



THE KINDNESS INSTITUTE

ATAWHAI Mindfulness Intensive Programme April 2018 Preliminary Evaluation Report

Executive Summary

The Kindness Institute's ATAWHAI programme supports youth to improve their own lives through mindfulness & yoga, stress management and leadership capabilities. Rangatahi learn to deal with challenging emotions, conflicts and to improve their forgiveness, communication, empathy, focus, motivation, decision making and relationship skills. The programme is made up of both an intensive programme during school holidays and an ongoing programme including monthly workshops and weekly stress management coaching & mentoring.

The Kindness Institute recently delivered their flagship week long intensive mindfulness programme. The participants were the six rangatahi (aged 15-17) that are part of the ongoing ATAWHAI programme of 2018, as well as their mentors and other volunteers. ATAWHAI runs over 12 months and this report is a preliminary evaluation of the results of the week long intensive part of the ATAWHAI programme. The report is prepared to share the voices of the participating young people with the Government's Inquiry into Mental Health and Addiction. The full report will be provided on request.

Summary of Outcomes

100% of the rangatahi reported that they found the programme helped them to better manage stress and challenging situations in their lives. The key themes arising from the rangatahi self assessments, daily group debriefs and post retreat in-depth interviews were:

1. Increased in ability to manage stress and challenging situations in their daily lives
2. Increased sense of connection to family, friends and the wider community
3. Increased kindness to others
4. Increased ability to focus
5. Increased ability to forgive
6. Improved ability to communicate and manage conflict
7. Increased confidence

What is Mindfulness & Yoga?

The term “mindfulness” refers to the ability to direct the attention to experience as it unfolds, moment by moment, with open-minded curiosity and acceptance (Kabat-Zinn, 1996). It enables those who have learned it go on to practice it to be more able to be with their present experience, and respond more skillfully to whatever is actually happening (Weare, 2013).

Hölzel and colleagues (2011) have suggested that the benefits of mindfulness can be attributed to two distinct but interrelated components. The first is focussing attention on immediate experience, whereas the second involves “approaching one’s experiences with an orientation of curiosity, openness, and acceptance, regardless of their valence and desirability” (Hölzel et al., 2011, p. 538).

Yoga is a non-secular set of skills based around movement, breathing, centering and meditation that promote physical, mental and emotional health. Yoga practice helps promote self-regulation, thought and emotional awareness, anger management, stress reduction and overall physical health.

Research specifically with children and young people has shown shown yoga and mindfulness produces health benefits in multiple domains, including psychological (e.g. reduced anxiety), cognitive (e.g. increased attentiveness), physical, and behavioral (e.g., improved social skills and reduced externalizing behaviors) (Dariotis et al., 2017).

Why teach mindfulness to children and young people?

Aotearoa / New Zealand is facing a youth mental health crisis. In the Youth '12 Survey of 8,500 secondary school students 38% of female students and 23% of male students reported feeling down or depressed most of the day for at least two weeks in the year over the previous 12 months (Clark et al., 2013). Our youth suicide mortality rate, an indicator of a population’s mental health, was 15.6 per 100,000 adolescents aged 15 to 19 years in 2010 – the highest among reported OECD rates (UNICEF Office of Research 2017).

Childhood mental health difficulties tend to predict adult mental illness (Britton et al., 2014). Experiencing mental illness while young has also shown to significantly increase the risk of substance abuse, suicide attempt, educational underachievement, unemployment, and early parenthood (Fergusson & Woodward, 2002). Thus, there is a clear impetus to develop strategies that foster wellbeing among children and young people (Bernay, Graham, Devcich, Rix & Rubie Davies, 2016). There is also a growing focus internationally on primary and secondary intervention aiming at providing young people with the capacity to better withstand the stresses of the teenage years (Gluckman 2017).

A United Kingdom review of the evidence in relation to mindfulness with young people found that it is popular with both staff and students and can be effective in promoting a very wide range of outcomes (Weare 2013):

“Specifically, they can improve well-being, sleep, self-esteem, calmness, relaxation, self-regulation, awareness and aspects of cognitive function and physical health. In addition, they can reduce worries, anxiety, distress, reactivity and bad behaviour. Mindfulness correlates positively with well-being, positive emotion, popularity and friendships, and negatively with negative emotion and anxiety.”

Local research investigating the benefits of the Mental Health Foundation's Pause, Breathe, Smile: Mindfulness in Schools program (PBS) has also shown increases in calmness, self-regulation, self-awareness, the forming of positive relationships between peers, an increased ability to resolve conflict and statistically significant increases in wellbeing (Rix and Bernay 2014; Bernay, Graham, Devcich, Rix and Rubie-Davies 2016).

In a 2017 evaluation of a six-week mindfulness & yoga programme delivered by The Kindness Institute to four classes at Auckland Girls Grammar, 98% of the students reported that they found the program beneficial and it that had help them feel more calm and relaxed. Very high percentages (ranging from 90-98%) of the students also reported that the other seven program outcomes had been achieved. The teachers' observations also suggested that Mindfulness and yoga contributed to increased experiences of calmness, respect, connection and focus for participants as well as improving communication skills and relationships (The Kindness Institute 2017).

Structure of the programme

The ATAWHAI programme has been developed with long term outcomes in mind and is based on world leading models in mindfulness and stress reduction education. The model is inspired by Jon Kabat Zinn's mindfulness stress reduction programme, The Work of Byron Katie and Holistic Life Foundations (HLF) successful model in delivering outcomes for youth living in urban poverty and suffering post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The HLF programme is a community-academic partnership involving researchers from John Hopkins Bloomberg Medical School, University of North Carolina at Greensboro and Pennsylvania State University (Mendelson et al., 2013). The Kindness Institute Director has trained under their leadership and the programme facilitators are specialist in this field.

The programme was delivered over seven days. The first day was youth mentor training, the next five days took place at the Sacred Earth Retreat at Karekare from the Monday 22nd April through to Friday 27th April, with the final performance event on Saturday 28th April being held at the Manukau Institute of Technology. The daily activities in the ATAWHAI programme included:

- Yoga and mindfulness practice;
- Group korero around theme for mindfulness practice e.g. forgiveness: how to forgive ourselves and how to forgive others;
- Emotional intelligence building, stress management and capacity building activities;
- One on one / small group work with mentors to unpack that knowledge generally through the creative arts; and
- Group meditation, gratitude practice and a gratitude circle.

The programme content included developing present moment awareness, mental and physical strength and flexibility, awareness of the breath, the senses, focus, compassion, kindness, gratitude, turning around negative thought patterns, conflict resolution and stress management tools.

A main focus of our kaupapa is the training the trainer model through which our youth are empowered to teach mindfulness, yoga & stress management to each other and to their community. This model has been hugely successful & has seen our work having a much wider impact.

Evaluation methodology

The evaluation process involved both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Rangatahi lead feedback during daily classes, rangatahi and mentors both completed pre and post retreat questionnaires, and also took part in daily in-depth group debriefs. The rangatahi were also interviewed one-on-one after the retreat in order to find out how they are integrating their learnings from the retreat into their daily lives.

This approach allowed for the programme to be assessed based on both the intended outcomes as well as identifying any other outcomes individual rangatahi had experienced. Feedback received through these channels was recorded and collated and a thematic analysis of the open feedback has been conducted to ascertain the common themes that emerged from the interview data.

Key themes

The specific feedback from the rangatahi clustered around a number of interrelated themes that reflect previous research regarding the outcomes of mindfulness with young people:

1. Increased ability to manage stress and challenging situations in their daily lives
2. Increased sense of connection to family, friends and the wider community
3. Increased kindness to others
4. Increased ability to focus
5. Increased ability to forgive
6. Improved ability to communicate and manage conflict
7. Increased confidence

Theme one: Increased ability to manage stress and challenging situations in their daily lives

Rangatahi reported that the program assisted them to deal with the stresses they face at school, at home and with peers. It has helped them to stay calm when in difficult situations. For example, students reported:

“I’m more calm about stress. I feel like I usually go ‘OMG I can’t do this’. Now I have more of a ‘I need to get this done’ kind of attitude. It’s quite amusing for me - usually I’d be stressing really badly, like I can’t do it, but now I know I can so it means I can relax a little bit.”

“It’s less hard to face challenges. It used to be so hard that I couldn’t complete it. Like getting out of bed was really hard and now I just think ‘I can’t be in bed all day, I need to do stuff’. It’s like I have the thought but then I actually do it, I don’t give up so easily.”

“Using my breath is a really good way to release stress.”

“I have learnt to breathe properly to relax which is helpful in many situations. I’ve also learnt to keep calm in stressful situations like arguments instead of reacting straight away.”

“The manifestation meditation would help me if I get stressed or anxious. I can prepare myself to prevent whatever is going through my mind.”

Theme two: Increased sense of connection to family, friends and the wider community

In interviews after the retreat, rangatahi reported an increased sense of connection to family, friends and the wider community. This took shape in different ways, but for example:

"It sounds weird, but it made me want to become more Maori. I'm quite plastic, and just standing there made me realise I wanted to learn the language and the history."

"I feel hopeful now. For like how I deal with things at home. I can be more independent with my thinking... I can think more about my thoughts instead of rushing to conclusions."

"I have a friend with deep and anxiety and I usually just listen when she needs to talk because I don't know what to say. But this last time I was able to ask her some questions about her thoughts, like Byron Katie's questions. It was cool to have her see a different, more spiritual side of me."

"It was so peaceful and relaxing. Like, I never get time like that usually. I felt weird being offline at first but then I started to quite like it."

Theme three: Increased kindness to others

Rangatahi reported that they had learned to be kinder to others. For many this was most evident in their home lives and among close friends. For example, rangatahi reported:

"I'm nicer. Every time my brothers do something wrong I get angry. I usually yell at them. Now I think back about what I learnt in yoga and meditation and it means I can stay calm and talk it out with them instead."

"It's like I'm just more patient and can keep calm. I think that makes me a nicer person."

"I can put myself in other people's shoes now...seeing things from other people's perspectives helps me to be kinder."

Theme four - Increased ability to focus

Rangatahi reported that they had also learnt how to focus better on a daily basis (by using breathing techniques) and over a longer period of time (e.g. focusing on a goal to achieve). For example:

"It's real hard to try and focus at school all day... I can use my breath to come back to the moment and regain that focus when it goes."

"This week has shown me how we can set a goal, work towards it and achieve it or even go beyond it."

"I can easily get distracted by negative thoughts about myself and now I know I can just notice that thought and stop it before it takes over."

Theme five: Increased ability to forgive

Rangatahi reported that the program had helped them to forgive others, including their parents, and to improve their relationships with whanau and friends. For example:

“The forgiveness meditation helped me to know that anger never lasts and that it’s better to forgive and forget so that I can be happy.”

“The forgiveness meditation made so much sense to me because it made sense to release all the hate and sadness a person has caused that may have affected me. The thought of just forgiving them, and not having them be a big part of your life felt like getting everything off my chest and it felt good!”

Theme six: Improved ability to communicate and manage conflict

Rangatahi reported that they had learnt how to communicate more mindfully with others. For example:

“I feel like I’m a way better listener now. Doing that mindful listening stuff made me see how good it feels when someone listens to you properly.”

“I used to be real insecure about how I felt. I was scared to tell my family. Ever since the retreat I’ve opened up to my mum. It’s very nerve wracking talking to people about my emotions but she’s been really supportive and talking about getting me some more help. Like, I think she understands more about my anxiety and depression after we talked. She doesn’t just think I’m a moody teen any more.”

Theme Seven: Increased confidence

All of the rangatahi reported that their confidence has increased after the one week intensive. For example:

“I’m meeting new people and talking to them. Usually I would try to avoid friendships but now I want to meet new people. It’s a new realisation, like I’ve been told making new friends is good, and before I’d be like ‘whatever’, but now I really want to meet new people.”

“I used to be real shy. I used to be the girl that sits at the back of the class. But ever since this programme I’ve been more open and talkative. I can give my opinion without worrying.”

“Me and Christine have been teaching two of our friends meditation during our tutor period (at school)...We did the love meditation with them and they said they felt so relaxed at the end that they didn’t want to open their eyes. Next week we are going to try to teach them about Byron Katie and questioning their negative thoughts.”

“It’s been cool to see the rangatahi teach this week. We know we can be future teachers some day.”

Summary of impact

This preliminary evaluation of the intensive programme found a number of benefits for participating rangatahi. All reported an increased in ability to manage stress and challenging

situations in their daily lives through using breath and mindfulness techniques. There was an increased sense of connection to family, friends and the wider community reported among many of the rangatahi which might be a result of their improved ability to communicate and manage conflict, as well as their increased ability to forgive. These are also likely to be factors impacting the reported increases in the rangatahi kindness to others. Other areas of impact include an increased ability to focus and a general ability for rangatahi to make positive transformations in their own lives.

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