

Problem Solving and Leadership Individual and Organizational Motivation Affected by Stress: The Use of Mindfulness into Action Practices to Encourage Protective Health Behaviors among Individuals and Organizations

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INTRODUCTION

Mindfulness into Action is currently implemented in three different countries, within three different higher education institutions, and is now implemented in numerous high schools in New York City. Participants of MIA have experienced transformations within themselves, where they have become more aware of their psychological and emotional behaviors, including their self-limiting assumptions about themselves and self-sabotaging actions.

MIA addresses individual self reflection with the purpose of individuals finding their true best self and fulfilling their goals. MIA addresses stress levels, the presence and acknowledgement of microaggressions, and a need to create stable and nurturing environments and relationships. Through the implementation of MIA in high schools, with the collaboration of Teachers College Columbia University graduate students, mentorship will be built and MIA practices will be utilized grounded in the Diffusion of Innovation Theory (Rogers, 2003).

Conceptualizing the Problem

Chronic stress refers to high stress sustained over extended periods of time. Chronic stress occurs among young people more frequently, and is more closely related to maladaptive health behaviors and mental health problems, than acute stress, or episodic triggers of stress (Leonard, Gwadz, Ritchie, Linick,

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Cleland, Elliott, & Grethel, 2015; Carter, Garber, Ciesla, & Cole, 2006). Children in poverty are more likely to experience both chronic and acute stress than their affluent peers (Almeida, Neupert, Banks, & Serido, 2005). Recent literature demonstrates that high levels of chronic stress may undermine young people's ability to succeed academically, and may hinder mental health functioning (Leonard et al., 2015; Suldo, Shaunessy, & Hardesty, 2008; Conner, Pope, & Galloway, 2009). Both chronic and acute stress have the capacity to shrink neurons in the brain's frontal lobes including the prefrontal cortex which is responsible for working memory, impulse regulation, decision-making, and goal-directed behaviors (Cook & Wellman, 2004; McEwen & Morrison, 2013); and can damage the hippocampus in ways that lessen capacity to learn (Vythilingam et al., 2002). Indeed, stressful experiences, especially those that occur during childhood and adolescence have the capacity to alter neural circuitry in a way that changes the functioning of the brain (McEwen & Morrison, 2013), as well as the cardiovascular system, the immune system, and metabolic regulatory controls--disruptions that lead to lifelong damages in physical and mental health (Center on the Developing Child, 2010).

The United States has the second highest child poverty rate among 35 industrialized countries despite the size of our economy; in fact, a child in the U.S. has a 1 in 5 chance of being poor (Giannarelli, Lippold, Minton, & Wheaton, 2015). In New York City, 29.6% of children (under 18 years old) live in poverty (CCC New York, 2016). Black (31%), Latino (39.1%), and Asian (27.2%) children are significantly more likely to experience poverty than White children (18.2%) (CCC New York, 2016). 76.1% of public school students in New York City are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, a statistic that typically acts as a useful indicator of poverty levels (NYSED, 2015). However, community poverty data do not always capture the volume of challenges that New York City public school students face: persistent chronic absenteeism may be a more useful school-level poverty indicator, as attendance is closely related to schools that struggle with multiple poverty-related risks (Nauer, Mader, Robinson, Jacobs, Cory, Moss, & Bloodworth, 2014). Average attendance rates of public schools drop from 93% in elementary school to 85.8% in high school (NYC DOE, 2015), indicating that high schools suffer from lower rates of attendance than lower schools. This may indicate a relationship between high schools and school poverty levels.

Identify Variables of Interest

Three foundations of healthy child development include stable, responsive relationships; safe, supportive environments; and appropriate nutrition (Center on the Developing Child, 2010). The following measurable variables will act as representations of these foundations:

1. Stable, responsive relationships through the Mindfulness into Action Clubs at high schools:
 - a. Teachers College graduate students who successfully adopt Mindfulness Into Action practices,
 - b. Active mentorship between Teachers College graduate students and high school students in New York City.
2. Safe, supportive environments:
 - a. Public high school students that plant trees with schools or community organizations such as MillionTreesNYC,
 - b. Public high school students involved in advocacy for equitable environmental policies including clean air policies.

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