


Chapter 6

Mindfulness for Health and Well Being:

An Innovative Physical Education Course in the University of the Philippines Diliman

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ABSTRACT

The University of the Philippines (UP) Diliman College of Human Kinetics offers a Physical Education (PE) class called Mindfulness for Health and Well-being (MHW), aimed at teaching mental health skills and promoting pro-social behavior among college students through mindfulness practices and cognitive behavioral

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therapy exercises. The Centre for Mindfulness Studies Toronto and FriendlyCare Foundation, Inc. developed the curriculum and tested it in a randomized controlled trial funded by the Templeton World Charity Foundation. This course seeks to enhance Filipino traits such as empathy, compassion, and altruism by strengthening mental health skills, including attention control, emotional regulation, and self-awareness. Following the trial, UP Diliman continued to offer MHW as a PE elective, taking initial steps to address long-standing gaps in mental health education, skill-building, help-seeking behaviors, and destigmatization.

INTRODUCTION

As much as it is desirable to have one official definition of what Physical Education (PE) is and to neatly place a mindfulness-based curriculum within it, the literature on the subject offers a breadth of definitions and directions. PE is, at its core, physical activity, but its scope extends far beyond mere movement. It encompasses the holistic concept of total well-being, merging physical fitness with mental and emotional health. For some, it focuses on structured sports and competition, cultivating discipline and teamwork. For others, it includes recreation, play, and exercise, offering a more relaxed and inclusive approach to engaging the body. In its performance-driven aspect, PE encourages striving for excellence, achievement, and physical prowess. Yet, it does not solely focus on external results; it also needs to address the cognitive processes and emotional states that accompany physical engagement. For example, activities may be aimed at fostering emotional regulation, attention control, or stress management, especially in mindfulness-based practices, where the mind-body connection is emphasized. Furthermore, PE is ever-evolving. It responds to societal trends, scientific advancements, and changing educational priorities. What was once a rigid focus on physical development has expanded to incorporate mental well-being, social development, and the cultivation of personal values such as resilience and empathy. This fluid nature makes PE an adaptable subject, continuously redefining itself to meet the needs of students in an increasingly complex world. In short, PE resists simple classification because it is a multifaceted field that reflects the dynamic interaction between the physical, mental, and social aspects of human development.

This shift in focus is further emphasized by global health concerns, including the obesity epidemic and declining physical fitness among school children, driven largely by increasingly sedentary lifestyles. These issues led to the 2013 UNESCO Global Survey (UNESCO, 2013), which highlighted the urgent need for educational institutions to address not only physical inactivity but also the broader implications of unhealthy habits among young people. The survey underscored the urgent need for

educational institutions to address not only physical inactivity but also the broader implications of poor health habits among young people. Interestingly, in the same year, the Sixty-sixth World Health Assembly—comprising Ministers of Health from 194 Member States—recognized the escalating mental health crisis and adopted the WHO's *Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan*. Originally designed for 2013–2020 and later extended to 2030 (World Health Organization, 2021), the plan maintained its four major objectives: fostering effective leadership and governance for mental health, delivering comprehensive and integrated mental health and social care services within community-based settings, implementing strategies focused on promotion and prevention, and strengthening information systems, evidence, and research. These objectives reflected a holistic approach to health, emphasizing the need to address mental health in tandem with physical health to ensure overall well-being.

While PE materials have consistently highlighted the risks associated with sedentary lifestyles and the increasing rates of obesity among school children, there has been a conspicuous gap in addressing the looming mental health crisis, particularly among Filipino children. Mental health challenges have become an alarming issue that demands immediate attention. According to the World Health Organization, mental health illnesses rank as the third most common form of morbidity among Filipinos, with the problem reaching critical levels in the youth population. In fact, data from the Global School-Based Student Health Survey (World Health Organization, 2015) reveal that 16.8% of Filipino students aged 13 to 17 have attempted suicide at least once within the year prior to the survey (Malolos et al., 2021). This striking statistic highlights the severity of the mental health crisis, illustrating the urgent need for interventions that address both the physical and psychological well-being of children.

Despite the rising obesity rates and the focus on physical health, mental health concerns have not been adequately integrated into the physical education curricula in the Philippines. The absence of mental health education perpetuates stigma and prevents young people from accessing the care they need (Campoamor-Olegario et al., 2024). The WHO's *Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan* and global data like the 2015 survey serve as a call to action, suggesting that educational programs must evolve to incorporate mental health literacy and interventions, creating a balanced approach to both physical and mental health. Addressing these challenges in a comprehensive manner is critical to fostering a healthier, more resilient generation.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter addresses a significant research gap in the integration of mental health education within PE curricula, particularly in the context of Filipino youth. While PE traditionally emphasizes physical fitness and performance, the mental health challenges faced by students—such as stress, anxiety, and depression—are often overlooked. Despite the growing recognition of the importance of mental well-being, there is a scarcity of programs that address mental health in tandem with PE, leaving an unmet need for holistic health education in the Philippines and globally. The primary objective of this chapter is to explore the development and implementation of the Mindfulness for Health and Well-being (MHW) course at the University of the Philippines Diliman, an innovative program that integrates secular mindfulness practices and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) exercises into the PE curriculum. The course aims to promote both physical and mental health skills, providing students with tools to manage stress, build resilience, and improve emotional regulation. By addressing both physical and mental health, this course contributes to the overall well-being of students and offers a scalable, evidence-based solution to the mental health crisis among the youth.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Evolving Perspectives in Physical Education

David Kirk (2009), in his book *Physical Education Futures*, explored the complex landscape of PE, highlighting both the shared elements that persist over time and the significant lack of consensus within the field. He noted that despite the ongoing evolution of PE, certain “*enduring commonalities*” remain central to its practice. These commonalities are fundamental components of how PE is implemented across different contexts, whether in schools, sports, or recreation programs. At the same time, Kirk (2009) pointed out the challenges stemming from a “*lack of consensus*” among physical educators about the very nature of their subject. He explained, “*As some physical educators bemoan a lack of consensus among their peers about the nature of their subject, when a number of apparently competing written definitions of physical education vie for their attention, and when they point to a proliferation of titles for university departments, they overlook the enduring commonalities of physical education practice, particularly in terms of what people say and do in the subject’s name*” Kirk (2009). This tension between commonality and diversity cre-

ates a unique dynamic within the field, where educators must navigate competing definitions while still acknowledging the core practices that unite them.

“The beliefs and values about embodiment expressed in and through contemporary physical culture arguably bear little resemblance to the beliefs and values in the 1940s and 1950s. A constituent part of this change in beliefs and values, for better or worse, is that science has advanced our understanding of the relationships between organized physical activities, health and psychophysiological processes.” (Kirk, 2009)

Looking at the commonalities, the 2013 *World-wide Survey of School Physical Education* conducted by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) and NWCPEA (Northwestern Countries Physical Education Association) listed Health-related Fitness, Motor Skills, Active Lifestyles, and Personal/Social Development as common themes in primary and secondary schools' PE curricula. The survey also reported changes in some countries: *“Educational reforms and responses to the concept of healthy well-being related to active lifestyles and a perceived obesity epidemic have prompted changes in physical education curricula. Links between physical education and personal and social development are occurring in some countries”* (UNESCO, 2013).

Physical Education in the Philippines

Republic Act No. 5708 or *Schools Physical Education and Sports Development Act of 1969* stated *“physical development hand in hand with mental development”* even as succeeding rulings, guidelines in the Philippine education system omitted *“mental development”*:

“An integrated physical education and sports development program in all schools in the Philippines (Section 2) The goal is to instill in young citizens a proper appreciation of the importance of physical development hand in hand with mental development in individual and social activities (1) and the provision for a well-rounded physical education program must be addressed to physical growth, social training, and personal discipline for pupils and students as well as superior athletic achievement for those who are psychologically inclined and physically gifted.”

As we observe, the obvious commonalities of PE in the Philippines are:

1. PE is a general subject and may be the only one that gives opportunity to all students to participate in physical activities that promotes well-being. In the University of the Philippines (UP) Diliman, the premier state university in the country, as in other colleges, all students need to go through PE 1, 2, 3 in to complete their degree. Hence this is where interventions to promote well-being can be offered.

2. PE promotes fitness
3. It establishes a pattern of healthy living
4. It is done through movement, physical activities and exercises

All college students in the Philippines need to go through several semesters of PE. Integrating the development of mental health skills is a path to fulfill the WHO Action plan of implementing “strategies for promotion and prevention...” and a way to promote fitness, healthy living and well-being.

At present, mental health education is virtually nil. Socio-cultural norms have stigmatized mental health concerns, despite a rapidly changing social context, including urbanization, globalization, worker migration, mobile technology and social media; not to mention academic, family, relationship pressures which have all contributed to a general rising trend in mental health problems among the youth (Arif et al., 2024; Garcia, 2024; Lobo et al., 2024).

MINDFULNESS-BASED INTERVENTIONS

Secular Mindfulness Practices and CBT

Buddhism has long been regarded as a path to a virtuous life, with mindful meditation being one of its central practices. In recent years, this ancient practice has been adapted into a secular form and has become the foundation for a variety of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs). These interventions primarily focus on generating salutary benefits such as stress reduction, improved mental health, and enhanced emotional regulation. Numerous meta-analyses have supported the effectiveness of MBIs, showing significant improvements in mental health outcomes across diverse populations (Demarzo et al., 2015; Fendel et al., 2021; Goldberg et al., 2018). Rooted in Buddhist traditions, secular mindfulness retains essential attitudinal elements including non-judgmental awareness, curiosity about the present moment, kindness towards oneself, patience, gratitude, generosity, letting go, trust, non-striving, and acceptance.

A key mechanism in mindfulness is the ability to observe one’s internal experiences without becoming entangled in them. Brown et al. (2007) described this as the creation of a “mental gap” between one’s awareness and the content of that awareness, allowing individuals to notice their thoughts, emotions, and sensations without reacting automatically. According to Brown et al. (2007), “*the operation of mindfulness may occur through the creation of a mental gap between the stimulus-response.*” This gap creates a space for reflection and clarity, where individuals can observe their moment-to-moment experiences more objectively. Similarly, Shapiro

et al. (2006) explained that through mindfulness, “*one is able to disidentify from the contents of consciousness (i.e., one’s thoughts) and view his or her moment-by-moment experience with greater clarity and objectivity*” (p. 377). This process enables individuals to attend to sensory experiences without the influence of judgment, allowing them to suspend interpretations or narratives shaped by past experiences.

Moreover, research has demonstrated that mindfulness practices have tangible effects on the brain. In a study by Lazar et al. (2005), meditation was found to be associated with increased cortical thickness in areas of the brain linked to bodily awareness. This finding suggests that regular meditation enhances the brain's capacity for attention to bodily sensations, which in turn fosters adaptive body awareness. Typically, we fail to notice our bodies until something goes wrong; however, through mindfulness, individuals can cultivate a heightened sense of bodily awareness, potentially delaying or even preventing maladaptive responses to stress or discomfort. By practicing physical movements mindfully, individuals develop the mental capacity to suspend impulsive judgments and automatic interpretations (Barua, 2024; Hauwaert et al., 2024; Tavares et al., 2024), allowing their experiences to unfold naturally without interference.

Compassion and Empathy in Secular MBIs

Generally, secular mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) do not explicitly aim for higher-order outcomes, such as cultivating virtue or achieving eudaimonia (a state of flourishing), which are often central to traditional Buddhist practices. However, as Farb (2014) has noted, “*mindfulness must be accompanied by an intention towards virtue,*” suggesting that while virtue may not be the primary focus, it is inherently present in the practice. In recent years, there has been growing interest in the West in integrating more explicitly Buddhist elements into secular MBIs, such as loving-kindness (metta) meditation. These practices, while secularized for broader application, retain their core focus on fostering positive social emotions like compassion and empathy. A recent meta-analysis by Luberto et al. (2018) highlighted the effectiveness of these secularized MBIs in increasing levels of empathy, compassion, and self-compassion. The analysis revealed that participants in such interventions experienced significant improvements in these prosocial emotions, which are crucial for mental and emotional well-being. These findings suggest that incorporating practices like loving-kindness meditation into mindfulness programs can deepen the emotional and interpersonal benefits of mindfulness, extending its

impact beyond stress reduction to fostering greater empathy and compassion for oneself and others.

Neuroscientific studies have further supported the positive effects of compassion training. In the article *Compassion vs. Empathy: Designing for Resilience*, Peters and Calvo (2014) explored how training in compassion and empathy affects both experts and novices. The surprising finding was that compassion training, even when undertaken for a short period, triggers positive affect and related brain activations. As Singer and Klimecki (2014) put it, “*This finding underlines the malleability of social emotions, as it shows that a short-term compassion training of several days can foster positive feelings and related brain activations, even when persons are exposed to the distress of others.*” This suggests that cultivating compassion may be an effective coping strategy to enhance positive emotional states, even in the face of suffering. The ability to generate positive affect through compassion, especially when faced with difficult emotions or witnessing the suffering of others, contributes to building emotional resilience.

Further supporting these findings, Loving-Kindness Meditation (LKM), a key component of some MBIs, has been shown to provide significant emotional and regulatory benefits. Wong et al. (2022) observed that LKM’s ability to enhance emotional regulation is tied to its capacity to help individuals recognize and accept negative emotions rather than reacting impulsively to them. Recognizing and accepting negative emotions is a critical factor in maintaining mental health. Psychological measures, such as the ability to observe, describe, and refrain from reacting to inner experiences, highlight the beneficial effects of LKM. These findings have important implications for clinicians working with individuals who struggle with emotional regulation, as they suggest that cultivating compassion can lead to more effective management of challenging emotional states (Hofmann et al., 2011).

Deriving Elements from CBT Exercises

One of the key components of CBT is the development of awareness regarding negative thoughts and understanding how these thoughts influence physical sensations, behavior, and the overall interpretation of experiences. CBT encourages individuals to recognize patterns of automatic thinking, particularly those that are negative or irrational, and to examine the impact these thoughts have on their emotional and physical well-being. A central challenge in CBT is helping individuals evaluate and reframe these thoughts, transforming them into more balanced and constructive perspectives. A common CBT technique involves journaling or writing down negative thoughts as they arise, along with associated emotions, bodily sensations, and behaviors. This practice serves to slow down the automatic thought process, providing an opportunity for greater awareness. By documenting these thoughts,

individuals can step back and observe them more objectively, thereby interrupting the immediate reaction and creating a space to challenge the validity of these thoughts. This delay in the thought-response process allows for cognitive restructuring, in which the individual can replace distorted thoughts with more realistic and adaptive alternatives. Studies have shown that such cognitive restructuring can significantly reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression by altering the way individuals interpret and respond to stressful situations (Ramsay, 2010).

CBT exercises also emphasize the importance of developing routines and engaging in activities that reinforce positive behaviors. For instance, individuals are encouraged to identify specific tasks or behaviors that they can implement to counteract negative thought patterns or habits. This process helps in creating a structured approach to habit formation, as well as fostering the ability to view situations from multiple perspectives. Establishing a system of regular activities can be particularly helpful in maintaining long-term behavioral changes, especially in the context of overcoming procrastination or task avoidance. Negative or task-interfering thoughts frequently involve exaggerated views of the difficulty or unmanageability of a task, often shaped by past problematic experiences. For example, thoughts like “*My work is never good enough*” or “*This is going to be terrible*” are common distortions that magnify the perceived difficulty of a task. On the other hand, task minimization, such as thinking “*I have plenty of time, I can do it later,*” can also hinder progress. CBT techniques aim to develop credible alternative possibilities to these distorted thoughts, enhance motivation for follow-through, and establish concrete action plans for task completion (Burns, 1989). By consistently practicing these techniques, individuals can improve their cognitive flexibility, reduce negative self-talk, and increase their overall motivation to complete tasks.

MINDFULNESS FOR HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

In 2019, after receiving a grant from the Templeton World Charity Foundation (TWCF), FriendlyCare Foundation, Inc., in collaboration with the Centre for Mindfulness Studies (CMS) in Toronto and the UP Diliman, developed and piloted a mindfulness-based program. Originally named Mindfulness for Compassion and Well-being, the program was designed to enhance prosocial qualities such as empathy, compassion, and altruism, aligning with TWCF’s goals of promoting character development and fostering emotional resilience among young people. The program was initially targeted at college-aged participants from UP Diliman and the University of the Cordilleras, aiming to integrate mindfulness-based practices into students’ daily lives. The course was later aptly renamed “*Mindfulness for Health and Well-Being*” when it was offered as a PE elective for university students. Key figures, including

then-UP Chancellor Michael L. Tan and Dean Carlos Francis Diaz of the College of Human Kinetics, played instrumental roles in bringing the MHW course into UP Diliman's PE curriculum. Their leadership facilitated the integration of mindfulness into the university's educational offerings, ensuring the program reached a diverse student population from various colleges across the university. Initially envisioned as a program that could also be incorporated into other fields, such as psychology, sociology, National Service Training Program (NSTP), or life skills education, PE ultimately emerged as the ideal platform to introduce the program to the widest range of students. By embedding MHW into the PE curriculum, the course became a mandatory component for all students, providing them with essential tools for both physical and mental well-being.

The in-person trial of the course, however, faced significant challenges when the COVID-19 pandemic forced a sudden shift to online learning. Like many educational programs during this time, MHW had to rapidly adapt to a digital format, creating logistical challenges but also revealing new opportunities for scalability and access. Despite the unforeseen shift, the course successfully transitioned to online and hybrid formats, allowing students to participate in mindfulness practices remotely. This adaptability highlighted the resilience of the program and its capacity to serve students from different locations, as long as technical requirements—such as reliable internet connections and access to a laptop or desktop computer—were met.

Post-pandemic, however, feedback from participants suggested a strong preference for in-person sessions. Students noted the differences in ease of communication, the benefits of practicing mindfulness together, and the deeper rapport built when gathered in a physical space. This preference may be culturally specific, particularly among Filipinos and other Asian populations, where non-verbal communication and shared physical presence play significant roles in social interaction and community building. While online or hybrid formats can be beneficial for participants from different regions or countries, the in-person delivery remains the preferred method due to the unique social dynamics that occur when participants are physically present together. One of the course's primary objectives is addressing entrenched gaps in mental health education, skills-building, help-seeking behaviors, and the stigmatization of mental health issues. MHW takes significant steps toward filling these gaps by providing students with essential mindfulness tools that help them manage stress, regulate emotions, and develop greater self-awareness. Additionally, the course fosters a deeper understanding of *kapwa* (a Filipino concept of shared humanity), encouraging students to extend their compassion and empathy beyond themselves to their peers and communities. Many participants have reported that the course has positively influenced their ability to connect with others and has inspired them to become more active in helping their communities.

Although MHW was initially conceptualized for college-age students, its potential applications extend beyond PE. The program could be offered as a part of social science courses (e.g., psychology, sociology), the NSTP, values education, life skills programs, or development studies. However, in UP Diliman, offering the course through the College of Human Kinetics as a PE elective proved to be the most efficient and inclusive way to introduce it to a broad student audience. As PE is a requirement for all students, this approach ensured that the course reached a large and diverse group of participants across various disciplines. Now in its third semester as an officially offered PE course, MHW has proven its value within the university. The course not only equips students with mindfulness practices that support their physical and mental well-being but also aligns with the evolving role of PE as a holistic discipline that addresses both physical health and emotional resilience. The success of MHW at UP Diliman demonstrates that mindfulness, when integrated into a university setting, can have a lasting impact on student health and community engagement.

MHW as a PE Course

At the core of the MHW program is a fundamental understanding of the mind-body connection. This makes it a natural fit for integration into the curriculum of the College of Human Kinetics, where disciplines such as physical training, recreation, and sports psychology are already well-established. MHW recognizes that mindfulness is not only about external physical performance but also about the awareness of internal experiences—the body, mind, emotions, and behaviors. This holistic approach challenges and expands traditional notions of PE, pushing the boundaries of what we commonly consider well-being.

Historically, PE has been primarily focused on physical performance, often associated with sports, physical training, and the achievement of bodily perfection. The goals of PE have typically been externally oriented, aiming for excellence in form and physical prowess. As a result, mental health has largely been overlooked in the context of PE, only gaining significant attention in recent years. In the Philippines, mental health received formal recognition with the passage of the *National Mental Health Act* (Republic Act No. 11036) in 2018, which marked an important shift in the national health agenda. Mental health, unlike physical health, tends to focus more on internal processes, such as thoughts, emotions, and the management of negative thinking patterns. Neglecting the mental aspect of well-being in favor of a singular focus on physical health places individuals—particularly athletes and performers—at unnecessary risk of burnout, anxiety, and emotional discomfort. Historically, many athletes and artists have suffered as a result of prioritizing physical achievements

over mental well-being, leading to both physical and psychological distress (Glick et al., 2016; Schaal et al., 2011).

MHW addresses these gaps by offering a more balanced and integrated view of health that incorporates both physical and mental well-being. The program's framework emphasizes that a healthy individual is not just physically fit but also mentally resilient, emotionally stable, and socially connected. A holistic view of health suggests that well-being extends beyond personal achievements, contributing to healthier communities and societies (Baer, 2015; Kabat-Zinn, 2005). MHW draws from several well-established and effective mindfulness programs, such as Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), and Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC), all of which have been shown to improve mental and physical health outcomes. Additionally, MHW incorporates indigenous social technology approaches, such as the Healing Circle, which fosters a sense of community, shared understanding, and emotional support, particularly relevant in culturally specific contexts.

Theoretical Framework of MHW

The MHW program begins by introducing basic mindfulness practices to cultivate self-regulation, which then builds up to more advanced mindfulness capabilities. These practices aim to enhance students' Sense of Self, Sense of Belonging, and Sense of Meaning and Purpose (see Figure 1). In each class session, students engage in yoga-based mindful movements, explore relevant topics through experiential activities and discussions, and practice meditation together. These mindfulness activities serve as foundational exercises that help students develop key skills, such as attention control, self-awareness, emotional regulation, and self-compassion (Shapiro et al., 2006). Over time, these skills become critical tools for building personal resilience and coping mechanisms, ultimately empowering students to take greater control of their mental and emotional states, thereby fostering a deeper sense of agency.

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework Mindfulness for Health and Wellbeing



As the course progresses, students expand these core skills into more advanced mindfulness capabilities, including attention monitoring, acceptance, decentering/appraisal, reducing experiential avoidance, and cultivating compassion (see Figure 2). These key capabilities allow students to move beyond simple self-regulation, helping them to navigate difficult emotional and cognitive experiences with greater ease and objectivity. For instance, the practice of decentering—viewing one’s thoughts and emotions from an objective distance—helps individuals avoid becoming overwhelmed by their emotions, while compassion training fosters kindness toward oneself and others, enhancing social connections and emotional resilience (Creswell, 2017; Hofmann et al., 2010). Through the development of these skills, students gain a stronger sense of self, a heightened sense of belonging to their communities, and a greater understanding of their purpose in life. This comprehensive framework of self-regulation, emotional resilience, and compassion prepares students not only for the challenges of university life but also for their roles as healthy, productive members of society.

Figure 2. Key Mindfulness Capabilities



Teaching and Learning in the MHW Program

While teaching any mindfulness program may seem straightforward on the surface, the reality is far more nuanced. Facilitating mindfulness practices, particularly in an educational context like MHW, requires a deep level of competency, which develops through time, experience, and repeated exposure to different participants. Each class presents unique dynamics, as facilitators encounter various participants with different backgrounds, experiences, and needs. Therefore, even when a course structure remains constant, no two sessions or classes are ever truly alike. The content of each session emerges organically from the experiences and reflections of the participants and the facilitator, making each interaction dynamic and adaptive (Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Shapiro et al., 2006).

A central element of the MHW program is creating an atmosphere of openness and fostering a safe space for participants. These values are introduced at the beginning of the course and maintained throughout each session. Students are encouraged to minimize narrative content and focus on their immediate experience, such as sensations, emotions, and thoughts. For example, when reflecting on a struggle, a student may be asked to describe the physical sensations (e.g., tension or uneasiness in the body) rather than recounting the entire story behind the emotion. This practice promotes mindful awareness and presence in the moment. The goal is to encourage students to be present for one another without judgment, suggestions, or

criticism—an essential part of mindfulness that fosters empathy and compassion within the group (Hofmann et al., 2011). Presence is a major emphasis throughout the course. Students are asked to turn off their mobile phones, store their bags in a designated area, and refrain from cross-talking, emphasizing attentive listening when someone else is speaking. Each class becomes an opportunity to practice shared presence, where students honor and respect one another’s experiences, fostering a collective sense of mindfulness and respect.

Structure and Content of the MHW Program

MHW is designed as a 12-session course, with an optional introductory session (Session 0) and a concluding session (Session 13), titled *Living Mindfully in the World*. The course begins with self-awareness and individual skill-building in the first nine sessions, gradually progressing toward more interactive sessions that explore what it means to live mindfully in a community of human and non-human beings. The program is scaffolded, meaning that each session builds upon the previous ones, creating a cumulative learning experience. A culminating essay, which replaces traditional final exams, has been integrated into the course for the past two semesters, and adjustments are made each term depending on logistical factors (Figure 3).

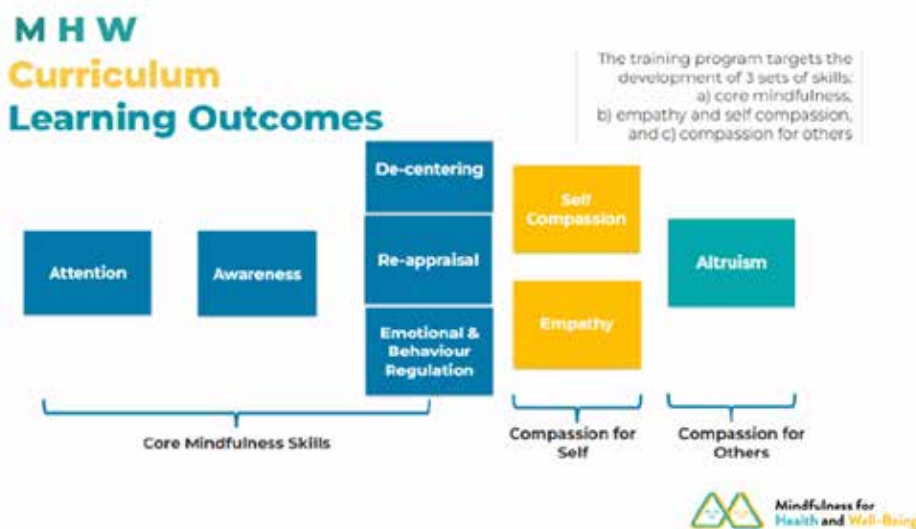
Figure 3. MHW’s 12-session moving from student’s environment to building skills for the self to others

| MHW PROGRAM OVERVIEW | | | | | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------|
| S0* | S1 | S2 | S3 | S4 | S5 | S6 |
| Orientation & Introduction | The World We Live In | Gift of Presence | Being in the Body | Opening Up to Experience | Awakening the Senses | Facing the Difficult |
| S7 | S8 | S9 | S10 | S11 | S12 | S13** |
| Staying with Difficulty | Power of Choice | Discovering Self-Compassion | Self in the Other | Being with the Other | Compassion in Action | Living Mindfully in Our World |

Unlike most mindfulness programs, which are typically delivered in 6 to 8 sessions, MHW is more extended to fit the college context, emphasizing patience and perseverance. The learning objectives (Figure 4) outline the program's focus on developing core mindfulness skills, such as attention control, self-awareness, emotional regulation, and self-compassion. These skills, acquired incrementally, form the foundation for the later development of more advanced capabilities, including compassion and the ability to live mindfully within a community (Keng et al., 2011).

This gradual approach allows students to internalize mindfulness practices through repetition and reflection. The depth of change is often directly proportional to the commitment participants make to practice, both during the sessions and outside of class. Those who are consistent in attending sessions and engaging in home practices are more likely to notice changes in their emotional reactivity, internal processes, and behaviors (Creswell, 2017).

Figure 4. MHW Learning Objectives develop core mindfulness skills in Sessions 1 to 8 and compassion in Sessions 9 to 12



Unlike most mindfulness programs that are delivered between 6 to 8 sessions, teaching and learning MHW in a college context entails patience and perseverance. MHW learning objectives (Figure 4) lays out the skills that the program desires to develop. Utilizing a scaffolded and experiential approach, each session serves as a foundation for the succeeding ones and students learn skills one step at a time. This incremental approach allows for the practices to develop into skills, often the degree of learning and change is commensurate to the commitment to practice and observe. Those who have really committed to attending sessions and doing their home practices are more aware of the changes in their reactivity, their internal processes and the impact on their behavior and interactions.

For facilitators, teaching MHW requires not only familiarity with the course content but also a commitment to the structure of the program. Each week introduces new practices, and it is the facilitator’s responsibility to ensure that the activities lead to meaningful discussions and that key teaching points emerge naturally. Facilitating

mindfulness is a dynamic process that requires flexibility, presence, and a deep understanding of both the content and the participants' needs.

- The teacher understands the intention for each session while having a perspective of the overall direction of the course.
- The students are able to interact with each other and share in the bigger class and remain aware of their own experiences and the need to commit to their own practice.
- The didactic part of the course clearly connects to the observations of the participants about their experiences, and that the teacher doesn't merely lecture and push their own agenda.
- The teacher's practice never ends – in conducting activities, in guiding meditations and inquiry, and in living one's life.
- Inquiring into the students' experiences means actively and mindfully listening, being able to reflect it back to them and relating it to the intentions and teaching points of the session.
- The teacher is physically able to do the movement practices, which are part of every session and done with loving kindness intentions.
- After the class, the teacher has to provide asynchronous instructions and materials for home practices in a clear, timely and structured manner.
- If handling multiple classes, being prepared to repeat everything 2, 3 or 4 times in the same day with a beginner's mind, patience and presence throughout with kindness, acceptance and compassion.
- Most importantly, that sometimes after all the preparations, the teacher/facilitator simply has to show up and attend to whatever they encounter in class. In this course and perhaps in teaching, one is a role model, first and foremost.

Challenges and Observations in Teaching MHW at UP Diliman

One of the significant observations made while teaching the MHW course at UP Diliman is that many students bring their personal challenges into the classroom, including mental health issues or other health-related conditions. Occasionally, students openly share their struggles with the class, which can create challenges for both the teacher and the class environment (Acut et al., 2024). These situations require the facilitator to balance sensitivity with the acknowledgment that the course is not a substitute for professional therapy. Recognizing the limits of the program is critical—while MHW provides students with tools for emotional regulation and mindfulness, it is essential that facilitators direct students in need of professional mental health support to the appropriate resources, such as university counseling centers or external mental health services. The best approach in such cases is for

the teacher to show compassion and understanding while gently redirecting the conversation. In some instances, it is appropriate to ask the student to have a private discussion after class, where their concerns can be addressed more fully, and a referral to professionals can be made if necessary. This strategy preserves the class's collective focus on mindfulness practice while ensuring that the student's individual needs are met in a more suitable context.

One of the most profound challenges for any facilitator or teacher of mindfulness-based programs is the need for deep self-awareness. Facilitators must confront and recognize their own habitual patterns and negative conditioning in the process of teaching. Mindfulness teaching demands that facilitators model mindfulness through their own behavior, which requires a level of self-confrontation and reflection. This type of teaching is less about delivering information and more about embodying the principles of mindfulness—present moment awareness, acceptance, and compassion. The journey of becoming a mindful teacher is not without difficulties, but the rewards are expansive. Teaching mindfulness has the power to transform not only the teacher but also the students and their broader community. In fact, many students who have completed the MHW course have extended its principles into their personal lives, engaging in altruistic activities such as leading mindfulness sessions within their organizations or practicing compassion in their social circles. Others have applied the skills learned in the course, such as emotional regulation and self-awareness, in other academic subjects or personal relationships. The ripple effects of mindfulness extend beyond the individual, enhancing community well-being and fostering greater social engagement.

Student Reception and Feedback

Students entering the MHW course at UP Diliman generally fall into four distinct categories. The largest group joins to fulfill a school requirement, while others are drawn to the course based on reviews they encounter on platforms like Reddit, where discussions about easy or engaging PE classes often highlight MHW. A third group of students is influenced by friends or classmates who have taken the course, and finally, a smaller group chooses MHW after researching mindfulness or feeling that it addresses a specific personal need.

During Session Zero, the orientation for the course, many students express that they were drawn to the class because it was described as a “*chill*” or “*breather*” course, providing a break from more demanding academic or PE requirements. This reflects a broader shift in student attitudes, with many now seeking environments that support mental and emotional well-being, rather than the traditionally rigid and tough training associated with PE courses. These students, influenced by the stresses of academic life and the recent impact of the pandemic, increasingly

prioritize courses that offer supportive environments. They appear to reflect a new cultural mindset, more open to expressing their mental health needs and recognizing the benefits of activities that promote well-being. This generational shift highlights how students are balancing academic demands with a focus on self-care, well-being, and emotional health.

A striking feature of the MHW course is that 100% of students who have taken it recommend it to their peers. Many express that the course helped them navigate academic and personal challenges more effectively, making it a valuable resource during their university years. Students often describe the class as a safe space—a welcome break in their weekly routine where they can reset and refocus. This sense of sanctuary is one of the most appreciated aspects of the course, fostering a community of mindfulness and offering students a peaceful retreat from their otherwise busy lives. At the beginning of the course, students are asked to set personal goals. Some students articulate these goals easily, while others take more time to reflect on what they hope to achieve by the end of the semester. Regardless, by the conclusion of the course, most students report meaningful shifts in their perspectives, emotions, and ability to cope with personal or academic difficulties. Some students achieve their goals entirely, while others recognize progress toward their objectives, appreciating the journey of mindfulness as an ongoing process.

One of the most profound outcomes of the course is the change in how students understand themselves and others, particularly through the Filipino concept of *kapwa* (shared humanity). Many students report gaining a deeper understanding of this concept, which they previously knew intellectually but now experience emotionally and practically through the mindfulness practices. This shared experience fosters empathy and connection among classmates, enriching both their personal and collective growth.

The structure of MHW has received widespread praise from students, many of whom commend the course for its balance of mindfulness practices and theoretical learning. Most students do not suggest any major changes to the program's development or delivery, although there have been occasional comments about the course's grading system. Initially, MHW was designed without the intention of providing numerical assessments, but grading became necessary within the context of the university. To address this, the course now incorporates home practices that allow students to track their progress through methods such as journaling, audio or video recordings, and blogging. These forms of practice are optional and intended to help students deepen their engagement with mindfulness, rather than serve as the basis for grading. Attendance and a final written essay remain the primary requirements for grading, with the essay providing insights into the students' learning experiences. Interestingly, some students have expressed interest in continuing their mindfulness journey beyond the course, suggesting an advanced mindfulness class that would

include longer meditation sessions and a deeper exploration of mindfulness practices. A few students asked, “*what happens next or after the course?*”. This feedback has prompted discussions about developing a follow-up course, allowing students to build on the foundational skills gained in MHW and continue their mindfulness practice in a more advanced setting

PROGRAM IMPACT AND RESULTS

Randomized Controlled Trial Results (Online Classes during the Pandemic)

The MHW course demonstrated significant improvements in various aspects of emotional regulation, empathy, and compassion during its randomized controlled trial (RCT) conducted during the pandemic. This version of the course, conducted entirely online, featured mindfulness exercises and practices centered around attention management, emotional regulation, and the awareness of others—referred to in Filipino as “*kapwa*.” The program’s focus on empathy (“*pakikiramdam*”) and compassion (“*kagandahang-loob*”) was supported by mediation analyses, which confirmed the hypothesis that increases in mindfulness directly led to heightened compassion scores at post-test. The results suggest that mindfulness practice can foster altruistic behavior, as evidenced by one class spontaneously organizing a mindfulness webinar for fellow students struggling with the challenges of online learning during the pandemic. These findings align with previous research indicating that MBIs can enhance prosocial behavior and improve emotional well-being (Hofmann et al., 2011; Shapiro et al., 2006).

Pre and Post Evaluation of Face to Face Classes in UP (Post-Pandemic)

In a separate evaluation conducted after the pandemic, the pre- and post-course data for 145 students participating in face-to-face MHW classes revealed substantial improvements. According to the results, 50% of students showed higher scores on the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) and the Well-being Scale (WHO-5), while reporting lower scores on the General Anxiety Disorder scale (GAD-7) and the Perceived Stress Score (PSS-9). Notably, these post-program assessments were conducted during the university’s final exam period, colloquially referred to as “Hell Week.” Despite the high levels of stress typically associated with this time, the improvements observed in the students’ well-being scores suggest that mindfulness practice may serve as a buffer against academic stress, which is consistent

with findings from earlier studies on the benefits of mindfulness during stressful periods (Baer, 2015; Creswell, 2017).

Table 1. Lessons Learned from the MHW Course

| Biggest Lesson Learned | Frequency | Relative Frequency |
|------------------------------------|------------------|---------------------------|
| Being grounded in the present | 23 | 35% |
| Being kinder to oneself | 40 | 61% |
| Being more compassionate to others | 16 | 24% |

Student Feedback and Thematic Analysis

The qualitative data collected from student essays further supports the effectiveness of the MHW program. A thematic analysis revealed that students gained deeper self-understanding, which helped them relate more effectively to others. Table 1 provides insight into the most frequently mentioned lessons learned by students, with 61% noting that being kinder to oneself was the most significant takeaway, followed by 35% who emphasized the importance of staying grounded in the present moment, and 24% highlighting the value of being more compassionate toward others. Below are some of the students’ qualitative responses.

“Kindness begins from the self. When I entered the course, I was able to really voice out that you need to put yourself first before you can give to others in the best way possible. This thought has been looming in my mind before this course enabled me to really say it and acknowledge it.”

“The biggest lesson I learned is that our present is the only thing we have the control of, and we should not force ourselves to control everything that is beyond our poser just to appease ourselves or others. Knowing when to act and when to let things go is important in preserving the self, especially mentally and physically”

“The number one lesson I will take away from this course is how crucial listening is to forming fruitful relationships with the people around you and yourself. It has made me start listening to my friends instead of daydreaming or trying to come up with a solution for them. Sometimes in life, the most important thing you could do is just be there and that’s what listening is”

Table 2. Change in Understanding of the self

| Biggest Lesson Learned | Frequency | Relative Frequency |
|---|------------------|---------------------------|
| Getting to know more the insides and the quirks of the personal character | 15 | 23% |
| Misconceptions about oneself | 21 | 32% |
| Appreciation of belongingness to a community | 6 | 9% |
| Kindness to oneself that is extended to other people | 7 | 11% |
| Control over oneself and having the autonomy to change | 20 | 30% |

Understanding the Self

A significant portion of students also reported changes in their understanding of themselves, as seen in Table 2, where 32% of respondents mentioned overcoming misconceptions about themselves, while 30% highlighted gaining a sense of control and autonomy over their actions. This sense of empowerment aligns with existing literature that suggests mindfulness practice increases self-awareness and strengthens one’s capacity for self-regulation.

“I have always been a happy-go-lucky and go with the flow person, and before this course I have never felt the necessity to understand myself. Now I have learned that understanding oneself is important and it might be one of the keys to having a better life. I have learned that on top of understanding myself, it is important that I get to have control over myself better – that I am not just someone that floats through the air but someone that could actually control the direction of the flight.”

“I noticed that previously I was very detail-oriented and would sacrifice health and well-being for the results, but [after] the course, I had the realization that I can actually focus on the process as well that is, by being mindful of how I treat myself and others. It dawned on me that I was very judgmental of myself as a perfectionist, but I learned that is alright to be non-judgmental of my feeling and emotions because they are valid and they matter; they are not a sign of weakness or vulnerability but a sign of being human.”

Increasing Demand for MHW

Since the pandemic, the demand for the MHW course has grown exponentially, underscoring its importance in the lives of students. In the first semester post-pandemic, the course was offered in four classes with 25 students each. By the following semester, this had increased to six classes with 30 students each, with over 200 additional requests for enrollment. In the current semester, the number of

classes has expanded to seven, with class sizes ranging from 35 to 42 students each. This growing demand suggests that the course is meeting an essential need among students, which extends beyond traditional PE and highlights the evolving educational priorities in the face of post-pandemic challenges. It reflects a shift in student preferences towards courses that prioritize mental health, emotional resilience, and well-being, perhaps signaling a broader societal shift in the approach to education.

The increasing demand for the MHW course reveals the necessity for training more educators to facilitate mindfulness-based programs. As a course that provides essential life skills, MHW is not restricted to any specific student demographic; it has universal value and should be made available to all college students. At present, only two faculty members at the UP-CHK have undergone teacher-training for MHW, with a third awaiting the next training session. Currently, only one faculty member has taught MHW, with mentorship from a more experienced mindfulness facilitator. The need for more trained facilitators is becoming urgent as the demand continues to rise.

Challenges and Opportunities for Mindfulness-Based Programs

Despite growing interest, the implementation of mindfulness-based programs in the Philippines has been slow, likely due to societal preferences for quick fixes and instant solutions. Although the passage of the National Mental Health Act (Republic Act 11036) marked a significant step forward, there remains a gap between mental health needs and the services available. Stigma surrounding mental health continues to impede help-seeking behaviors and receptivity towards programs like MHW, even as lifestyle illnesses such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes, obesity, and certain cancers continue to rise. Studies have demonstrated that MBIs can help address many of these issues by promoting both mental and physical well-being.

Another challenge lies within the structure of educational institutions themselves, which often do not prioritize rest, mindfulness, or mental health. While the flexibility of UP Diliman's system, particularly in its PE offerings, has allowed MHW to flourish, many other universities lack the necessary flexibility to incorporate mindfulness programs. Traditional educational systems may prioritize academic performance and workload over mental and emotional well-being, creating an environment counterintuitive to the goals of mindfulness education. Moreover, religiously affiliated institutions, particularly Catholic or Christian colleges, may hold misperceptions about mindfulness due to its Buddhist origins, further complicating its acceptance.

Additionally, funding and sustainability pose significant challenges. MHW was initially developed through a Templeton World Charity Foundation grant, but further funding is needed to train additional teachers and expand the program to

other colleges and universities. Without institutional buy-in or recognition of the program's value, securing long-term support for MHW could be difficult. There is a lot of opportunity available given all these challenges.

- Studies have shown that mindfulness is effective in addressing mind-body health and overall wellbeing. Mindfulness programs and courses have to be made available to more people, from the academe to the workplace.
- Educational structures and systems need to be more flexible and adapt to the changing times – how students learn, what they need not simply to survive but to thrive and flourish, and what kind of learning environment and approaches best support students' changing needs.
- Equipping teachers with mindfulness skills will go a long way, for their own health and wellbeing and in modelling the lessons that they teach.

HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND MINDFULNESS: GOING FORWARD

The Philippines, with its large youth population, stands to gain significantly from a comprehensive program that addresses both physical and mental well-being. Programs like MHW, which integrate mindfulness-based practices and CBT exercises into the PE curriculum, offer a holistic approach to student health. This dual focus on physical and mental wellness equips students with the tools they need to cope with the many challenges they face in modern life, fostering resilience and well-being. Mindfulness and mental health literacy programs provide immediate and practical solutions by promoting positive social and behavioral changes, while also working to destigmatize mental health issues. The course, rooted in secular mindfulness practices, addresses physical activity alongside mental health management, offering students essential life skills in real time. The inclusion of MHW as a PE course makes mental health education accessible, practical, and relevant, providing a valuable resource to students as they navigate the complexities of academic life.

Looking beyond the short-term goal of expanding MHW to more colleges and universities nationwide, a pressing need exists to train and certify a greater number of instructors. The ability to scale the program effectively is key to meeting the growing demand for mental health education. To this end, organizations such as the FriendlyCare Foundation and the Centre for Mindfulness Studies Toronto, in collaboration with various partners, are facilitating additional rounds of certification training. This approach is crucial for ensuring that qualified facilitators are available to teach mindfulness-based programs, which are becoming increasingly sought after by students and institutions alike. The future of MHW is promising. Its ability to address both physical and mental health in an educational setting makes

it a promising model for other institutions. The program's trifecta—combining physical and mental health skills, maintaining affordability, and being grounded in evidence-based practices—ensures that it remains accessible and impactful for a wide range of students. As the demand for holistic approaches to education grows, there is ample room for future research to explore how MHW might impact different student populations across the Philippines. For example, expanding the program to different regions could reveal significant variations in its effects, offering insights into how local contexts shape the outcomes of mindfulness education. Additionally, longer-term studies could track the program's influence on pro-social behaviors, emotional intelligence, and community engagement, strengthening its evidence base and informing future educational policy.

Integrating mental health education into the PE curriculum offers a holistic approach to promoting students' overall well-being. It leverages the natural benefits of physical activity while explicitly teaching mental health skills that empower students to manage stress, anxiety, and emotional challenges. By creating a school environment that emphasizes both physical and mental health as interconnected components of wellness, institutions can take a proactive role in student health. The intentions of Republic Act No. 5708, or the *Schools Physical Education and Sports Development Act of 1969*, which envisioned a robust PE framework, are finally coming closer to fruition through such initiatives. This act sought to advance the physical and mental development of Filipino youth and integrating mental health education into PE is a crucial step toward realizing this vision.

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