

# Mindfulness-based coaching in small groups: An approach for stress reduction and personal growth amongst university students and staff

## *A case study at the National University of Singapore*

Jody Cicolini, Aaron Quinn, Gaston Schmitz  
TeamUp, [www.teamup.co](http://www.teamup.co)  
Corresponding author [gaston.schmitz@teamup.co](mailto:gaston.schmitz@teamup.co)



This study investigated the effects of participation in the TeamUp mindfulness-based coaching program on perceived reaction to stress and personal development in a sample of students from the National University of Singapore. Students (n=30) completed a pre- and post- questionnaire and survey. Comparison of scores using paired t-tests showed significant improvement in self-score overall ( $P=0.001$ ), self-awareness ( $P=0.001$ ), ability to react positively to stress ( $P=0.002$ ), productivity ( $P=0.003$ ), self-confidence ( $P=0.010$ ), communication ( $P=0.006$ ), creativity ( $P=0.023$ ), clarity and purpose ( $P=0.007$ ), learning agility ( $P=0.050$ ), and ability to respond positively to change ( $P=0.028$ ). 85% of students and 93% of staff/faculty members rated the program very good or excellent and 80% of students and 93% of staff/faculty members reported a resounding positive effect on personal development. These findings suggest that participation in the TeamUp program may be advantageous for students to improve self-awareness and to experience personal growth.

### Background

Singapore has one of the highest performing education systems in the world and is recognized for its continual pursuit of improving its education system.<sup>1,2</sup> However, despite students achieving high academic standards, there is recent concern that students lack the personal skills and coping mechanisms required to manage stressful and intense work environments. Additionally, students have limited exposure to opportunities that develop emotional intelligence and create meaningful connections with others.<sup>3</sup>

The National University of Singapore (NUS) is Singapore's flagship education institution and 12<sup>th</sup> best ranked university in the world.<sup>4</sup> NUS is focused on ensuring graduates not only succeed academically, but are accomplished in self-awareness and confidence, and well-prepared to explore and serve the world with courage and curiosity.<sup>5</sup> For many students, university is their first time away from home; forging new relationships, dealing with new pressures and seeking clarity on many aspects of life, including meaning and purpose. Since NUS has no single program that addresses these concerns directly, a partnership was initiated with TeamUp, an online mindfulness-based coaching program, to explore facilitating personal development and change within the student cohort.

### TeamUp and the Asian Leadership Institute

TeamUp is a division of the parent company The Asian Leadership Institute; a pioneer in mindfulness-based coaching since 1984. The Asian Leadership Institute specializes in high-end leadership development programs and executive coaching to a diverse and global market of senior-level executives from Fortune500 companies and family-run businesses. TeamUp was established in 2013 to develop online coaching programs to make the Asian Leadership Institute's philosophy and insights available to a larger audience, including university students and staff.

TeamUp uses an innovative coaching method to facilitate change by establishing small groups of three participants, forming a Triad group, and a facilitator. The small group dynamic creates a personalized and supportive environment, stimulating connection, accountability and peer-coaching skills amongst participants. Participants are encouraged to challenge and support each other in the personal growth process in order to develop new and profound insights and to stay motivated throughout the program and beyond.

The program encourages active practice of two types of mindfulness: meditative mindfulness and applied mindfulness. Meditative mindfulness practices enable participant to create more self-awareness and reduction of stress through engaging in activities with present-moment awareness including, but not

limited to formal meditation. Applied mindfulness consists of bringing attention to specific behavioural, mental and emotional patterns that participants identify and shift using more systematic awareness and mindfulness techniques. Applied mindfulness practices are unique to each person and can include personalized practices to improve key relationships, deal with stress and strong emotions, and communicate more effectively.

Over the last few decades, mindfulness has proven to be a useful tool for improving physical and mental health in a secular context detached from religious beliefs.<sup>6</sup> However, there have been relatively few studies introducing mindfulness to university students and staff aimed at promoting self-contemplation, development, empathy and efficacy in regulating emotions.<sup>7</sup> The hypothesis of this study was that students would learn the concept of mindfulness and mindfulness techniques to deal with difficulties such as anxiety, stress or social incompetence, and to improve interpersonal communication, self-awareness and eventually a higher personal quality of life.

### Study Participants

36 students and 26 staff/faculty members from NUS voluntarily enrolled to participate in the nine-week TeamUp program. Although the primary focus was the student population, staff/faculty members were invited to participate in order to experience the program. The control group was made up of 35 students and staff who did not participate in the program. The program took place between October 2015 and January 2016; a high stress period when most of the students were preparing for, and taking, key university exams.

Triads were scheduled to meet weekly online with a facilitator for nine weeks. Most triads were extended by one or two weeks due to varying schedules and exam commitments. Each weekly module consisted of reading several texts, suggested texts, videos, exercises, an online forum and a 90-minute group discussion. Group discussions involved practicing mindfulness techniques, various guided body scans, inquiry exercises, and discussing homework assignments.

### Data collection

TeamUp developed a 54-item, Lickert-type questionnaire (TUQ) based on nine facets (self-awareness; stress; productivity; confidence; communication; creativity; clarity and purpose; learning agility; and comfort with change) identified by NUS. The questionnaire was given to students before commencement and after completion of the program. The control group completed the questionnaires at similar time-points. Students and staff were given a post-participation evaluation form on personal experiences and were also invited to rate the program.

**Table 1** Effect of TeamUp intervention on TUQ score (Participants N=30)

	TUQ Score; Mean (SD)		Difference		Paired t-test
	Baseline	After Intervention	Absolute difference	Relative change, %	
<b>Student</b>	167.2 (22.4)	186.5 (18.4)	19.4	11.6	0.001
<b>Control</b>	179.5 (18.5)	178.5 (16.6)	1.0	-0.6	0.813

### Statistical methods

Paired-student t-tests were used to compare the mean difference of self-score before and after participation in the program to compare the relative change in scores. *P* values less than 0.05 we considered statistically significant. The responses to the self-evaluation form examining personal experience were summarized into themes.

### Results

30 students completed the TUQ questionnaires. Significant improvement was observed for overall experience ( $P=0.001$ ), self-awareness ( $P=0.001$ ), ability to react positively to stress ( $P=0.002$ ), productivity ( $P=0.003$ ), self-confidence ( $P=0.010$ ), communication ( $P<0.006$ ), creativity ( $P=0.023$ ), clarity and purpose ( $P=0.007$ ), learning agility ( $P=0.050$ ), and ability to respond positively to change ( $P=0.028$ ). There was no significant change observed in the control group, however it is worth noting that the control group decreased overall in self-score, perhaps as a consequence of the coinciding exam period at NUS (Table 1, Graph 1).

23 students and 26 staff/faculty members completed the self-evaluation and rating survey. Students described a broad range of experiences in the evaluation form. However, the most frequently observed insights reported were an increased ability to look at one's self and others without judgment and bias, better coping mechanisms particularly regarding stress (specifically during the intense exam period), and increased confidence and willingness to try new things. Students reported feeling safe and comfortable to share their personal challenges and experiences in the group discussions, however, they were slightly less keen to participate in the online forum. Staff/Faculty members described feeling safe and comfortable to express personal challenges and valued participating in the group discussions despite being in Triads with their peers. Staff/faculty members also reported

experiencing an increase in self-awareness and better relationships with colleagues.

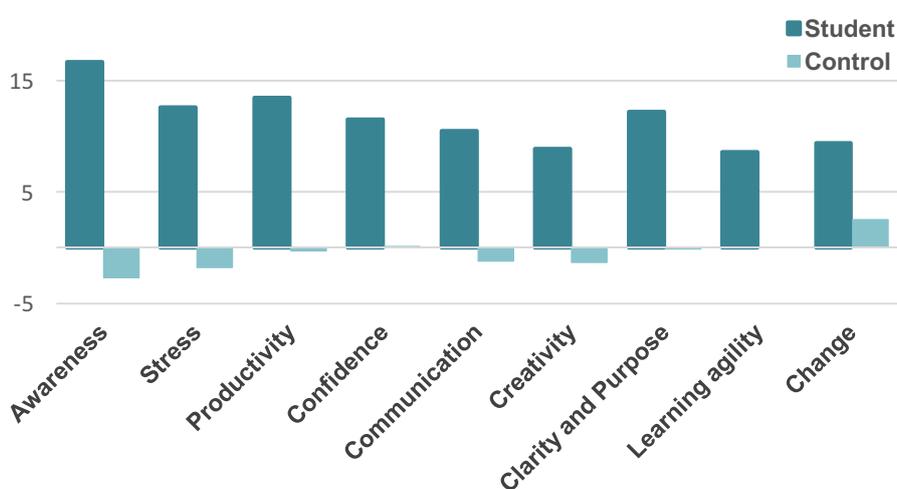
80% of students and 93% of staff/faculty members reported experiencing resounding positive effect on their personal development, and 85% of students and 93% of staff/faculty members rated the program very good or excellent. The quality of facilitation was rated, on average, 9.4 out of 10 across fourteen facilitators.

### Discussion

The outcomes that emerged from participating in the TeamUp program are consistent with other applications of mindfulness, for example; increased calmness, reduced anxiety, more consciousness of action, thoughts, emotions, and enhanced interpersonal communication based on compassion. This study demonstrated that change occurs when mindfulness is increased, and that observing thoughts and feelings and seeing things from the others' perspective has a positive influence on their relationships and ability to communicate effectively. This study did not assess the impact participation had on academic achievement, or future employability; however, students positively reported feeling calmer and better able to cope with stress and complex interpersonal scenarios. It is worth noting the completion rate of 95% is very high particularly given that students did not have to pay for the course. It should also be noted that the program took place over a busy exam period with the majority of students completing this program in addition to a heavy work schedule and with no academic incentive to do so.

There are several limitations of this study that should be considered. Firstly, the sample size was small and may limit the qualitative data, participants were also self-selected to join the program, and this may introduce a bias. Finally, the positive effect of participating in a small group setting, which may have therapeutic effects, has not been explored separately.

In conclusion, this study demonstrated significant improvement across multiple facets specified by NUS as areas that students needed to develop. The delivery model of TeamUp also enhanced cross-learning and collaboration between students and between staff and faculty members. These findings suggest that participation in the TeamUp program is beneficial for students to improve self-awareness and to develop the skills and mindsets to effectively deal with inevitable future challenges.


**Graph 1** Bar chart showing percentage of mean relative change in self-score before and after participating in the TeamUp program

### References

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