



The role of mindfulness in reducing the adverse effects of childhood stress and trauma

“Recent mindfulness studies in youth, specifically in populations with known trauma exposure or populations at high risk for ACEs [adverse childhood experiences], suggest promise in improving a variety of outcomes, including mental health symptoms, behaviour and quality of life, and coping” (p. 6).

1. What is the research about?

Adverse childhood experiences, combined with the absence of factors that protect against the effects of these experiences, can result in poor health outcomes that may be felt across generations. These experiences have been associated with challenges such as substance use, risky sexual behaviour, risk for intimate partner violence, suicide attempts, behavioural challenges, risk of incarceration, and physical ailments such as fibromyalgia, irritable bowel syndrome, heart disease, liver disease, and other physical and mental issues.

This paper explores the ways in which trauma and chronic stress can have long-lasting mental, physical, and behavioural effects on children and youth, and how the meditative practice of mindfulness can provide a buffer to the negative consequences of adverse experiences. The article examines and summarizes relevant research on the impacts of mindfulness in both adult and youth populations with whom trauma has been experienced, making recommendations for future directions in mindfulness-based interventions in youth work/for youth.

2. Where did the research take place?

The research reviewed in this article took place primarily in the United States, across several settings, including multiple urban schools, a joint visitation space for youth in foster care, a primary care pediatric clinic, an outpatient psychiatric facility, an academic treatment centre, and an HIV clinic.

3. Who is this research about?

The article provides an overview of studies with various populations in order to build a case for the usefulness of mindfulness with youth who have been impacted by trauma. First, the authors conducted a review of literature on mindfulness interventions for adults who have experienced trauma. These groups include women exposed to childhood trauma, incarcerated women, female survivors of sexual abuse, survivors of political violence, military veterans, undergraduates with past stress or trauma, and frontline workers, such as intensive care unit and bereavement workers. Next, research on mindfulness for young people is explored. Youth populations featured in these studies include urban youth attending public middle school, underserved youth, low-income and ethnic minority students, children with ADHD, youth in foster care, a general population of youth aged 12-18, and youth aged 13-21 who are HIV-positive.

4. How was the research done?

The authors conducted a literature review on a wide range of related studies. Research reviewed in this article utilize a variety of methods, including, but not limited to, randomized control trials and mixed methods involving both qualitative and quantitative measures.

5. What are the key findings?

This review demonstrates that **mindfulness can be an effective strategy for mitigating the effects of trauma and chronic stress in young people.**

The literature shows that mindfulness has been associated with:

- decreasing symptoms of stress, trauma, anxiety, and depression;
- decreasing emotional dysregulation;
- increasing traits linked to resilience;
- enhancing coping skills;
- reducing the production of stress hormones, such as cortisol;
- improving sleep quality;
- lessening physical symptoms associated with stress, such as fatigue and tension; and
- promoting neurological changes that can positively influence executive functioning, such as the ability to reason and make decisions.

Youth studies, in particular, further indicated that mindfulness is associated with:

- a decrease in rumination;
- decreased school-related stress;
- improved classroom behaviour;
- reduced hostility;
- fewer incidents of self-harm;
- increased ability to deal with conflict;
- heightened capacity for attention;
- lower stress; and
- improved self-esteem.



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6. Why does it matter for youth work?

This research has practical implications both for youth and their caregivers. As both a tool for mitigating the effects of trauma and a potential buffer against future experiences of trauma, mindfulness practices can be integrated wherever possible into youth programming. The authors offer support for incorporating mindfulness into schools, including in curriculum, and/or primary care sites, as these are the places with the broadest reach to young people experiencing adversity.

Additional suggestions are offered, including merging mindfulness programming with other therapeutic interventions and clinical groups for youth, into women's shelters and community centres, and through collaborations with arts-based services for young people. While mindfulness may be integrated into broad-based youth services, individualized programs for youth who are incarcerated or who experience eating disorders, for example, are encouraged. Resources that support home-practice and the inclusion of mindfulness into everyday activities are also suggested.

The research further signals that mindfulness-based practices, programming, and training should be integrated into trainings and workshops for youth workers, school teachers, parents, and entire families, as these individuals are often exposed to high levels of stress and secondary trauma, which can impact their ability to effectively support the youth in their care.

Qualified mindfulness instructors who have a longstanding self-practice and have experience working with the youth populations served by youth workers should be recruited to facilitate programming. The authors deem it critical that mindfulness facilitators working with youth populations are trained in trauma-informed practice, which includes general principles of safety, connection, trustworthiness, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural competency.