



courage

wellbeing project

Case Study: Strand B: Resilience Training - Yoga for the Mind

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Setting the scene

One strand of the Courage Project was to develop, pilot and evaluate resilience training (i.e. training that would develop skills in managing stressful and challenging circumstances) as part of personal and professional development of PGRs at the University of East Anglia, University of Suffolk and Norwich Bioscience Institutes. This case study presents Yoga for the Mind.

Action taken

Yoga for the Mind is a 6 week course for postgraduate research students provided as part of the Courage Project and contributing towards Personal and Professional Development accreditation. The course is a combination of yoga and mindfulness practical tools useful for dealing with the specific areas of stress associated with postgraduate research. Stress, anxiety, low mood and loss of motivation are common responses to the research process and the course is specifically tailored towards the postgraduate research experience. The course was taught by qualified yoga instructors with personal or professional experience of postgraduate research and wellbeing.

Yoga for the Mind was evaluated using a pre and post course survey that included Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale and some qualitative feedback.

Key impacts/ outcomes

Over the course of the Courage Project, five 6 week yoga courses were delivered, with 82 postgraduate researchers attending across the five courses.

Although the courses were well attended, responses to the survey were low (n=33 pre-course survey, n=9 post-course survey), therefore the responses will be presented descriptively only.

Of those who completed the pre-course survey (40.2% response rate), the average age of the participants was 32 years, all were full-time PGRs, 42% were funded by a Research Council, 39% by a University Studentship, 6% by other funding sources (e.g. charity) and 9% were self-funded. There were 42% (n=14) laboratory based, 36% (n=12) were non-lab based and 21% (n=7) were studying

professional doctorates. Around 40% of the participants were from the Science Graduate School, with an even distribution across the remaining faculties (Humanities, Medicine and Health, Biosciences, Social Sciences). The larger proportion from the Science faculty was expected as the courses were organised and run through the Science faculty Personal and Professional Development Co-ordinators.

The average score from WEMWBS at baseline was 47 points (n=33). The average score at the two-week follow-up after the yoga course was complete was 49 points (n=8).

There was an overwhelmingly positive response from the PGRs who took part, with the course providing a time every week to dedicate to themselves, learning new techniques to manage stressful circumstances associated with postgraduate research.

“Having an hour once a week which I was able to dedicate to quieting the mind and managing my ever increasing (and developing) anxiety”

Poses for beginners, mindfulness, relaxation, body awareness and yoga poses that can be practised at a desk were all considered useful. Moreover, having a course tailored to PGRs was considered a benefit;

“Particularly the relation to being a PhD student – things that can be used in the future”

“To pay attention to where stress manifests in my body and then the exercise to release it – great! Thank you, I really enjoyed the course.”

The course was considered to be something that would benefit the wider postgraduate community:

“It gives you a chance to switch off, so this could help everyone”

“It is very useful in the level of stress PhD work and the impact of it on your physical status”

“For PhD anxiety and stress I found this really useful and having it ahead of time, pre-booked in my diary helped me to attend.”

Having a venue that is appropriate and accessible and access to yoga mats is important and may be the biggest challenge in setting up a course at another institution. The course was very popular, often over prescribed but regular attendance was a challenge.

Yoga for the Mind was established as part of the Personal and Professional Development (PPD) training offered through the university, meaning that PGRs could gain accreditation for attendance. Whilst we did not explicitly enquire about whether this improved engagement, we expect that this helped to validate the individual giving time out of their busy schedules to be part of the course.