

# **‘An Exploratory Study to Examine the Impact and Perceptions of Mindfulness Meditation (MM) upon Community Group Attendees’**

By

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# **'An Exploratory Study to Examine the Impact and Perceptions of Mindfulness Meditation (MM) upon Community Group Attendees'**

## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** To examine the impact and perceptions of mindfulness meditation (MM) upon community group attendees' and its potential as a sustainable healthcare intervention.

**Method:** Four semi-structured interviews were carried out with voluntary participants from a MM group and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the findings into themes.

**Results:** All participants reported considerable improvement in health and well-being, control over emotions, importance of support and the power of group MM. Participants reported It is part of their everyday life and will continue to be so.

**Conclusion:** MM has the potential to be a sustainable health care intervention provided continuous support groups with an experienced teacher are available in local communities. This would be the safest and most beneficial for health and wellbeing. OT's could support implementation of MM with clients to facilitate occupational engagement.

### **Key Words:**

**Mindfulness, Meditation, Group, Transformation, Adverse effects, Health, Well-being, Occupational therapy, Experienced Teacher, Collective Energy**

This research is 'an exploratory study to examine the impact and perceptions of mindfulness meditation upon community group attendees'.

**Objectives:**

- To explore individuals' experiences of mindfulness meditation and how this has impacted them and what motivates them to continue
- To explore perceived benefits and/ or issues of engaging in this occupation
- To explore the perceived difference of group sessions compared to individual practice.

This is qualitative research consisting of semi-structured interviews with participants who fit the inclusion criteria. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim and from this thematic coding took place to identify themes.

Mindfulness is the process of attending to the immediate world through sensory attunement, cognitive awareness and active engagement and it can be understood as a 'mindful' state or a formal practice (meditation). Mindfulness meditation (MM) is the building block to develop a 'mindful state' which can be applied and experienced within everyday life and occupations (e.g. while washing up, walking, cooking, and eating) (Elliot 2011: 372-373). Mindfulness allows people to focus on the task or occupation at hand. Individuals often respond to their thoughts and emotions as though they are realities, subsequently allowing thoughts on external stimuli to guide their actions and behaviours, which can lead to unnecessary avoidance of situations and occupations- (Gardner and Moore 2007: 31, 38). Through mindfulness, individuals are taught to observe and describe as opposed to judge and control, prompting 'mindful responding' rather than 'mindless reacting' to life's events (Gardner and Moore 2007: 36).

Mindfulness teaches practitioners to observe and accept uncomfortable internal experiences yet not get involved in them (Gardner and Moore 2007: 35).

In the words of Kabat Zinn (2002), founder of Mindfulness based stress reduction programmes, 'Meditation is simply a platform used to develop the state or skill of mindfulness'. MM involves being "present" by bringing awareness to the senses, concentrating on the breath, having stillness of body and silence of mind (Ludwig & Kabat-Zinn, 2008).

MM is a sustainable healthcare intervention as it is free of charge and is an empowering tool for individuals to take control of their mental and emotional health, which ultimately impacts on physical health and disease (Tang, Holzel and Posner 2017). Improving health and well-being allows individuals to engage in occupations which hold meaning in their life (COT 2017). It is easily accessible and welcomes all characteristics, as Farias and Wikholm (2015: 155) state, meditation can be detached from groups and religion as it can be used to de-stress or explore the self whether one ascribes it to religious beliefs or not. Tabak, Horan and Green 2015 (540) affirm that not only is MM an occupation in itself but it facilitates increased confidence, motivation and present moment perspective; enabling individuals to pursue and engage in other meaningful activities.

A literature review found previous mindfulness meditation (MM) studies identified only temporary interventions and many were not solely mindfulness meditation, involving additional techniques like cognitive behavioural therapy and mindful activities e.g. Yoga. This study will build on current research as it explores experiences of those who attend a continuous, voluntary, mindfulness meditation group. Furthermore, no other studies identified were concerned with the perceived differences of group vs individual mindfulness meditation practice.

## **Mindfulness and Occupation**

Mindfulness has a natural fit with occupation as its practice of awareness cultivation facilitates heightened engagement in activity (occupational engagement). A literature search completed by Elliot (2011: 367) found hundreds of articles from scientific disciplines of medicine, rehabilitation, mental health, family services, neuroscience and psychology linking mindfulness and activity. Elliot proposes that mindfulness is an area with potential to deepen understandings of the process of occupational engagement and being in daily life. She therefore argues mindfulness is an important construct for occupational science to adopt as a field of investigation (Elliot 2011: 368). Occupational science looks to understand the phenomenological experience of an individual participating in occupation, as does mindfulness, due to the attention and awareness given to what is happening in any given moment (Elliot 2011: 373).

Present moment awareness facilitates 'occupational flow' (Elliot 2011: 327). Both flow and mindfulness involve being present, attentive and actively engaged. Reid (2011: 50) suggests that occupational therapists may be able to enhance depth and meaning of occupational experiences and improve health and wellbeing of clients through understanding flow and mindfulness thus increasing the client's occupational engagement.

## **Health Benefits**

MM and its health benefits has been the subject of substantial research. MM is a great tool for relaxation, but as the literature shows, can be extremely beneficial for a number of conditions and has been evidenced to significantly increase activation of the left hemisphere

associated with pleasure (Gardner and Moore 2007: 37). There have been articles exploring MM benefitting: depression (Ozen et al. 2016), Parkinson's disease (Pickut et al. 2013), improving cognition (Zeidan et al. 2009), weight loss (Manzios and Giannou 2014), Psychotic illnesses (Chadwick 2014), anxiety and blood pressure (Chen et al. 2013) and altering brain plasticity (increasing grey matter) (Holzel et al. 2010). In addition, MM has been shown to benefit overcoming addictions, relationships with others and physical problems like heart disease, chronic pain and hypertension (Mental Health Foundation 2017: 5).

A literature review regarding 'mindfulness' and 'groups', suggested mindfulness is beneficial for a variety of individuals. Group mindfulness intervention benefits were found amongst people with learning disabilities, with outcomes of decreased anxiety, enhanced social skills and improved academic performance observed (Beauchemin, Hutchins and Patterson: 2008). Such interventions were also found to benefit people hearing distressing voices (psychosis) (Chadwick et al. 2016), adolescents with behaviour problems (improving their sleep) (Blake et al. 2017), reducing depression symptoms among school students (Raes et al 2014) and decreasing stress amongst college students (Newsome, Waldo and Gruszka 2011).

## **Contraindications**

There was a paucity of literature regarding MM and contraindications, so other forms of meditation were included in the literature search. Van Dam et al. reviewed over 20 reports of meditation-related experiences that were serious or distressing, finding that it can cause, depersonalization, mania, anxiety, psychosis, panic, traumatic memory re-experiencing and other forms of clinical deterioration for some individuals (Van Dam et al. 2018 :47).

However, pre-existing health records were not considered. The article by Lazarus and Mayne (1990) discusses the limitations and side effects of relaxation (including meditation). They identified possible side effects of relaxation as: perspiration, numbness, rapid heart rate, increased tension, difficulty breathing, dizziness, floating, depression, fear of losing control, depersonalization and intrusive images (261). They concluded these symptoms can be managed by using the correct relaxation technique in the proper manner in a person-centered way.

As Lustyk et al. (2009) point out, increasing interest in MM warrants discussion on safety for research participants of MM interventions, identifying the need for a risk assessment. They discuss contraindications associated with mental, physical and spiritual well-being.

### **Mental contraindications**

Reports of severe anxiety disorders, temporary dissociative states and psychosis are the primary cause for concern. For example, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a severe anxiety disorder and individuals often avoid or mentally block painful thoughts and environments. Farias and Wikholm (2015: 152) restate that repressed and traumatic material can easily resurface during intense meditation. However, once faced, the individual will be able to move past their fears.

**Physical contraindications** found by Lustyk et al. (2009) include neurological and somatic problems, such as epilepsy due to increased cortical gamma wave synchrony and somatic discomfort of the joints (people with forms of arthritis) due to sitting still for a period of time. To overcome this barrier, an active form of mindfulness (walking) could be used.

## **Spiritual contraindication**

Individuals fear violating their own foundational religious tenants by engaging in meditation. However, mindfulness is a universal tool and traditions such as Hinduism and Christianity also recommend the practice to their followers. Also discussed is the need for an expert teacher who has personal experience and can escort individuals on a 'deep inward journey' (Lustyk et al. 2009: 27,28). This leadership is said to help novices deal with their insecurities and barriers to MM such as embarrassment, self-judgement and skepticism.

Farias and Wikholm (2015) look deeper into contraindications in their chapter 'the darker side of meditation'. They give examples of regular meditators developing severe mental health problems requiring hospitalization, experiencing considerable upset/ fear and one man going on a 12-man killing spree (146).

Psychiatrist Razzaque (2014) argues many psychotic experiences his patients describe resemble mystical experiences of 'ego-dissolution' (boundaries separating one from the world disappear and a feeling of connectedness is gained) and are known to occur after years of meditation practice. Ego-dissolution is a relatively new phenomenon and is not a universally positive or negative experience. A person may experience feeling overwhelmed, leading to anxiety and panic. However, ego-dissolution can be a positive and transformational experience, leading to acceptance, peace and a new perspective on life. Ego dissolution has been known to be experienced through meditation, psychotic conditions, and the use of hallucinogenic drugs (Baer, 2017: Razzaque 2014; Nour et al. 2016: 9).

Meditation is a process and requires the right intention, a good teacher and moral framework to make real positive change (Farias and Wikholm 2015: 181). It has the

potential to quiet thoughts and angst, sharpen attention, increase positive emotions towards ourselves and others and can even lead to a deep alteration of our identity. However, with the wrong motivation and no clear ethical rules, that spiritual selflessness can serve all kinds of ill purposes (Farias and Wikholm 2015: 169).

## **Current Practice**

A systematic review completed by Mars and Abbey (2009) concludes that mindfulness 'shows potential as a possible healthcare intervention'. The National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE) recommend it as a preventative practice for people who experience recurrent depression (NHS 2013). However, the evidence suggests that MM has the potential for a bigger impact, influencing individuals holistically, appropriate for all characteristics (age, gender, faith, condition) (Mental Health Foundation 2017).

MM is often prescribed to people as an 8-10 week evidence based programme of either mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR) coined by Kabat Zinn in 1982 or mindfulness based cognitive therapy (MBCT) coined by Teasdale et al. 2002. Both are group based interventions involving 8 weekly sessions and daily home practice. Teachings include the body scan, sitting meditations and mindful movement. They were both created to improve people's health and well-being by reducing stress and accepting, understanding and adapting thought patterns (Morgan, Simpson and Smith 2015: 744). Although these programmes have proven successful with many people, it is criticized and some studies call into question the theoretical underpinnings of mindfulness. Lao, Kissane and Meadows (2016: 119) declared that short-term mindfulness meditation training did not enhance theorised attentional pathways. Although there was significant evidence for improvements in working and autobiographical memory in addition to improved meta-awareness and

cognitive flexibility. However, MM is a practice that should be maintained consistently to show beneficial results.

The current use of MBSR and MBCT in practice is an 8-week course. After this, individuals are left to their own devices, losing support that would facilitate continuation of the practice. If people do continue, they may progress to spiritual experiences that they cannot understand and without an experienced teacher to guide them, this could have adverse effects on health. Farias and Wikholm (2015) also draw attention to this fact, stating the danger to mental illness.

Health care workers experience of mindfulness found benefits ranging from increased personal wellbeing and self-compassion to enhanced present moment awareness, leading to enhanced compassion and a sense of shared humanity with clients (Morgan, Simpson and Smith 2015: 744). Fraser and Greenhalgh (2001) found that occupational therapists who engage in MM practice improve services. Being mindful allows the OT to enter each situation with a fresh mind set, giving the client their full attention by being present. In addition, mindfulness can emphasize an OTs awareness, reflection, curiosity, non-judgementality and commitment to practice (Reid 2009).

## **Methodology**

This is an empirical study, collecting primary, qualitative data using semi-structured interviews to explore the views, experiences, beliefs and motivations of individuals about a topic which leads to a deeper understanding of a social phenomenon (Gill et al. 2008: 292). See appendix 3 for interview questions. Qualitative has been seen as the methodology of

choice for some time for occupational therapy (Taylor 2007: 86). This could be because the qualitative researcher views social phenomena holistically (Marshall and Rossman 2006: 3), thus sharing this holistic perspective with the occupational therapy profession. Qualitative methodology generates deep, rich data which also addresses quality and meaningfulness (Taylor 2007: 86).

Particular phenomena (impact of group MM on health and wellbeing) are explored in an attempt to understand how individuals interpret and give meaning to their lives (phenomenology approach) (Taylor 2007:90).

## **Ethics**

Ethical approval was gained from Coventry University on the 18<sup>th</sup> April 2018- see appendix 1. Gate keeper approval was gained before recruitment commenced. All participants were provided with information about the study and signed consent forms before taking part, being made aware that participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw their data up to two weeks after the interview.

## **Recruitment**

Recruitment took place at a Mindfulness, Holistic Health and Well-Being centre in Coventry where weekly mindfulness meditation groups take place. The meditation teacher has over 20 years' experience of mindfulness. Ruijgrok-Lupton, Crane and Dorjee (2018: 124) found results which supported the hypothesis that higher mindfulness-based teacher training levels are linked to more positive participant outcomes. The study was advertised in the centre via a poster with clear inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The primary researcher of this study has attended the group for 2 years, interested to explore the impact of this occupation on others. Attendees do not meet outside the group and there is little chance to engage in conversation. Researcher bias was minimised by ensuring open ended questions, and gaining a second opinion on identified themes, increasing dependability of the data.

## **Participants**

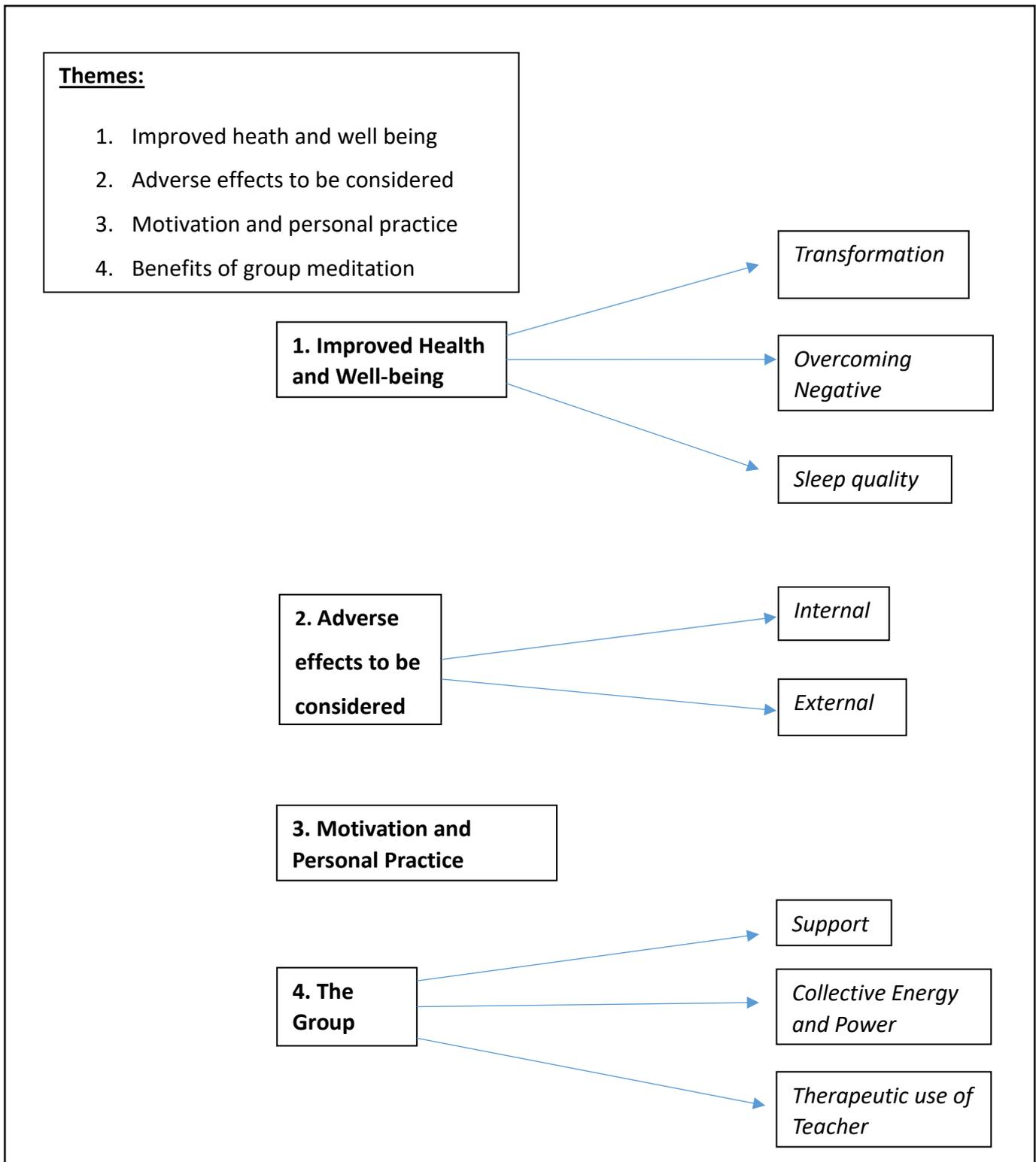
Purposive sampling was adopted in this study to identify participants who could give meaningful data (Taylor 2007). Participants had have attended a minimum of 4 group sessions, and practicing MM regularly (minimum 4 times a week). Participants must be over 18, understand English and sign a consent form confirming their understanding of the study's requirements. A variety of characteristics were included to allow diversity and increase transferability.

### **Table of Participant Characteristics- Demonstrating Versatility of MM**

<b>'Name'</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>
Participant 1	61	Female	Speech and language therapist	White British
Participant 2	34	Female	Self Employed	Black British
Participant 3	71	Male	Retired	White British with mixed European back ground
Participant 4	39	Female	Play therapist	White British

## Analysis and Findings

Thematic analysis was coined by Braun and Clarke defined as: “A robust, systematic framework for coding qualitative data, and for then using that coding to identify patterns across the dataset in relation to the research question” (2014).



## Sub Theme 1: Transformation

The largest subtheme associated with health and well-being was transformation and this was evident with all participants. Positive transformations were described including an increase in positive emotions such as peace, compassion, stillness, calmness, relaxation, connectedness, acceptance, empathy and appreciation of life. All participants described living more in the present moment, increasing their awareness and gaining the ability to let go of living in the past or worrying about the future.

Participant 1: *"I do sit and appreciate beauty now, I do appreciate things I feel more"*

Participant 2: *"I'm much more compassionate to myself and others"*

Participant 3: *"I'm totally chilled out and relaxed at all times, I don't worry about things, you know, I don't, I don't stress over things, you know, so it's made a big difference to my attitude, to life"*

*"There is no doubt about the impact on my health and wellbeing, as I said before I have a very relaxed attitude to life, I don't worry about the future, I'm not concerned about the past"*

Participant 4: *"Yeah and maybe my perspective has changed and that's why the world seems a lot different to me, yeah and it makes my days calmer, I don't get stressed by things, I don't worry so much, I haven't got so much anxieties about things, I'm just more able to tackle things I think, in a calm place".*

All participants spoke of a changed attitude to life (ego dissolution), commenting on changes in demeanour, living for the day, maintaining a relaxed attitude and experiencing realisations about the world/ life meaning. Realisations included: realising our thoughts aren't always truths, realisation that we can't avoid pain, we can only avoid suffering by adapting our reaction to pain and realisation that often what puts pressure on us is ourselves.

Participant 2: *"I now trust that I'm not the centre of the world and I'm not here to save it, but I'm just here to contribute in the best way I can"*

Participant 2: *"We can't avoid pain, we can just avoid suffering. Pain is just a natural part of life and sometimes pain, good things come from pain, growing pains, they call it the darkest part of the night is just before the dawn. These are things that happen all the time that we see and go, oh, isn't that, that butterfly beautiful, but it's gone through multiple changes, you know, it literally liquefied itself before it becomes a butterfly, so, you know, we see these things and then somehow we convinced ourselves that we are outside of this system."*

Participant 4: *"I find that maybe my perspective has changed of the world so now I don't see the world as such an angry place anymore I see it as a more peaceful place"*

One participant explained how MM practice enabled him to set targets and reach them. This included the task of removing all carbohydrates from his diet in order to tackle type 2 diabetes. Through mindfulness he was able to achieve his goal.

Participant 3: *"I am classed as diabetic, but I no longer receive any medication to control it and I think that I would not have done that without mindfulness helping to achieve it"*

Two participants described feeling more in tune with their body and intuition, becoming more aware of its signs and needs.

Participant 2: *"The main thing that I think has changed is I'm much more willing to listen to my instincts and my guts and my mind and I'm much more willing to act upon that"*

Participant 4: *"I think it makes you more in tune with your own body so you can feel what your body needs and wants so I am more able to listen to my body saying you need a bit of rest and I think yes I'll take that rest and I'll be allowing myself to do that and not beating myself up about it so I think when you become more in tune with yourself you can hear what your body needs and nourish it the way it needs to be nourished and not fight against it and that leads to better health".*

Participants also described how practicing MM has impacted those around them, spreading and sharing the benefits. Also increased skills of empathy, appreciation and awareness positively impact those around the individual.

Participant 2: *“Actually, in the long term it has flourished to other people”*

Participant 4: *“You can kind of keep your peace yet still interact with the world from a calmer place and actually I find then as your day goes on that calming effect kind of spirals on to the next person and the next person”*

One participant explicitly related his practice of MM to his achievement of a ‘mindful state’ in everyday life, even doing mundane tasks (sweeping floors).

Participant 3: *“...some tasks can be mindful, so for instance, if you're sweeping the floor of a large building, which I used to have to do, I'm sweeping the floor in the morning before we'd open to the public, I could do that in a mindful way. I'd make certain patterns I swept it, like like the Chinese and Japanese gardens where they raked their pebble gardens and I do it up the allotment when I'm raking the vegetable beds and that yano”.*

## **Sub theme 2: Overcoming Negative Emotions**

All participants described a loss of negative emotions and thought patterns due to their mindfulness meditation practice. Repeatedly, decreases in anxiety, upset, anger and stress were reported. Participants described feeling more in control of their emotions and accepting them for what they are, knowing they will pass. Participants also described finding

it easier not to get involved with drama and to let things go quicker, using acceptance. One participant shared her new perspective of seeing the negatives as lessons.

Participant 1: *"Negative sort of processes were hitting me constantly and it seemed that everything I do wasn't right after that and it was only going to the mindfulness meditation that sort of stopped that, it took several months but there was a shift happened...in my demeanour.. that that I suddenly became ok with myself again".*

*"I felt a shift in in me. I felt that I hadn't got all these negatives about me, you know I hadn't got all the upset, all the anxiety that I was walking around with, I just felt lighter"*

Participant 2: *"...it's easier to not get involved with drama and let it pass, before it would have been a whole blame game or whatever it is now I've got a lot more skills to be compassionate to myself, how I feel, be compassionate to others, not get caught in the story and just let things go so much quicker. So life can still be happening to a level, but I'm not necessarily buying into the drama around it".*

Participant 3: *"I don't exhibit anger anywhere near as much as I used to. I don't get stressed up and um, so yes it has changed me yes, my attitude to life has changed, I'm much more relaxed and I live for the day"*

Participant 4: *"Keep accepting that it is the way it is, keep accepting that you're like really and and be okay with this is what stress feels like, this is what anger feels like, this is what sadness feels like (take a step back) yeah and be allowed to feel these things and and almost draw a positive out of that and go wow get me I get to experience sadness that's amazing okay and know it won't last cause non of it lasts, it will all pass, it will all pass so erm yeah really really hard but really really quite transformational really".*

### **Subtheme 3: Sleep Quality**

Three of the four participants specifically discussed improved sleep quality, one also discussing the impact family MM practice has on her children's sleep. One participant even cured their insomnia through a dedicated daily practice.

Participant 1: *"...and I started to sleep properly because the upsets had caused that I wasn't really sleeping very well and I was having lots of negative thoughts".*

Participant 3: *"I was only getting three hours sleep a night. I went to mindfulness and after three weeks of doing it religiously every morning and every evening I was then sleeping normally after a period of three weeks back into a normal sleeping pattern"*

### **Theme 2: Adverse effects to be considered**

When asked directly, two participants commented that there wasn't anything negative about MM they had experienced.

Participant 1: *"There's nothing negative really that I've experienced from it".*

Participant 3: *"No I can't say that I have, no I can't put my finger on anything that is negative... I've not experienced anything that has made me feel that, you know, I'm going down the wrong path or it's disturbed me in anyway. I don't get easily disturbed".*

Adverse effects appeared to be primarily internal, however some important external adverse effects were discussed.

## Subtheme 1: Internal

Difficulties with MM are often experienced at the early stages and include ones' mind being all over the place, struggling to focus. People experienced difficulty in sitting still for so long and putting the discipline into a dedicated practice. To begin with, a participant could not relate to people at the MM group who expressed that 'everything is wonderful all the time'. However, she led onto saying that she has now got to that point of accepting things the way they are and striving to see the good.

Participant 1: *"...just listening to people in the group talking about everything's happy now, everything's fine, I can remember sitting in the group to begin with thinking.... but everything isn't right, everything isn't alright all the time dya know what I mean, bad things happen (mmm) bad things happen in peoples life's and I felt it was quite strange for people to sit there saying everything's wonderful, I've got a wonderful life, and I thought great, great for you but I can't feel that I can relate to that at the moment but um, gradually you do, I can relate to that now but it took me a long time of hearing the same messages (mmm) which is where I found the group helpful".*

Two participants particularly expressed walking down the unknown path as scary and a journey that is not easy and takes bravery. This is because it can break world views and raise big fundamental questions about life purpose and existence itself. One participant explained it can be a lot deeper and soul searching than you anticipated and knowing more can lead to feeling out of touch with the world.

Participant 2: *"...there's that initial, wow, I'm much calmer, much more relaxed, I feel happier, but then when it really starts to open, I'll just ask fundamental questions or you start to ask yourself fundamental questions and some of those questions are big questions and scary and questions make you think, well actually that suffering wasn't so bad, that ignorance isn't so bad but yeah. So I think it can make you feel a bit shook, shake you up".*

Participants expressed that it is a journey that is going to be uncomfortable sometimes and its one that can unearth suppressed traumas. One participant reported that once faced, she was able to move on from them, however if unsupported, she commented she would be really 'freaked out'.

Participant 4: *"the deeper you go into meditation you start to touch on things that are really uncomfortable er things you know like erm if there was a kind of shadow side it would be those negative things that you don't really want to think about you want to suppress but through your meditation your deeper processing they surface and for me there's been times when I think I don't want to do this anymore I don't want to do this anymore and I remember saying to (the teacher) I don't want to do this I really don't want to come today and it has made me think I'm not coming today It was that strong that I didn't want to look at this stuff that was coming up but it was a case of even that I thought I'm still going so I still went to the class and shared that experience and I sat with it and actually I went through it and I was actually okay not as bad as I thought it was going to be not as bad at all but if I didn't have that group to sit and that space and somebody to hear that I was struggling a little bit I probably would have gave it up, I know I would have given up actually because it can be quite daunting to be in that place on your own and it feels very lonely it feels very scary to maybe re-experience things you've experienced in your head this time which can be even more scary it does it does unearth things that need to come up but if you are not supported or you haven't got a containment for that I think it can really freak you out so yeah there has been things that are more difficult it's not an easy journey Its one that takes it takes bravery to go through it I think".*

## **Subtheme 2: External**

Two participants expressed negative external experiences as a result of their MM practice.

These primarily relate to other peoples' opinions (hippie, cult, very strange), feeling disconnected from those not on the same journey and feeling like the 'weirdo in the room'.

Participant 2: *"...when you are talking to non-meditators, you can share to a point but there's a point where I feel that now I'm the weirdo in the room".*

Participant 4: *“The thing I dislike is that if people don’t really understand it they can just think that you are very strange and the people that are quite close to me just think I’m turning into a hippie or there are people who maybe don’t agree with it and think it is some kind of cult or some kind of you know strange way and actually that can be quite damaging and can have quite a negative effect it can make you feel quite disconnected to people yeah I think that would be a negative you are going on a journey and if people don’t come on the journey then you are kind of leaving them behind almost and I don’t like that but at the same time you have to find a way of letting go of things that are not giving you any positivity in your life so it is quite hard”.*

One participant also addressed the idea that meditation is selfish and demonstrated how actually it is the opposite as ten minutes a morning to yourself may seem selfish however it cultivates compassion leading to better interactions and a non-judge mentality to others therefore impacting other people positively too.

Participant 2: *“... it's funny because in one hand they say it's selfish, but if I hadn't meditated I would be talking about that all day long when actually it's nothing to do with me. So my meditation allows me to take out because I am self-compassionate and I can look at this person and go, this person needs compassion”.*

### **Theme 3: Motivation**

All participants engage in MM practice daily and have it ingrained in their routine. All participants could no longer imagine it not being a part of their life.

**Participant 1:** *"...I feel I have to do it every morning, I feel if I don't do it, I don't feel right, I feel its beneficial to me without really knowing how to explain, you just notice it don't you, you may have a not so great day or something"*

*"I felt out of control, whereas this puts, makes me feel more in control"*

*"It wasn't an overnight thing, it was over time and after about a year I thought I don't really need to come anymore, but then I carried on going and I don't want to stop. I don't want to stop going"*

*"I can't imagine not sitting every morning now"*

*"I don't think I'll ever take the practice out of my morning practice"*

*"I don't feel as though I need to go because I NEED it now, in the beginning I NEEDED to go I needed that support, I needed to keep hearing all those fantastic words that (the teacher) gives to you yeah I needed that and now I don't need, I still enjoy that I still take something from it and I think I can take something from it every time" (the group)*

*"I'm going because I want to, not because I think I need this to keep me sane and to keep me you know from being upset and things" (the group)*

*"(the group) gives you motivation to do because you know that he's gonna ask you so how's your practice' so in the week it gives you the motivation to be like right I'm gonna do my practice"*

**Participant 2:** *"For me it just makes sense really. It's not even that as much that I like it, it makes sense that we shouldn't spend our lives in our heads that we should be present as we can be and enjoying it as much as we can be...and its hard, it sounds like a cliché that we can enjoy the negative, but it's our reality and the more we deny it and the more we hide from each other and ourselves the more suffering we have. So for me it's not necessarily about liking mindfulness as such, it just seems like a sensible way to live. So I like it for the sense that I feel like it, it helps me to be present and it helps me to appreciate my life more, but I think it just makes complete sense."*

*"It became a discipline, then it became a practice and then it became my path, my life."*

*"I think there's certain level, some people who will seek and as much as it might be challenging, there's a certain sense of this is what I have to do"*

**Participant 3:** *“my own wellbeing, the fact that it made me feel good, why would I wanna stop it if it makes me feel good, I will continue to do it , yano.”*

**Participant 4:** *“I think that’s where the transformation stuff happens, in those moments of uncertainty and don’t know what I’m doing but to look towards (the teacher) for reassurance and guidance and know it will be okay it will always be okay and I think knowing that has got me through lots of different difficulties”.*

*“I just kept practicing had to keep practicing had to keep going to the group and actually make my practice even stronger so that when I wobbled or things became rocky actually I was still safe enough within my practice to be grounded”*

*“It’s a felt experience so if you feel a difference in you then that motivates you to keep doing it as you can feel how beneficial it is and I think that’s, it’s become very much a routine but actually the benefit of doing it has become so powerful I could never not make that my routine now, once you know how good it feels it’s like I’m not going to not do that”.*

## **Theme 4 – The group**

The group itself was the foundation stone of all participants practice, providing them with continuous support, safety and guidance.

### **Subtheme 1: Support**

All participants reiterated the importance of the support they get from the MM group from the experienced teacher and shared experiences from other attendees, enjoying the company of like-minded, non-judgemental people.

Participant 1: *“you have got that constant reinforcement and it’s .... it’s... often the same message but then something new comes in about the yano someone might say something to (the teacher) and it triggers something in him and he says something and its really wow yeah light bulb moment”.*

*“I just feel that people need to experience it, like we’re experiencing in the group, for perhaps to really benefit from it... just reading about it or going on a one day course or a , yano 8 week course or something (yeah) probably just isn’t enough”*

*“There’s a constant change of people there, there are some people that are there all the time, but there’s new people come in as well isn’t there (yeah) yano so people are coming in with their own experiences”*

*“It’s nice to have that, the 2 perspectives, from the experience of (the teacher) and his erm, wisdom that he gives, but just normal people like you or I”*

*“I find it helpful listening to other peoples experience as well”*

Participant 2: *“...society is a little bit judgmental and therefore it makes it easier to talk to people who understand is what makes a big difference”.*

*“...went to the centre and then you've got somewhere to go back to. I think that makes a big difference is that when it's getting a little bit hard, you've got somewhere to go and ask the questions that are popping up and you know, they might not always have the answers, but it's also useful to know that there's people who have gone through it or might have the answer or might even just have some comfort to offer”.*

*“...there's a certain level of openness to that, that okay, well I've come this far and I've experienced that. And they've experienced that, so they've experienced something I haven't, but maybe it's still true even if it's not true for me. So, yeah, there's been plenty of support with the centre”.*

*“I do feel that people who meditate seem to be more open and warm”*

**Participant 3:** *"I like to go to meet other people and hear other people's experiences and the support I get really is from hearing other peoples tales and relating to how they tell them, I feel that I manage and I do it very well and I enjoy it, so I don't think I need any further support in that, But you do need, to hear other people's experiences and they it helps you to acknowledge the fact that it works for other people and not just yourself. It's not just a blip in my life, I've suddenly found yano, I've found it".*

*"For the first two to three years I definitely needed that foundation stone and I go really just to support the centre now to give them support"*

**Participant 4:** *"... if I didn't have that group to sit and that space and somebody to hear that I was struggling a little bit I probably would have gave it up..."*

*" (the group is) a valuable resource of information and I think that makes you feel even more supported it's not just (the teacher), the wider group here that have all got something valuable to contribute so I think that makes you feel quite safe as well"*

*"If I don't practice for 6 months and then I want to go back I know that that group will be there"*

*"that option is always there and I'm never going to close the door on that and I think that's so important and you just wouldn't get that in a short course you just haven't got ongoing support... what if your journey didn't fit into their 8 week programme you know, what if you did go really deep really quickly or you couldn't get as deep or whatever not everyone's gonna fit into that 8 weeks I think it has to be ongoing for as long as for life and I think that's what they offer so amazing".*

## **Subtheme 2: Power and collective energy**

All participants reiterated the power of group meditations and the connectedness between meditators, with two people experiencing short term temperature increase.

**Participant 1:** *“there’s something more powerful about the group”*

*“...the energy you get from other people occasionally in the group, I don’t know whether it’s just quite a lot of people in the room, I suddenly feel really really hot.... like really hot, and then it subsides and I don’t know whether its energy, it just goes”.*

*“it is something that is a very powerful experience, it’s a stronger sort of experience than what I feel at home but I think that what I do at home just keeps my day, each day going along nicely, but I just wouldn’t like to miss out on that experience”*

**Participant 2:** *“you’re going on a journey with people... so you, you end up having a certain level of connection with them as well”*

*“a sense of peace and warmth”*

*“I do think that group practice is, it’s just different. It’s got different quality, different depth.”*

**Participant 3:** *“My once a week attendance at a group mindfulness I find quite powerful. I think group a group of people doing it mindfully there is almost as though there is a quantum connection between us”*

*“There’s no doubt about it, It must be quantum physicists or something but we all, our minds must interact with one another because it feels so much more powerful”*

**Participant 4:** *“the group is so connected and the experiences are quite similar but quite unique and different as well”*

*“The group practice is a lot more powerful. I think I have experienced lots of things in groups group practice that maybe I haven’t so much on my own I think it is a collective energy that you experience in a group so often my hands will get really really hot and maybe I’ll see different pictures or visions in my head err within a group setting and I think it is a powerful collective energy of everyone meditating”*

### **Subtheme 3- The therapeutic teacher**

Each participant expressed the need for a quality teacher with enough experience to be able to offer support and guidance.

#### **Participant 1:**

*"I think if he was a less experienced person that wasn't able to really er..get the message across, perhaps people would drift away quicker"*

*"Yeah so there was something about that his manner and what he was saying, that I really felt, and he listens as well doesn't he, he listens to people"*

*"Something about what he says that leaves you feeling peaceful and calm and even though you still have your problems it doesn't take your problems away but he doesn't belittle the problems"*

**Participant 2:** *"when you're talking about your mind particularly or your person and your being, then you have to be discerning in who you trust that too"*

*"So if you're going to entrust it to somebody entrust to somebody you feel confident in"*

*"The more experience you have, the greater your ability to help people"*

#### **Participant 3:**

*"I don't think I could get anybody better than (the teacher) to do it for us"*

**Participant 4:** *"I think for this kind of practice you have to feel very safe and to feel safe you have to feel you are in the hands of someone who knows what they are doing and I think if you were you can't open this stuff up if you don't feel safe you just can't do it and I think with someone who has less experience what if you went to quite a deep level and they hadn't I think that would be quite dangerous cause they wouldn't know how to help or guide or support you and I think that would be really dangerous and I just wouldn't feel safe enough to do it because (the teacher) is so experienced and also he when he talks to us he can kind of trigger little ideas in your head and let you go explore them yourself and I think that's quite interesting okay so you just feel it's like your own journey but it's kind of like how about this, what about that and it still is your journey but it's just a kind of heads up (and he doesn't force anything on you does he) not at all and I think that's the key it's never forced and I feel people go because they are drawn to him and not because oh god I've got to go it's never like that its more I can't wait to sit and sit in awe and listen to what he has to say and I could sit there for hours and absorb it all and that's not even what he wants he wants you to go and explore your own journey you know and I think if I didn't feel safe I definitely wouldn't be able to practice on a deeper level that I think that comes with experience and you just can't get that with an 8 week course or whatever you can't you just can't."*

## **Discussion**

Results demonstrate that for these participants MM has been predominantly beneficial and has led to increased health and well-being encompassing an increase in positive emotions and a decrease in negative emotions and personal transformation. All participants commented on the powerfulness of the collective energy of the mediating group along with the support the space provides and the beneficial impact an experienced teacher has.

Internal issues related to initiating a dedicated MM practice and difficulty in training the mind to be calm. Internal issues that arise in deeper meditations included facing fundamental questions about life and re-experiencing traumatic, suppressed memories.

External issues included feeling disconnected to those not on the same journey and experiencing negative opinions from others.

Motivations cited to continue MM practice include maintaining personal wellbeing and emotional control, because it makes sense and enjoyment. The themes discovered in this research study reinforce existing research.

### **Improved Health and Wellbeing**

This theme, along with its subthemes of transformation, overcoming of negative emotions and sleep quality correlate with previous findings by Farias and Wikholm (2015), Morgan, Simpson and Smith (2015) and Reid (2009) who identified an increase in positive emotions, accepting, understanding and adapting thought patterns, enhancing wellbeing, self-compassion and present moment awareness, reflection, curiosity and a non-judge mentality. Achievement of a mindful state through MM practice was previously described by

Elliot (2011) and Kabat-Zinn (2002). Improved sleep due to MM was found by Blake et al. (2017) and Black, O'Reilly and Olmstead (2015) and was true for the majority of participants.

Overcoming negative emotions was repeatedly expressed by participants; reinstating Gardner and Moore's (2007) statement of accepting uncomfortable experiences, reduction in anxiety (Chen et al 2013) and decreasing stress (Newsome, Waldo and Gruszka 2011).

## **Adverse Effects**

Internal issues that arose from the study included traumatic memory re-experiencing, previously addressed by Van Dam (2018), Lustyk (2009) and Farias and Wikholm (2015).

Participant 4 concluded that the support of the group enabled her to face these traumas and come out the other side.

External issues that came up included a feeling of loneliness and disconnection from people who are not on the same path. No articles were found that reiterated this, however Ashley (2017) wrote a blog giving insight into this experience of loneliness, with 23 others commenting that they feel/ have felt the same, providing rich qualitative insight. Humans are social beings and predominantly value social interaction, love and intimacy over fame and money (Cacioppo and Patrick 2008: 5). Ashley leads on to say that the pain will dissipate and eventually be replaced by a strong sense of purpose, wisdom and empowerment here on earth.

## **Motivation**

For all participants a reason for continuing MM practice included maintaining positive health and wellbeing, because it feels good and because it makes sense. This reiterates Pepping et al.'s (2016) findings of motivation to continue MM to be fuelled by desire to eliminate emotional distress and enhance emotional regulation and wellbeing. Some participants reflected Shapiro's (1992) findings that increased meditation experience leads to self-exploration and liberation as motivation.

All participants offered advice to non-meditators/ beginners which has been attached as appendix 2.

## **The Group**

The findings demonstrated the group as the foundation of practice offering consistent support for an ongoing time, enabling people to feel safe and meet like-minded people (useful for if the journey becomes lonely). Carne (2016) states that finding a group of people to practice with is the single most useful key to supporting ongoing mindfulness. All participants commented on the power of the group, the collective energy cultivated and the ability to experience deeper meditations. Carne (2016) states that the energy of the group is deeply supportive, with the collective energy having the power to heal each member.

The need for an experienced, trustworthy teacher was expressed by participants as necessary in order to feel safe and to be drawn in in the first place. This was also previously found in the literature by Lustyk et al. (2009), Farias and Wikholm (2015) and Ruijgrok-

lupton, Crane and Dorjee (2018) whom state that more experienced teachers lead to more positive participant outcomes and without, could result in adverse effects on mental health.

### **Implications for Occupational therapy practice**

As initially discussed, Reid (2009) and Morgan, Simpson and Smith (2015) found MM to improve health care practitioners practice, encompassing occupational therapists. If OT's incorporated MM into their daily life not only would they experience the positive effects on health and well-being, but also could achieve increased present moment awareness with clients, offering them their full attention, providing them with a fully client centred experience. As Elliott (2011) previously states mindfulness is an area to be explored within occupational science as it has such strong links with occupational flow and engagement, as demonstrated by participant 3's achievement of a mindful state, and future research could consider the relationship between them.

If OT's promoted MM with their clients and places of work, this would facilitate increased occupational engagement and flow for clients, enabling them to fully immerse and be present in their occupations, therefore gaining maximum benefit. Furthermore as illustrated by the literature and the table of characteristics presented in this study, MM is versatile and can be undertaken by people of all characteristics and condition's, although caution needs to be taken when working with individuals with psychotic illness and the intervention should be adapted to suit the client.

As demonstrated by participants and existing literature, the technique of MM is a tool for life, empowering individuals to take control of their health and wellbeing and low cost,

therefore making it a promising sustainable health care intervention. The implication of MM interventions could save the NHS huge costs on pharmaceuticals (e.g. mental health, blood pressure, sleeping pills).

As suggested by this study, having a group which offers continual and consistent support with an experienced teacher is of utmost importance to ensure safety and progress of individuals. As stated by participants themselves, 8-week courses just are not enough and can even be seen as unethical- leaving participants with no support of guidance which could have adverse effects on health. It would be beneficial to create a community of practice of MM and OT combined to set up groups across the country so when people are referred to mindfulness interventions, there is already consistent and continuous support groups in place. OT's would be very suited to this role in communities as it could incorporate engagement in mindful occupations.

Another ideal environment for MM interventions to be implemented by OT's would be in schools. This would serve as a beneficial preventative approach. Schools currently put too much pressure and expectations on children and this needs to be addressed, as a preventative approach to decrease mental and physical health implications in the future, as demonstrated by Hostinar, Nusslock and Miller:

“The neuro-immune network hypothesis proposes that early-life stress sensitizes neuro-immune communication in ways that amplify inflammation and promote physical and mental health problems across the lifespan” (2018:152).

The role of the OT would be to teach methods that build the foundations of stability, placing individuals in a much better position to be able to engage in occupations that give their life meaning.

Furthermore, the impact of an increased amount of meditators could have even bigger impacts on society. Hatchard et al. (1996) discovered that reduced crime rate should occur when the group size of people meditating approaches the square root of 1% of the total population. Over a five-year period, the crime rate went from being the third highest to the lowest of the eleven metropolitan areas studied therefore indicating that meditation can reduce crime and increase peace.

### **Limitations and future recommendations for research**

Study design limitations include the small sample size as more participants would have increased the studies trustworthiness. Time constraints were a limitation as the ethical approval stage was lengthy and left only 1 month for the researcher to complete the study and analysis. Potential bias from researcher attending some group sessions, although steps were taken to reduce this (e.g. open questions).

### **Conclusion**

The findings from this study suggest that attendance at a MM group has the capabilities to change lives- improving people's health and wellbeing, creating positive thought patterns and offering a support network of people striving to the same goal. Implications of these findings indicate that MM offers a sustainable health intervention. However, like anything, it

must be approached with caution and steps to eliminate risk of individuals should be considered and the intervention adapted to the person. For the intervention to be ethical and most beneficial to users, MM groups would need to be set up in communities across the UK with experienced teachers, to provide continuous support and guidance. Occupational Therapists would be ideal for implementing this idea as it links to increased occupational engagement, flow and performance of individuals. OT's could develop a community of practice of combined OT with MM and work in partnership with experienced MM teachers across the country. The potential impact this could have on society could be huge.

*“If everyone in the world would just stop for a moment and take a deep breath; if everyone in the world became mindful of the controlled chaos that is life for one minute a day – sensing the gift of energy and love when our thoughts and attention are centred away from fear and fantasy – anchored soundly in the present – Yes, there would be less violence. When we stop to meditate we allow the gift of space, clarity and responsiveness to arise from our True Nature. From these qualities arises wisdom and love – not violence and tyranny.”*  
**(Bader 2012)**

**Key Messages/ Summary:**

- MM has the potential to improve health and wellbeing for people of a variety of characteristics.
- To facilitate positive transformation, ongoing group MM sessions with an experienced teacher are essential.
- Insight into the impact of MM on health and wellbeing, exploring the importance of continuous group sessions to support positive health outcomes and increase safety.

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## Appendix 1: Certificate of Ethical Approval



### **Certificate of Ethical Approval**

Applicant:

Lucy Randall-Smith

Project Title:

An exploratory study to examine the perceived impact and perceptions of mindfulness meditation upon community group attendees

This is to certify that the above named applicant has completed the Coventry University Ethical Approval process and their project has been confirmed and approved as Medium Risk

Date of approval:

18 April 2018

Project Reference Number:

P61479

## **Appendix 2: Advice from Meditator to Beginner**

**Participant 1:** *“got to give it a go to keep yano don’t just dismiss it to keep going and urm to yano sort of enjoy the experience, to get something from the experience i think you need to go quite regularly for a while”*

*“Persevere with it”*

*“I think somebody who is perhaps struggling with life in some way shape or form I think I would definitely tell them it would be something they should try “*

*“You don’t suddenly become good at meditating and that’s it you’re always a good mediator, sometimes it’s more urm the experience is more deep and meaningful than others isn’t it”.*

*“It’s the intent just the intent of sitting there is important, that’s important”*

**Participant 2:** *“Listen to your gut as much as possible. Your instincts if you prefer that term, and when you're first getting started, discipline is key and try and keep plugging back into the support system. And I don't think there's that much that you can offer somebody in the sense of advice because each journey's different. But I do think that, you know, the, if you're feeling, if you're feeling the urge to explore it, then it's worth exploring, but it won't necessarily produce what you want or what you expect. And that's not a negative, it's just that, you know, we're constantly changing and life is complex and that's, that's a wonderful thing.”*

**Participant 3:** *“They have to follow the pattern that’s being taught to them for the first few weeks at the very least because after one week, one session you're not going to realize the benefits of it. It takes several weeks of practice to realize the benefits”.*

**Participant 4:** *“make an appointment with yourself so say at 9am every single morning this is my five minutes and have a little tiny five minutes for yourself every every single day but make sure it is every day and just sit with yourself until it becomes your habit and if you do that then your practice will just take another level and will just kind of spiral on its own it’s not like you have to force it it will just happen as long as you start the initial appointment with yourself same time same place every single day if you can do that and set up a framework then I think your journey will evolve so that would be my advice just to keep going every single day”.*

### **Appendix 3: Interview Questions**

1. Characteristics:
  - Age
  - Gender
  - Ethnicity
  - Occupation
2. How long have you attended a/ the mindfulness meditation group?
3. How were you introduced to/ did you discover mindfulness meditation?
4. How often do you engage in your own mindfulness practice per week?
5. What do you like about mindfulness?
6. What do you dislike about mindfulness?
7. Do you perceive it to have impacted your health and wellbeing in any way?
8. What experiences have you had through mindfulness meditation that have been less positive?
9. How did that make you feel?
10. Was support available to you?
  - If so, from whom/ what and how did this impact your experience?
  - If not, what kind of support do you feel would have been/ would be beneficial?
11. What motivates you to continue to engage in mindfulness practice?
12. Have you changed since engaging in mindfulness practice? If so- how?
13. How do you compare and contrast group practice compared to individual practice?
14. Do you have any advice for people beginning to engage in mindfulness?

#### **Appendix 4- Suggested journal for the article**

The researcher of this article would suggest that this research would be suited for the **British Journal of Occupational Therapy** as it considers MM in relation to occupational science (flow and engagement) and provides valuable insight in how MM can influence individuals' health and well-being and motivation and overall engagement in meaningful occupations. MM could be of high relevance to occupational therapy in the future.