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Research Brief: Mindfulness Training as a Clinical Intervention with Homeless Adults: A Pilot Study

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Research Brief

November 2018

Mindfulness Training as a Clinical Intervention with Homeless Adults: A Pilot Study

Executive summary This study gives support to the promising potential of mindfulness interventions being implemented in homeless settings, empowering service users to deal with their mental health and addictions issues while potentially reducing homeless health service costs.

Introduction

Ireland has experienced a 152% increase in the numbers of homeless people since 2011, to 9,698 people in September 2018 (Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, 2018). Living as a homeless person can be a challenging and traumatic experience (O'Reilly et al. 2015). Homeless populations have clear health needs with a greater likelihood of experiencing a number of forms of morbidity, with drug and alcohol addiction and mental health issues presenting as the most pressing health concerns (O'Reilly et al. 2015). Between 30 and 50% of homeless people in Ireland have a mental health problem, with approximately 50% having a mental health and addiction problem (Amnesty International, 2003; O'Reilly et al. 2015).

Emotional reactivity and impulsivity have been identified as key factors in problematic behaviour, which leads to people becoming homeless and in the maintenance of addiction, depression and anxiety disorders (Bylsma et al. 2008; Freyberger et al. 2008). A growing body of research supports the efficacy of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction

(MBSR) in producing positive changes in mental health across age and patient/client groups through the reduction of levels of emotional reactivity, impulsivity, anxiety and depression (Fjorback et al. 2011). There has been a significant lack of research examining the effects of mindfulness interventions on homeless populations. The development of mindfulness coping skills could be a useful approach to the treatment of symptoms of addiction and mental health issues in homeless populations, by empowering service users to deal with their mental health and addictions issues, and potentially reducing their use of mental health and addiction services.

Recognising the gap in research on the use of mindfulness interventions with homeless populations, this brief reports on an exploratory pilot study that aimed to (1) investigate if homeless service users in an MBSR group could develop enhanced coping skills and accrue mental health benefits through the learning of mindfulness skills; (2) understand the experiences of these service users in order to identify factors that support or hinder the development of these coping skills; (3)

investigate if statistically significant changes in depression, anxiety, impulsivity and emotional reactivity could be achieved by the group's participants.

Methods

A mixed methods design was chosen for this study in order to generate a detailed and in-depth understanding of a group of homeless participants who completed an MBSR programme. This MBSR group

programme was carried out over an 8-week duration, with an initial group of 12 participants beginning the programme, with 7 participants completing the intervention. Data were provided in open-ended semi-structured interviews with the 7 participants who completed the MBSR group; participants also completed psychometric measures of depression, anxiety, impulsivity and emotional reactivity pre and post intervention.

Table 1: Qualitative Research Themes

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
Enhanced coping skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to ground self and be less ruminative • Increased ability to accept difficult thoughts and emotions • Improved ability to regulate attention
Enhanced mindful traits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased self-awareness • Decreased emotional reactivity • Increased self-control • Increased compassion
Enhanced well-being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved mood • Improved interpersonal relationships • Experiencing less intense negative emotions

Findings and Conclusions

Findings from this study demonstrate the potential of mindfulness interventions for empowering homeless service users to deal with their mental health and addiction issues. Findings suggest an agreement between the statistically significant quantitative findings and the qualitative findings. All seven participants showed statistically significant reductions in anxiety, depression, emotional reactivity and impulsivity immediately following the intervention, with these changes being consistent with a number of themes found in the qualitative findings (Table 1).

Recommendations

This study has shown that mindfulness skills can be taught to a range of homeless

service users, and highlighted how these enhanced coping skills may empower homeless service users to achieve better mental health and addiction outcomes. Increased access to interventions of this nature are likely to increase the mental health capacity of homeless service users and allow them to cope in more pro-social ways than they may have previously, e.g., through the use of illicit drugs, as they move towards more stable accommodation and housing. Empowering homeless service users in this manner is likely to reduce service utilization of homeless hostels, addiction services and mental health services, and reduce the financial burden of homeless mental health on the exchequer by reducing its cost.

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