

Mindfulness: A Necessary Intervention in Reducing Adolescent Mental Health Issues in Nigerian Schools

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Abstract: *Adolescent mental health challenges are major public health issue. As most adolescents leave with untreated mental health disorders which may result in a variety of negative consequences including depression, anxiety disorder and suicide. To address this need, there has been growing interest into broad-based integrated health promotion interventions that sought to build resilience and promote adolescents' mental health. Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) represents as one such approach that have been administered to adolescents. This intervention is effectiveness in improving students' attention, awareness, alertness and reduce adolescent mental health issues. Compared to inefficiencies and high cost of traditional counseling interventions, MBIs are cost effective and efficient. The reviewer posits that since mindfulness is an evidence base intervention that increases students' ability to maintain focus, decreases stress and increase learning, adopting and implementing mindfulness in schools in Nigeria would be productive due to the effect it has on students' cognitive performance, stress and resilience.*

Keywords: adolescent; health; intervention; mental; mindfulness

INTRODUCTION

Sadly, most adolescents leave with untreated mental health disorders which may result in a variety of negative consequences including depression, anxiety disorder and suicide [1,2]. According to [3], globally, about 1 in 7 adolescents between 10-19 years experience mental health problems. Despite the progress that has been made to improve their condition [4,5], these problems continue to plague adolescents and also impact on their academic performance [6]. To address this need, there has been growing interest in broad-based integrated health promotion interventions that sought to build resilience and promote adolescents' mental health. Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) represent one such approach that has been administered to adolescents especially in high income countries. Therefore, this paper sought to discuss the use of MBIs as an adolescent mental health promotion technique and make recommendations for the introduction of a well-tailored MBIs intervention in school curriculum in Nigeria

MINDFULNESS AND ITS FORMS

Mindfulness-based therapy involves one being in a state of nonjudgmental awareness of internal and external conditions, while promoting acceptance and curiosity of one's thoughts, feelings and behaviour [7]. It is a type of psychotherapy used for a broad spectrum of physical and psychological conditions including cancer, obesity and mental health disorders. Reference [8] asserts that it helps users increase their awareness of a situation or condition and respond productively to processes in the mind that often would lead to emotional distress and unacceptable behaviour.

There are different forms of mindfulness including breath awareness, body scans, sitting meditations, and mindful movement, mindfulness eating others [9]. These forms of mindfulness can be practiced based on the occasion and need of the population or individual participants. Additionally, the type of mindfulness intervention required is also determined by the duration of the intervention and condition of participants [10]. Interestingly, most recently, researchers have begun to investigate the impact of various 1-4 weeks mindfulness-based activities for example mindful eating, body awareness, breathing, walking meditation, mindfulness-based coloring, as well as mindfulness-based yoga interventions. These activities have been shown to be effective on improving mental health and well-being outcomes in school settings.

Mindfulness intervention is a psychotherapeutic intervention can be applied in self-regulation of attention. Self-regulation of attention according to [8], deals with controlling the moment-by-moment sensations of one's experience which can be achieved in terms of the breath form of mindfulness, by turning the individuals' attention to the "breath" and away from external distractions. Reference [11] explained that the breath entails focusing on sensation of the breath coming in and out of the body. This means noticing the breath, how and where you feel it in the body without trying to change it.

The concept witting in mindfulness-based therapy creates opportunity for the practitioner /user to return their thoughts to the breath when they notice the mind begin to wander. Interestingly, the second stage of mindfulness looks at adopting a particular orientation toward one's experiences in the present moment. Reference [12] assert that, the practice challenges its practitioners to experience the present moment by immersing themselves in it, rather than worrying endlessly about numerous factors or stressors that are not occurring in the moment.

While there are other forms of brief therapeutic interventions that also help one cope with stress and other mental health problems. Arguably, [8] novel Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction approach, has an advantage over the other forms of psychotherapeutic intervention because this practice is widely utilized to reduce psychological morbidity associated with chronic illnesses and to treat emotional and behavioural disorders [13]. Another type of mindfulness therapy is mindfulness' based cognitive therapy which when combined with cognitive behavioural therapy can significantly reduce depression relapse rate and help to treat a range of psychological disorders such as generalized anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, and eating disorders [14].

EFFECTIVENESS OF MINDFULNESS INTERVENTION

Evidence has shown that mindfulness - based intervention is effective in preventing various health issues especially among adolescents [15]. This intervention has been administered to adolescent population in both resilience building contexts, including as part of a large-scale health promotion initiatives [16]. For example, in prevention contexts, findings demonstrate that mindfulness can lead to improvements in adolescents' levels of anxiety and depression [14], hostility, negative coping, emotional arousal and stress in interpersonal relationships [16], similarly, [17] reported the use of mindfulness in preventing co-occurring post-traumatic stress while [18] found that it was effective in tackling substance use disorder. Amazingly, researchers have demonstrated that mindfulness can be an effective approach for building coping skills in adolescents as it has been found to help improve mental health in adolescents immediately they start taking action to change [19]. (see fig. 1).

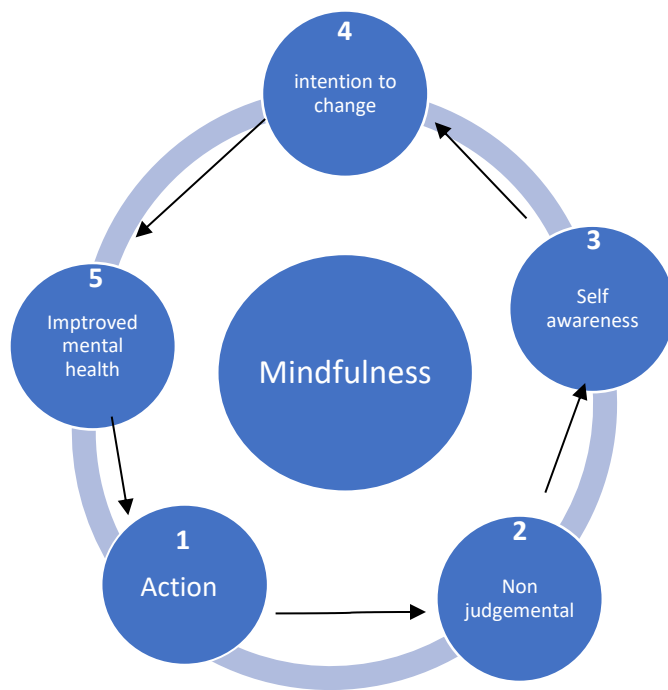


Fig 1. Mindfulness Framework to improve adolescent mental health

ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

An adolescent is someone that is transitioning from childhood to adulthood. At this phase adolescents are exposed to emotional and mental health problems. This is because at this stage, they are hypersensitive to stress leading to anxiety disorder, depression and other psychological challenges [20]. These challenges may have negative impact in their lives and could lead to both short- and long-term consequences [21]. Arguably, one of the most important and fragile social context in their lives is the number of hours spent in school as formation of values occurs in school so also does stress related activities. Several research have documented the relationship between stress and mental health [22]. Being a student in a school environment adds to the pressure adolescents' face and pressure causes stress which has significant influence on their academic performance.

According to [23] students, stress is the most common among all factors that influence their academic achievement. Report from [24] revealed that students face more stress as compared to other members in a given population. Academic stress can arise due to high expectations from parents and teachers. Additionally, this kind of stress could emanate from burden of homework, assignments,

examination and others. Similarly, adolescents in schools may experience academic stress from their own expectations to excel as well. Furthermore, [25] opined that unrealistic parental expectation is a dominant stressor for students. Sadly, some parents have unrealistic expectation from their young children without taking into cognizance the capacities and capabilities of the adolescent, these adolescents in a bit to please their parents take on unnecessary pressure which could lead to mental breakdown.

The educational system may also play roles that lead to increased stress levels. Some of the sources of stress in the educational system include overcrowded lecture halls, inadequate resources and facilities and long hours [22]. Studies conducted by [26] found that students reported experiencing high stress at university especially in preparation for examinations, competitions and mastering the syllabus within a short time. Other sources of academic stress include excessive workload unhealthy competition [22].

According to [11], adolescent low socioeconomic status is a contributor to stress. Unavailability of finance to take care of pressing academic issues also impacts negatively on adolescent mental health. The aforementioned challenges constantly plaque young students especially in Nigeria where access to loans to fund education are scarce or non-existent [27]. As a result, most young students are saddled with the responsibility of either paying their school fees or dropping out [28]. While some students develop different ways to cope with their situation and excel, others come down with depression, anxiety or other problems. Thus, poor socioeconomic status contributes to poor adolescent mental health and poor academic performance.

Social isolation is another determinant of adolescent mental health problems. Social isolation is a lack of social relationships or social contact [28]. The adverse effect of social exclusion on adolescent is but not limited to loneliness, sleeplessness, anxiety, reduced hormonal function, depression and sometime suicide [29]. Evidence from research conducted by [30] show there is a clear link between social isolation, cognitive function and academic performance, as students that feel socially isolated would usually have psychological issues and lack the necessary motivation to excel in their academics.

In an attempt to explain the problematic behavior leading to adolescent mental health challenges [17] used the problem behavior theory and ontological addiction theory respectively to demonstrate how that a given problematic behavior or mental illness is invariably an indicator of a more systematic maladaptive belief or unmet psychosocial need. According to the theorists, these needs can manifest across multiple risk-taking behaviors or psychopathologies. Researchers [31] posits that adolescents' experiences of emotions are informed by cognitive and biological maturation together with interpersonal interactions and perception of acceptance. These perceptions of support or acceptance if negative would lead to mental health issues which can be tackled using psychotherapeutic intervention such as mindfulness

While advocates of broad-based resilience-building adolescent interventions frequently cite schools as an optimum delivery setting, emerging evidence indicate that MBIs help students focus by calming the students mind and body, thereby increasing their ability to stay engaged, on course academically and away from negative influences. Presently, MBIs have been employed in school settings and has been shown to improve attention in both primary school pupils and secondary school students [32]. Pupils in primary school that used the intervention has demonstrated increased working memory, increased academic performance, social skills, improved emotional regulation, self-esteem, and a significant decrease in anxiety and stress levels [18]. Additionally, MBIs training also benefits teachers as it helps teachers in improving their teaching skills, sense of self, health and well-being, class room management and supportive relationships with students. Studies from [33] shows that mindfulness training increases teachers' compassion towards students and one another, reduces stress and also their listening ability

In contrast to the inefficiencies and high cost of traditional counselling interventions when counselling university students, MBIs are cost effective and efficient [34]. Most researchers have investigated the effect of MBIs on students' development of cognitive skills [35]. Report from [36], reveal an overall decrease in student distress level and improvement in individual scores when MBIs was used to test student distress, depression, anxiety, stress level subtest. Similarly, this intervention is effectiveness in improving students' focused attention, sensory-motor awareness sand attention stability [28].

Although in more advanced countries several research has been conducted and mindfulness is already being adopted as an integral part of school curriculum [14]. In Nigeria the awareness and practice of mindfulness is still not well documented [37]. However, emerging evidence suggest that the technique has been applied in some states including the north east where there are vulnerable internally displaced adolescents [38]. The reviewer, posits that since mindfulness is an evidence base practice that increase students' ability to maintain focus, decreases stress and increased learning, adopting and implementing mindfulness in schools in Nigeria would be productive due to the effect it has on students' cognitive performance, stress and resilience.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the increasing adolescent mental health issues and presented mindfulness as a necessary tool for improving adolescent mental health issues. It has recommended the adoption of mindfulness-based intervention in school curriculum. Mindfulness based intervention could serve as a panacea for increasing adolescent mental health issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Sequel to the above, the following recommendations were made:

Policymakers should make policies that would include mindfulness-based intervention in school curriculum such that teachers and students are allowed extra time within school period to engage in the training and therapy sessions. Making these policies would be a right step towards promoting behavioral change among adolescent, encouraging more interpersonal engagements which would snowball into positive self-image and improved mental health.

Government should implement these policies and monitor for compliance. Implementation and monitoring for compliance would provide teachers with extra time to engage in mindfulness practice themselves. Teachers' engagement would help to improve their own mental health and wellbeing. The implementation of these policies would also foster healthier student and teacher relationship. Policies that encourage students to make their own time for mindfulness could avail adolescents the opportunity to understand their emotions and build better coping strategies. This would promote good academic performance

School administrators should help build consistency and school-wide buy-in. Making time for staff and students to learn about the theory and science behind mindfulness, so students know how to talk about mindfulness and understand its purpose. Creating consistent space for mindfulness practice (like guided meditations) and theory in the school day can positively affect the entire school culture, emphasizing acceptance, self-care, and empathy and further improve adolescent mental health.

Mindfulness instructors should ensure adolescents with these conditions have the needed support to integrate mindfulness into their everyday life. This can be achieved by helping students make use of mindfulness apps, CDs and reminders to apply the three-step SOS (Stop, Observe the breath and Step back and watch the mind) technique when disruptive thoughts or feelings arise.

School teachers should serve as "Mindfulness Champions" or "Role Models" by getting actively involved in the training and meditation sessions with adolescents in school. Serving as mindfulness champions can foster more engagement as adolescents must be made to understand they are not alone in their struggle. It would help improve their mental health

Since parents form part of the support system for adolescent, parents should be invited to participate periodically in mindfulness trainings sessions. Parental participation and support would help boost adolescent self - confidence, promote resilience and reduce mental health problems.

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