



Mindfulness for students

Students are easy prey for performance anxiety and exam stress. *Ariana Faris* describes how mindfulness training helped young people cope with competitive pressures at a high-ranking music college. *Illustration by Mark Preston*

Performance, stress and anxiety go hand in hand. Anxiety is common in the context of performance, whether in public speaking, sports contests, exams and tests or the performing arts. Public speaking was ranked in one US survey as among our greatest fears, higher even than fear of death itself.¹

Sometimes known as ‘stage fright’, the symptoms are often described as ‘the jitters’ or ‘nerves’, and can include heart palpitations, sweating, trembling and shaking, which result from the activation of the sympathetic nervous system – our ‘fight or flight’ response. Most of us at some point in our lives have experienced this sort of hyper-arousal in the face of perceived danger or threat. The ‘switching on’ of the sympathetic nervous system that activates a state of alertness can be useful in a performance/exam or test situation (or when faced by a hungry tiger). However, it can also be debilitating if the system is activated to such an extent that the symptoms start to interfere with performance or if it fails to switch off when the performance/danger is over. There is now a growing interest in developing ways to support and teach students skills to help them manage the potentially detrimental effects of excessive anxiety.

Since 1999 a colleague and I have been providing the counselling service for the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama (RWCMD). RWCMD is a prestigious music and drama college with approximately 700 students. Places on the courses are highly sought after and the courses themselves are demanding and require students to have self-discipline, self-motivation and resilience. The courses all work towards a performance in some shape

or form, and performance anxiety is one of the challenges the students face.

We often see students who have experienced high levels of performance anxiety that affect them for several days (if not weeks) before a performance (or test situation), as well as during the performance itself. Although the symptoms may vary, these students all experience this anxiety as detrimental to their learning and to their ability to perform at their best.² Anxiety peaks when it matters most, during performance or in exam situations. However for many it is a constant presence throughout the course. Physical difficulties and injuries from playing or performing may also be exacerbated by stress and anxiety.

Long-term elevated states of stress and anxiety take their toll not only on physical health but also on self-esteem and confidence. A vicious cycle can then become established. Faced with a performance of exam, the student experiences performance anxiety; this leads to catastrophic thinking and physical symptoms of stress; the student’s actual performance is then impaired, which in turns reduces their confidence and resilience and heightens their anxiety when they next face a performance or exam.

These damaging effects are not limited to students of the performing arts. Performance stress occurs in other university and higher education settings and competitive learning environments where students feel ever-increasing pressure to achieve and exceed targets.

A colleague and I introduced mindfulness based cognitive therapy (MBCT) on an integrative counselling course at another university, using an

integrative psychotherapy approach that we called the relational integrative model (RIM).³ As part of the teaching day we would lead a short mindfulness practice and students reported that they found this very helpful in managing their stress and anxiety in relation to assessments and the pressures of being on an intensive training of this kind. It occurred to me that students at the RWCMD might similarly benefit from a mindfulness programme specifically adapted to managing performance anxiety and general stress.

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness means ‘awareness’. Being mindful is about being present, without judgment, in the here and now. Mindfulness enables us to pay attention to what we are doing at the point at which we are doing it and to be aware of what is happening in our mind and body and in the external environment.⁴ Its roots are in the ancient art of meditation but mindfulness can be learned and practised by anyone, regardless of his or her religious or cultural background. It offers a different attitude to experience – from problem-solving and fixing to one in which we relate to experience in a more flexible way.

A growing body of research suggests that mindfulness-based practices may have a significant positive effect on a number of factors related to both academic performance and general wellbeing.⁵ These include:

- attention, focus and concentration
- cognitive processing
- working memory and perception
- emotional and social intelligence (including emotion regulation and social/altruistic/pro-social behaviour).

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Agitated and distracted states of mind, such as those experienced when someone is anxious or under stress, can impair concentration and are clearly detrimental in an educational, learning or performance context. However, ‘despite its importance to learning, focused attention is rarely if ever systematically trained or cultivated in most educational settings’.⁶

Mindfulness-based interventions encourage a different attitude towards experience, thoughts and cognitive processes. We tend to regard our thoughts as facts. The thought ‘I can’t cope and I will fail’ becomes an accepted truth that then takes on a life of its own and extends beyond the original source of anxiety to infect other parts of our life, creating a chain, story or internal monologue of negativity. This internal monologue distracts from present moment experience and from what is actually occurring. The person starts thinking: ‘I won’t be able to manage. This is too difficult. What will happen if I don’t do well in this exam?’ Or they ruminate about past events, which colours their expectations of their future performance: ‘I failed to achieve the standard last time. I only got a B in that exam. I’m too stupid to pass any exam.’

When we are having these thoughts we are not fully focused on the current experience or task at hand; we are in a ‘mindless’ state’.⁷ Patterns of thinking such as these are usually habitual and outside awareness but they drive our moods and emotions and influence our physical states. The practice of mindfulness helps us to disengage from worry and negative thinking, not by trying to get rid of the thoughts but by changing how we relate to them.⁸

Thoughts are seen simply for what they are: not as eternal truths but as transient and ever-changing mental events.

Mindfulness practice deliberately cultivates attention and awareness.⁹ Awareness and attention are mutually dependent. Without awareness the mind runs on autopilot, leaving us more likely to react and less likely to respond

Negative cognitions are also significant factors in music performance anxiety,¹⁰ and probably in general performance anxiety too. The cultivation of awareness would therefore seem to offer one way to enhance a person’s ability to control their ‘on’ and ‘off’ switches in relation to external and task-related pressures.

Search for perfection

Many teachers in higher education know how difficult it can be for students who become preoccupied with achieving perfection or who are prematurely oriented towards outcomes and goals. Doubt about one’s abilities as well as the fear of making mistakes can narrow focus, limit creativity and increase anxiety. Sinden¹¹ found a significant relationship between high levels of perfectionism and levels of performance anxiety in students of classical musical instruments.

Sarah was a second year violinist who attended the RWCMD mindfulness course because she was unable to manage her nerves and felt overwhelmed by stress. She had become preoccupied with success and failure and thought her playing was not good enough. Sarah’s solution was to practise harder but her search for perfection yielded only frustration, self-criticism and exhaustion as she compared herself to others and always found herself wanting. This mind

state was exacerbated by premature cognitive commitments – ‘jumping to conclusions’ without paying sufficient attention to context or experience. Sarah was losing sight of all the progress she had made since coming to college and seeing only her faults and her inability to concentrate.

Mindfulness encourages a non-judgmental attitude towards the present moment experience. Cognitive problem-solving tends not to be the most effective way of finding solutions to emotional and physical difficulties, including performance-related nerves and anxiety.

At first Sarah struggled with the mindfulness practices and couldn’t quite see how ‘doing nothing’ was going to change anything. Then, slowly, she began to notice subtle changes: she was able to appreciate and get some satisfaction from her practice and the sound she was producing; she no longer avoided her lessons or performance classes; she found that she was able to develop a more balanced approach to all her experience, both the pleasant and the more difficult. Her stress levels dropped and she was able to look forward to the next term.

‘[Mindfulness] has helped me to stay in control of my nerves when performing and be less self-critical both when performing and practising. I can now be more relaxed when I play and I’m able to enjoy performing much more’ (student).

Mindfulness and the brain

Meditation training has been associated with increased activity in the prefrontal cortex – a region of the brain associated with positive emotions. Lazar and colleagues¹² found that the areas of the brain associated with attention,

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decision-making and sensory processing (the prefrontal cortex and right anterior insular) were thicker in people who meditate than in those who don't. Regular meditators also appear to react less to negative emotional stimuli and the areas of their brains associated with emotional regulation – the hippocampus, orbito-frontal cortex thalamus and inferior temporal lobe – tend to be larger, suggesting this capacity is enhanced by meditation practices.¹³

'Mindfulness has helped me in several ways: feeling calmer within, feeling happier and stronger within, feeling much less anxiety and not allowing stress to take over my mind' (student).

Mindfulness course

The eight-week mindfulness course for performance anxiety and stress that we developed and teach at RWCMD is adapted from MBCT. The programme focuses specifically on anxiety and stress in performance and test situations. The experiential skills-based sessions last 1.5 hours and teach mindfulness practices such as focusing on the breath, mindful movement and use of three-minute breathing pauses, as well as informal mindfulness exercises such as practising mindful awareness of regular daily activities. The first four sessions of the course address attention and the ability to focus and to disengage from the busy 'chatter' of the mind and, in particular, default negative automatic thinking. The second half of the course looks at how mindfulness practices can be used to reduce the symptoms of stress and anxiety by providing alternative ways to respond to stressful stimuli and to difficult experiences in particular.

We have taught six mindfulness courses at the RWCMD since we introduced them in 2009. We run the course twice each academic year. All students are offered the opportunity to attend and some are directly referred by Student Services or academic tutors. The cohorts have varied in size from 16 to 20. There is a small drop out rate. Student feedback tells us this is mostly due either to pressure from other commitments or, occasionally, because students do not feel it is relevant to them. Responses to the course have been very positive: 90 per cent of evaluations rate mindfulness at 8/10 or above in helping the student to manage not only performance anxiety but also stress, low mood and anxiety in general.

'Mindfulness has effectively challenged my thought processes towards performance anxiety and the practices have started to shift my whole anxiety level, not just before a performance' (student).

Skills for life

Greenberg and colleagues note that: 'Surprisingly, there has been little interest, in behavioural sciences or in educational research, in the relationship between social-emotional functioning and academic success.'¹⁴ Furthermore, to have a chance of success in the highly competitive world of work, students are under increasing pressure also to demonstrate other abilities and attainments to potential employers. This has driven some to use non-prescription ADHD drugs to improve their attention and skills.¹⁵

Although it is early days, the growing research evidence does suggest that mindfulness enhances emotion regulation, stress management,

decision-making, sensory processing, self-compassion and attention. The Mindfulness in Schools Project is looking at ways in which these skills can be taught to children in the UK and is attracting great interest. Less attention seems to have been paid to mindfulness for students in higher education and how these internal capacities and skills could be taught to students as skills for life.

Mindfulness courses do exist in some university and higher education settings including Swansea and Northampton Universities, the Guildhall and, more recently, Oxford University, which has run an eight-week course for students.¹⁶ The response among students at RWCMD lends support to the argument that mindfulness skills training in higher education may offer not just a way of coping with immediate stress and performance anxiety but also a means to enhance overall performance and general wellbeing. ■

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The case study 'Sarah' is a composite of student participants attending the RWCMD mindfulness course.

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