018). An annual survey conducted by the American College Health Association, of 90,666 college students from 141 higher educational institutions, showed respondents reporting sadness (36.3%), loneliness (35.1%), overwhelming anxiety (31.6%), hopelessness (24.0%), or depression that impaired functioning (15.5%) (Conley et al. 2013, pp. 286–87). Since 2012, students have repeatedly reported that stress has been the number one factor that affects their academic performance (American College Health Association 2012). These results have shown that a large portion of college students, including graduate-level students, have had difficulty adjusting to the various demands that they experience. Previous researchers have raised concerns due to the high impact of stress commonly reported within the helping profession of social work (Crowder and Sears 2017; Kinman et al. 2020; Stanley and Sebastine 2023; Trowbridge and Lawson 2016; Tu et al. 2022). Acknowledging that students are experiencing high levels of stress and mental health concerns before entering the field of social work makes it imperative to develop learning environments that can equip students with knowledge about mental health and about how to identify stressors and develop skills to assist with self-awareness, regulation, and self-care practices.

The recently mandated changes to the National Association of Social Work (NASW) code of ethics encourage social workers to engage in self-care, to ensure competent and ethical social work practice (National Association of Social Workers 2021). The revisions to the Council of Social Work Education Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards assess social work students' competency in their ability to demonstrate ethical and professional behaviors that reflect an understanding of self-care and the importance of self-awareness and self-regulation (Council on Social Work Education 2022). Mindfulness-based stress reduction has shown positive results in providing social workers and social work students with the knowledge and skills to manage stress and develop self-care practice techniques. Therefore, the researchers of this study developed a four-week mindfulness synchronous series with a strengths perspective, to examine the impacts of mindfulness on social work students' personal strengths, self-care, stress, and coping strategies.

2. Literature Review

The Oxford Dictionary defines mindfulness as "a mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment while calmly acknowledging and accepting one's feelings" (Mindfulness 2014). Originally developed from the Buddhist Vipassana technique (which means to see things as they really are) of meditation, mindfulness became introduced and popularized in Western society by Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh (Kang et al. 2009). Jon Kabat-Zinn, an American professor and creator of the Stress Reductions Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, further developed a mindfulness-based intervention termed mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) (Bamber and Schneider 2015). Kabat-Zinn (2003) states that mindfulness is the awareness that emerges through paying nonjudgmental attention to one's purpose in the present moment and becoming open to unfolding moment-by-moment experiences. Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) researchers have found favorable results in areas such as improved organization skills, time management, commitment to a healthier lifestyle, stress reduction, improved emotional awareness, improvement in relationships, and self-compassion (Dvořáková et al. 2017; Mahfouz et al. 2018; Oman et al. 2008). According to Shapiro et al. (2012) practicing mindfulness affects personal growth and transformation, which can lead to a shift in perspective, bringing forth greater clarity, objectivity, and, ultimately, equanimity (p. 379).

Over the past decade, mindfulness-based interventions have grown in acceptance among colleges worldwide. Short-term mindfulness-based stress reduction programs have been implemented in various formats, such as video apps, online interactions, meditations,

and group settings (Chesin and Jeglic 2022; Liu et al. 2023; MacDonald and Neville 2023). A literature review of 57 studies on the effectiveness of mindfulness with college students has shown that MBSR decreased stress in 73% of studies, while reducing anxiety in 100% (Bamber and Schneider 2015). These findings, along with other supportive literature, provide an educational awareness that mindfulness-based interventions have become a successful tool for college educators to aid students with stress reduction and developing healthy coping strategies (Beddoe and Murphy 2004; Bonifas and Napoli 2014; Brougham et al. 2009; Caldwell et al. 2010; Ramler et al. 2016; Song and Lindquist 2015). As Mahfouz et al. (2018) state, higher educational leaders' ongoing support of students' socio-emotional health and well-being is becoming increasingly important to ensure college success and course completion (p. 3). Therefore, it is necessary to develop ongoing integrated programs that target stress management, burnout, and self-care practices for students.

Mindfulness programs have become increasingly popularized in various school districts and college institutions worldwide as well. Fung et al. (2016) found in their review of mindfulness interventions that MBSR is a proven to aid in cognitive control, anxiety/depressive symptoms, attention difficulties, and the academic grades of participating students. Conley et al. (2013) further emphasized these findings by showing mindfulness to be the most effective intervention strategy among college-age students, followed by short-term cognitive behavioral therapy. Furthermore, research has also shown the effectiveness that mindfulness-based interventions have had on minority students enrolled in college programs (Fung et al. 2016, p. 2).

3. Mindfulness and Social Work Education

MBSR has been proven to reduce stress for specific majors such as the Master of Social Work degree, medical students, law students, and first-year college students who may have heightened stress and anxiety related to patient care, new experiences, and intense academic demands (Bamber and Schneider 2015). Leland (2015) notes that mindfulness education has been shown to be considerably effective for social work students, as they prepare to transition into the profession of helping others. The author highlights how important it is for social work students to develop self-awareness, effective listening skills, and empathy when working with clients. Additionally, practicing self-compassion, and learning ways to reduce personal stress, is vital once working in challenging environments. These skills are essential for students at the undergraduate and graduate levels to acquire, before entering their field placements and future careers in the social work field.

Social work programs that have incorporated MBSR programs into their academic environment have seen significant positive changes in the overall well-being of their students. Social work programs within universities have also been able to be flexible in the delivery of these programs and have utilized various available tools, such as online collaboration applications, integration within course assignments, or apps. Flexibility in student accessibility has been a major strength in implementing MBSR programs. Universities that have created a 6-week MBSR program have shown positive correlations in reducing stress and anxiety, while increasing the overall well-being in undergraduate students (Maddock et al. 2022; Roulston et al. 2018). Additionally, findings have shown significant changes in terms of increasing student resiliency toward academic demands and adjusting to first-time college program experiences (McCusker 2022; Roulston et al. 2018).

A significant aspect of transitioning to university life is the change that occurs within peer groups and the course requirements to collaborate with classmates, either in person or online. An eight-week mindfulness program conducted by Gockel et al. (2019) assessed changes in the mindfulness, self-compassion, affect, mood, and impairment due to emotional distress of MSW students. The researchers revealed that students reported a decrease in stress and increased self-compassion and mindfulness practices. A significant finding from this study was how students noted the significance of completing the eight-week program with their peers. The ability to learn, participate, and grow with peers influenced the students' engagement with the series, which was reflected in a successful engagement

in mindfulness even four months after the program ended (Gockel et al. 2019). This finding is supported by other scholars who have examined the influence of mindfulness with a group-based approach (Byrne et al. 2013; Newsome et al. 2012; Viverette et al. 2023).

4. Strengths Perspective

Saleebey (1996), summarizes the strengths perspective as the way that we view individuals, while recognizing, "the light of their capacities, talents, competencies, possibilities, visions, values, and hopes, however, dashed and distorted these may have become through circumstances, oppression, or trauma" (p. 297). The strengths perspective "requires composing a roster of resources existing within and around the individual, family, or community" (Saleebey 1996, p. 297). This requirement provides an opportunity for individuals to identify systems of support that aid them in the development of their internal strengths. Developing these identified strengths supports individuals' deeper understanding of self-awareness, attributes, and coping approaches.

Research by Weick et al. (1989), also highlights the importance of individuals recognizing their existing resources; the authors state, "If anything, a strengths perspective is a strategy for seeing; a way to learn to recognize and use what is already available to them" (p. 354). The authors reflected that, once an individual can identify their existing resources and strengths, they will be able to further grow and develop them over time. Pulla (2017) notes, "One of the most important practices a social worker can have when using a strengths perspective is reflection" (p. 111). Reflection allows an individual to develop a deeper self-awareness of personal values and beliefs which can assist them in their practice with clients. Reflection can also aid students in developing a knowledge of their values, skills, and knowledge.

A recent study by Caiels et al. (2021) reviewed peer-reviewed literature from 2009 to 2019 that focused on the use of strengths-based approaches and social work. The authors found a total of 72 articles that highlighted the utilization of this approach. However, only two articles focused on the strength perspective with social work students. Universities that have employed a strengths-based perspective have found positive increases in student confidence, seeing them applying their own strengths more effectively, accurately assessing their abilities, enhancing their well-being, increasing accountability, and showing significantly higher retention rates (Mason 2019; Soria and Stubblefield 2015; Stebleton et al. 2012).

In social work programs, students are taught skills to assist them in developing a rapport with clients, identifying their client's challenges, and supporting their clients in a collaborative effort to identify resources, individual skills, and new knowledge to address the presented concerns. While these traits are essential to the development of future social workers, in practice, researchers in multiple studies acknowledge that many social work students have often struggled to identify their own personal strengths, techniques for self-regulation, best practices for self-care, and compassion (Caiels et al. 2021; Gockel et al. 2019; Maddock et al. 2023; Viverette et al. 2023). Therefore, the authors of this study sought to examine the influence of a mindfulness-based stress reduction series, with a strengths perspective, aimed at stress management, strengthening personal strengths, self-care, and coping strategies for social work students.

5. Methods

The purpose of this study was to examine social work students' experiences with using mindfulness from a strengths perspective. Utilizing a convenience-sample qualitative research design, the authors studied social work students who engaged in a four-week mindfulness series. Twenty-three (*n* = 23) students enrolled in the four-week series. All participants, after reading and signing a consent form, were videotaped during the 1 h online synchronous sessions. Participants were also given the option of participating in an app called "GroupMe" throughout the series. GroupMe is a popular messaging app that facilitates communication and coordination among groups of people. It also served as a type of support for students throughout the week, as they would post weekly reminders to

practice self-care strategies. The mean age of the participants was 38.5 years, with 20 female students and 1 male. Seven students participated from the bachelor's social work program and 16 from the master's social work program. The series consisted of weekly mindfulness sessions, weekly writing prompts, and a focus group in the final week of the series. The participants met synchronously each week for four weeks. Each week, the participants were asked to complete writing prompts in an open-ended semi-structured format that used flexibility for each participant in helping them identify mindfulness strategies and techniques that work for them.

The mindfulness program included the following components:

- Online Sessions: The participants met synchronously each week for four weeks. The sessions were conducted online and lasted for one hour each.
- Weekly Writing Prompts: Participants were provided with weekly writing prompts in an open-ended semi-structured format. These prompts were designed to foster reflection and the exploration of mindfulness strategies and techniques tailored to each participant's context.
- Mindfulness Exercises: Each week's session included mindfulness exercises aimed at promoting stress management, self-care, and the cultivation of personal strengths (see Table 1). These exercises included techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation, deep breathing, meditation practices, and positive affirmations.
- Interaction: Throughout the sessions, participants engaged in discussions and activities to facilitate interaction and mutual support. The format allowed participants to share their experiences, challenges, and insights, fostering a sense of community and support.

Table 1 demonstrates the structure of the mindfulness series and the content covered in each session were as follows:

Table 1. Strengths-perspective mindfulness series weekly session content.

	Introduction to Mindfulness and Strengths Perspective.
Week One	- Introductions - Explanation of mindfulness - Differentiation between strengths perspective and toxic positivity - Stress exploration worksheet and development of self-care plan - Introduction to progressive muscle relaxation and deep breathing exercises - Journaling/reflection (5–10 min)
	Self-Worth and Support
Week Two	- Exploration of self-worth and support systems - Practice of positive affirmations - Engagement with self-love poem emphasizing the strength that can be found with self-love - Meditation practice and deep breathing exercises - Journaling/reflection (5–10 min)
	Gratitude and Kindness
Week Three	- Discussion on gratitude and acts of kindness - Reflection on gratitude poem emphasizing strength of kindness - Meditation practice and deep breathing exercises - Journaling/reflection (5–10 min)
	Integration and Reflection
Week Four	- Review of personal strengths and stressors - Engagement with poem on overcoming stress from strengths perspective - Meditation practice and deep breathing exercises - Final reflection on series and exploration of future incorporation of mindfulness techniques

At the conclusion of the Week 4 session, the researchers then conducted the focus group with the attendees present. The focus group was recorded and then later transcribed

for analysis. The following semi-structured focus group questions were asked in the focus group by the researchers:

- What was your biggest takeaway from this series?
- Is there anything that you wish there had been more or less of in the mindfulness series?
- What were your experiences incorporating mindfulness into your everyday life over these past four weeks?
- How do you see yourself incorporating some of these techniques that you've shared moving forward?
- What are some personal strengths that you've identified through practicing mindfulness in this series?
- How can you use these strengths that you've identified to continue to promote change and lifelong resilience when it comes to your health and wellness?

The researchers conducted a thematic analysis on the qualitative data collected from two primary sources: the weekly writing prompts completed by participants and the transcribed focus group discussion that took place after the four-week mindfulness series. This analysis method, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was selected for its effectiveness in uncovering underlying patterns and themes within the dataset. Braun and Clarke's approach involves a systematic process of identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes, which enabled a thorough examination of participants' experiences and insights regarding mindfulness from a strengths perspective. Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79).

To initiate the thematic analysis, the researchers first familiarized themselves with the data by reviewing the transcripts of the writing prompts and focus group discussion. This initial immersion allowed the researchers to gain a holistic understanding of the content and identify preliminary patterns or recurring topics. Following this, the researchers engaged in a process of coding, where they systematically annotated segments of the data that pertained to specific concepts, ideas, or experiences related to mindfulness and a strengths perspective.

Once the initial coding phase was complete, the researchers iteratively reviewed and refined the codes to identify broader patterns and themes emerging across the dataset. This iterative process involved organizing related codes into higher-order themes, which captured overarching concepts evident in participants' narratives. Themes were refined through constant comparison and discussion among the research team, ensuring that they accurately reflected the complexity and diversity of the participants' experiences.

Throughout the thematic analysis process, the researchers maintained transparency and rigor by documenting their decisions and providing clear justifications for the identification and interpretation of themes. Additionally, member-checking techniques were employed, allowing participants to review and provide feedback on the identified themes, further enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis.

By employing Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method, the researchers were able to conduct a comprehensive exploration of participants' experiences with mindfulness from a strengths perspective. This approach facilitated the identification of nuanced insights and patterns within the data, providing valuable insights into the impact of the mindfulness program on the participants' well-being, coping strategies, and self-perceptions. Ultimately, the thematic analysis process contributed to a robust and nuanced understanding of the study's findings, enriching the interpretation and implications of the research outcomes.

6. Results

Through the thematic analysis of weekly writing prompts and a concluding focus group, the authors identified six key themes from the study's findings, including consistency and commitment, affirmations and self-love, a caring community, mindfulness

strategies, physical restoration, and enrichment and learning, shedding light on the students' enhanced self-awareness and the application of mindfulness practices for improved well-being, in the demanding context of social work education and preparation for the profession. These key themes were found from the analysis of both the writing prompts and the concluding focus group.

6.1. Theme One: Consistency and Commitment

The recurring theme among participants in the study is a strong inclination towards a sustained integration of mindfulness exercises consistently into their daily lives, as expressed through statements such as "I can see myself continuing these mindfulness exercises on a daily basis" and reflections on the ongoing commitment to practices like breathing techniques, body scans, stretching, and mindful eating. Another quotation regarding consistency and commitment includes the following: "Now I've become more consistent throughout this series with getting resources that you guys have passed on to us and being able to, you know, understand in full what mindfulness is". Another student stated, "I think just signing up for the course made me begin to make a commitment to trying to be mindful about being mindful". Finally, in a focus group session, one student shared their thoughts, questioning their ability to practice mindfulness long-term and how their practice techniques might vary over time, by stating, "Once I implement it in my day-to-day life, I will continue to keep it up. Will I change my mindfulness daily, weekly, or continue with my breathing and walking". Participants consistently expressed a strong commitment to the integration of mindfulness exercises into their daily lives, emphasizing a dedication to practices like breathing techniques, body scans, stretching, and mindful eating. The recurring theme of sustained consistency and commitment is evident in statements, both in the focus group and in the journals, highlighting an ongoing engagement with resources, a mindful approach to learning, and an intent to continue and adapt mindfulness practices in their day-to-day routines.

6.2. Theme Two: Affirmations and Self-Love

The theme of affirmation and self-love is prominently evident in participants' reflections, emphasizing the importance of taking guilt-free personal time, practicing self-forgiveness, and embracing positive affirmations such as "I am perfect just the way I am" and "today is going to be a good day". The expressions reveal a collective commitment to nurturing one's well-being through self-love and cultivating a more compassionate and patient relationship with oneself. One student stated, "When affirmations were coming [in the GroupMe app] . . .it kept me grounded". Additionally, other students stated: "It's okay to take time out for yourself and not feel guilty about it, not to be so judgmental or harsh with myself, and to be patient with myself", "I think practicing on my health and bettering myself and loving myself could make a difference", and "not to feel guilty about working on me and my inner peace". The participants' reflections noted above underscore the prevalent theme of affirmation and self-love, portraying a shared commitment to guilt-free self-care and the cultivation of a compassionate relationship with oneself. These expressions reveal a shared commitment to fostering a compassionate and patient relationship with oneself, demonstrating the transformative power of self-love on individual well-being within the context of the mindfulness series.

6.3. Theme Three: Caring Community

The theme of a caring community, both within the mindfulness group and beyond, resonates strongly in participants' reflections. A diverse network of support, ranging from family and friends to co-workers and beyond, is highlighted as instrumental in providing encouragement, stress relief, and a consistent source of assistance during challenging times. Participants stated, "People have helped me by simply supporting my madness. I feel just putting up with me is a lot of support," "The supports that I have in my life are my family, my boyfriend, and myself," and "I love the GroupMe because at least I'm reminded at

least once a day because someone will post something". Additionally, several students reported that the mindfulness group helped them feel connected with others. One student stated, "I really did enjoy doing the stretches and meditation. I enjoyed connecting with others". Another student stated, "It was nice to be able to take part in this series and connect with others". The invaluable support from family, friends, co-workers, and fellow participants is depicted as a crucial source of encouragement and stress relief, fostering a sense of connection and shared experiences that significantly contribute to the well-being of individuals within the community.

6.4. Theme Four: Mindfulness Strategies

The theme of mindfulness strategies emerges prominently, as participants highlight the positive impact of practices such as breathing techniques, body scans, walking, and various other methods. The shared experiences underscore the value of taking intentional pauses in the day, whether through brief moments or dedicated activities, as effective tools for relaxation, guilt reduction, and overall well-being. Students reported, "Using the breathing techniques and the body scan has really helped me relax those few minutes in the evening before going to bed. It sure beats feeling guilty for all the things that I didn't get to do or should have done that day," "I realized that one must take time out of the day to pause. I know that we all do not have the luxury to take days off to rest but just 15 or 20 min makes a big difference," and "I continued with the breathing techniques and the body scan which is very relaxing. I did start a little walking in the afternoon". Other mindfulness strategies that students reported include body scans, breathing techniques, journaling, mindful eating, prayer, stretching, exercising, listening to music, sleeping, traveling, and positive affirmations. Participants' reflections illuminate the theme of mindfulness strategies, emphasizing the diverse and impactful ways in which practices like breathing techniques, body scans, and intentional pauses contribute to relaxation, guilt reduction, and overall well-being. The reported experiences showcase the versatility of these strategies, underscoring their significance in fostering a mindful approach to daily life and self-care.

6.5. Theme Five: Physical Restoration

The theme of physical restoration emerges as a significant focus in participants' reflections, with a collective acknowledgment of the transformative effects of mindfulness practices on relaxation and tension release. The incorporation of stretching, meditation, and breathing techniques is highlighted as essential for centering oneself in a busy world and cultivating a sense of relaxation, providing a valuable takeaway for sustained physical well-being. One student stated, "My experiences incorporating mindfulness in my everyday life were very different and better because I feel I never made time for myself and now I can see who I am, relaxed". Another student said, "It's nice to see that difference, physically in my body. Not a lot of headaches, I can sleep better, no neck pain, just things like that". One participant talked about how mindfulness techniques helped ease some of their tension and stated, "I will continue using these breathing techniques moving forward because I have noticed that it has helped me a great deal in relaxing and releasing some of the tension in my neck and shoulders". These participants' experiences highlight the profound impact of mindfulness practices on the participants' physical well-being, illustrating a tangible shift towards relaxation, improved sleep, and reduced physical discomfort. The shared experiences affirm the enduring value of incorporating stretching, meditation, and breathing techniques into their daily lives for sustained physical restoration and overall wellness.

6.6. Theme Six: Enrichment and Learning

The theme of enrichment emerges, as participants share insights into the transformative nature of the series as it pertains to their strengths and self-awareness, emphasizing the value of continuous learning and the incorporation of diverse mindfulness practices into their lives. The quotations underscore the enrichment gained through understanding the

deeper meaning of self-care, the acknowledgment of strengths, engaging in self-enjoyed activities, and normalizing mindfulness practices for ongoing personal and professional development. One participant stated, "If I could learn something that can help improve my life, I would have gained something good from the series". Another participant stated, "I learned the actual meaning behind self-care and the ways it involves different types of self-care, and it is not just 'spa' related but more of self-enjoyed activities". In addition, a participant shared, "I feel that I tend to put others before myself a lot like you know in work and in life and all of that and uh this really has helped me to take a moment and say like hey you need to take care of yourself too not just everybody else so this this really has helped me these past four weeks". This participant developed self-awareness and reflections on the importance of self-care, connected with the other participants identifying personal strengths throughout their engagement in the study.

Focusing on the additional enrichment of strengths, one student shared, "I think that I have gained strength and awareness in my behaviors either good or bad". This participant discussed how it was important for them to have better self-awareness, to support them in making better decisions to address their needs. Another student stated that "love of learning would be my strength so like I've learned a lot again this is my second time around with the mindfulness series, but I've learned a lot and I'm glad I'm like open to change you know open to learning". Another student also expressed new things they learned about themselves from their engagement in the series. They reflected, "I learned patience more patience um and spending more time walking with my kids and listening to them more instead of like I don't have time I don't have time, so patience was a big one and always staying grounded". These reflections highlight the enriching impact of the series, as participants expressed a commitment to continuous improvement, embracing a deeper understanding of personal strengths and integrating mindfulness practices for self-care into both personal fulfillment and professional growth.

7. Discussion

The mindfulness series provided an awareness that students were able to learn new techniques to utilize, in an online learning environment that promotes students' well-being and self-awareness and reduces stress. These techniques included mindfulness-based stress reduction, progress muscle relaxation, and breathing techniques. The participants expressed how they could continue to apply their developed self-care strategies and strengths during their future practice in the field, as helpful coping strategies. The findings from this study confirm the findings in the literature, which identify that practicing mindfulness techniques can reduce the stress of students and allow them to develop routines that focus on their health and well-being (Bamber and Schneider 2015; Carmody and Baer 2008; Mahfouz et al. 2018; Roulston et al. 2018; Viverette et al. 2023). The findings in this study, that MBSR sessions improve social work students' well-being and self-care practices, are in line with Maddock et al. (2022), who identified that a six-week "MBSWSC program" led to significant changes in anxiety and well-being for social work students. The findings on affirmations and self-love are consistent with the literature, reflecting the students' development of self-compassion while engaging in mindfulness-based wellness programs (Conley et al. 2013; Maddock and McCusker 2022; Mahfouz et al. 2018; Newsome et al. 2012).

Progress was identified in the students' attention to gained self-awareness, the continued learning of self-care practices, and the consistency of implementing mindfulness techniques, based on the students' reflections, the weekly writing prompts, and the focus group, which is in line with Viverette et al. (2023), along with the importance of support systems and further developing individual strengths. The theme of a caring community is consistent with findings from scholars that note the importance of students feeling connected with, and motivated by, their peers in their journeys to remain consistent in practicing mindfulness techniques (Bonifas and Napoli 2014; Gockel et al. 2019; Maddock and McCusker 2022; McCusker 2022; Viverette et al. 2023).

The findings on enrichment and learning revealed a further insight into the noteworthy results of students practicing mindfulness techniques and ways to further embed the practices in the social work curriculum. Participants expressed how they were invested in learning more about mindfulness techniques and further ways to develop self-care plans, as they navigate the social work program and prepare for the social work profession. When asked what could be added to the series, students reflected on having the series take place every month like a class. Another student expressed an interest in wanting to spend more time practicing and learning ways to center themselves. Students who were in the MSW program reflected on wanting to learn about these practice techniques sooner in life. Some expressed how the gained awareness of the terminology and resources supported them as they were completing their field placement. These findings are consistent with Mahfouz et al.'s (2018) work in recognizing the importance of providing supportive resources to students that focus on their health and well-being. The findings also support the literature that recommends implementing a curriculum throughout the social work program for the introduction course to the field practicum placement (Maddock et al. 2022; Maddock and McCusker 2022; Viverette et al. 2023).

One element from this study that revealed new findings to add to the literature pertained to student's reflections on their personal strengths. The participants expressed how they were able to notice new strengths developing, and current ones strengthening, throughout their participation in the series. These results of the growth and development of strengths align with the findings of Pulla's (2017) and Saleebey's (1996) research on the strengths perspective. In addition, these findings help inform future research, to incorporate a strengths perspective when conducting mindfulness research to further explore the benefits of students' strengths and their impact on developing their competence in ethical and professional behaviors.

The findings on mindfulness strategies from the study were supported by other works that note the positive impact that practicing yoga, breathing techniques, mindful walking, and mindful eating can have on students (Caldwell et al. 2010; Oman et al. 2008; Ramler et al. 2016; and Wichianson et al. 2009). The theme of physical restoration provided more context to recognize the actual transformation students were experiencing from engaging in mindfulness practices. The students reflected on the significant changes they noticed in reduced stress but also the somatic symptoms that accompanied it. Students reported a release of tension in the body, improved sleep, and decreased body pain, further informing the literature of the direct physical connection to health and wellness when practicing mindfulness techniques.

Because of this study's focus on strengths, researchers encouraged participants to reframe feelings of guilt into a positive concept. Students identified the positive concept of self-love as a replacement for guilt; this highlights a crucial aspect of mindfulness and well-being. The findings underscore the significance of releasing feelings of guilt, and recognizing one's own value and strengths, for fostering a healthier mental state.

The participants' initial struggle with allocating time for self-care activities, such as journaling or practicing breathing techniques, sheds light on a common challenge—the perception of selfishness. Many students struggled with the idea of taking time for themselves, fearing that it may be perceived as self-indulgent or neglecting responsibilities. This struggle is particularly relevant in academic settings, as students often face high-pressure environments and demanding schedules. This study emphasizes the importance of dispelling the notion that self-care is selfish. Instead, it encourages a shift in perspective towards a strengths perspective and understanding that taking time for oneself is a fundamental aspect of overall well-being. This reframing is essential for preventing burnout, a pervasive issue among students and individuals in various professional fields. The metaphor of not pouring from an empty cup resonated strongly with the participants. It vividly illustrated the idea that individuals must prioritize their well-being to effectively contribute to others or meet external demands. This metaphor aligns with the philosophy that cultivating self-love and self-compassion is not only beneficial for personal fulfill-

ment but is also a prerequisite for being able to support and contribute positively to the well-being of others.

8. Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

The findings suggest a need for integrating strengths perspective mindfulness practices into social work academic curricula. Social work educators can design courses or workshops that incorporate mindfulness strategies, fostering a culture of well-being and self-awareness among students. This curriculum can be embedded across learning modalities, to ensure students continue to gain self-awareness and are equipped with supportive practices and resources to address stress, self-care, and prevent burnout and compassion fatigue. Additionally, social work practitioners and educators should emphasize the importance of developing personalized self-care plans for students. Practitioners should adopt a strengths perspective when implementing mindfulness practices for the self-care plan development. This includes not only focusing on stress reduction, but also recognizing and cultivating students' strengths and promoting a positive and empowering mindset. Through this research, students expressed a desire for regular mindfulness sessions, akin to a class format. Institutions could consider incorporating consistent mindfulness programs, creating a structured space for students to engage in practices that enhance their mental, emotional, and physical well-being. This includes teaching students how to identify and leverage their strengths as a foundation for well-being and resilience.

Considering the demand within the helping profession field and the reported stressful impacts on clinicians and social work students, it is imperative to provide preventative measures to ensure healthy professionals are ethically practicing in the field, in accordance with the social work professional code of ethics and the education accreditation body for social work programs. Incorporating MBSR practices in courses creates further opportunities for students to develop self-regulation skills that can support them when working with clients.

This study does have a few limitations to note. The researchers recognized that the timing of the weekly group meetings could influence the engagement of the participants. The researchers also facilitated weekly synchronized sessions, which may have an effect on the participants' reporting on mindfulness techniques and engagement in mindfulness practices, considering social desirability. Lastly, the qualitative study is limited in sample size and is not generalizable. However, the sample from this study, including participation from students in the MSW and BSW programs, reveals a future opportunity to further develop a collective supportive community for students across program levels.

Future research should delve deeper into the benefits of adopting a strengths perspective in mindfulness interventions. Investigating how recognizing and leveraging strengths contributes to competence in ethical and professional behaviors would enhance our understanding of the holistic impact of mindfulness on students. Research could examine the long-term effects of mindfulness practices on students' well-being and professional development. Understanding how these practices influence individuals as they progress through their careers can provide insights into the sustained impact of mindfulness education. Further research could focus on the integration of mindfulness practices into specific academic disciplines, exploring how these practices contribute to the unique challenges and demands of different fields. This tailored approach could provide discipline-specific recommendations for educators and practitioners. Finally, investigating the correlation between mindfulness practices, strengths development, and academic performance could provide valuable insights. Understanding how a positive mindset and well-being translate into academic success can strengthen the case for incorporating mindfulness into educational settings. While qualitative insights are rich, incorporating quantitative measures could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of mindfulness practices. Future research could include standardized assessments, to expand on previous studies that explore changes in stress levels, self-awareness, self-compassion, and other relevant variables.

9. Conclusions

In conclusion, this qualitative research paper explored the transformative impact of mindfulness techniques, particularly mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) sessions, on the well-being, self-awareness, and stress levels of social work students. The findings from this study align with the existing literature, confirming the positive effects of mindfulness practices on students' stress reduction and the development of routines that prioritize health and well-being. The participants' reflections on the integration of mindfulness strategies into their lives revealed a profound shift in their approach to self-care, emphasizing the importance of incorporating such practices throughout their academic and professional journeys.

This study contributes valuable insights into the enrichment and learning experienced by students engaged in mindfulness techniques. Participants expressed a keen interest in regular mindfulness sessions, highlighting the potential for integrating such practices into the social work curriculum. Their reflections on personal strengths evolving and increasing throughout the series align with the strengths perspective, suggesting the importance of incorporating a strengths perspective in future research on mindfulness and its impact on ethical and professional behaviors.

In summary, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on mindfulness in education, specifically within the context of social work programs. The findings advocate for the integration of mindfulness practices into academic curricula, emphasizing the need for ongoing support and resources that focus on students' health, their well-being, and the development of a caring community. As students continue to navigate the challenges of academic and professional life, incorporating mindfulness becomes not just a strategy for stress reduction but a holistic approach to fostering a positive and resilient mindset.

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