

Using mindfulness in the classroom with undergraduate future social workers

Abstract

This article describes the experience of including mindfulness in an undergraduate course for social work students. It includes information about the purposes of the course, theoretical foundations presented to students, exercises offered to them as well as evaluation of students. The paper also discusses the relationship between mindfulness and social work and the benefits of practicing mindfulness for students and practitioners.

Key words: mindfulness, social work, students, course

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Social workers have to support people living in the most difficult situations. Their essential role is to create helping relationships with people living in poverty, individuals who have mental health or family problems, who are abused or neglected, who are homeless, etc. (Lecomte, 2000). The development of such social ties with people requires a great deal of diverse and specific abilities that are related to interpersonal skills, compassion and self knowledge.

Social workers also experiment a considerable amount of stress and pressure in their profession. Consequently, it is generally recognized that professionals in helping relationships like doctors, nurses, clinical psychologists and social workers are at greater risks of suffering from compassion fatigue, from stress and from emotional problems because of the great responsibilities associated with their work. Specifically, according to Graham and Graham (2009) social workers have more risk of suffering from burn out and depression. The nature of their work, the work overload, the paperwork, the lack of financial resources and support to workers in the social services organizations are the main reasons for the existence of such problems. For these reasons, social workers need to be supported (May & O'Donovan, 2007), and they need to learn to support and protect themselves from the negative aspects of their work.

Mindfulness is defined as a way of paying attention to the present moment with an attitude of openness and without judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Mindfulness, defined as a contemplative practice, is usually practiced through sitting meditation but it can also be practiced through for instance yoga, tai chi or walking meditation. This concept is interesting to introduce to social workers because it has shown to be helpful in different ways and for different populations

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including people in the helping professions. It is used to enhance interpersonal abilities, self compassion and to prevent burnout.

As a matter of fact, positive effects of contemplative practices have been reported for different problems like chronic pain, stress, compassion fatigue, anorexia, cancer and suicidal thoughts (Hick, 2009). Benefits of a mindfulness practice also seem to be felt physiologically and psychologically (Lutz, Greischar, Rawlings, Ricard et Davidson, 2004; Vollestad, Birkeland Nielsen et Hostmark Nielsen, 2012). Mindfulness practices are not only good for reducing symptoms. Studies also have showed that they contribute to wellbeing. May and O'Donovan (2007) report studies that have associated contemplative practices with a greater sense of self-efficacy, a greater compassion toward oneself and less burnout for health professionals. Their own research conducted with 58 psychotherapists resulted in a positive correlation between a mindfulness practice and the presence of positive affects and work satisfaction. Presence toward oneself, without judgments, induced by a mindfulness practice, helps to navigate through difficult emotions and to make thoughtful decisions. These skills transferred to a therapeutic context can help social workers develop a more helpful relationship with their clients (May & O'Donovan, 2007).

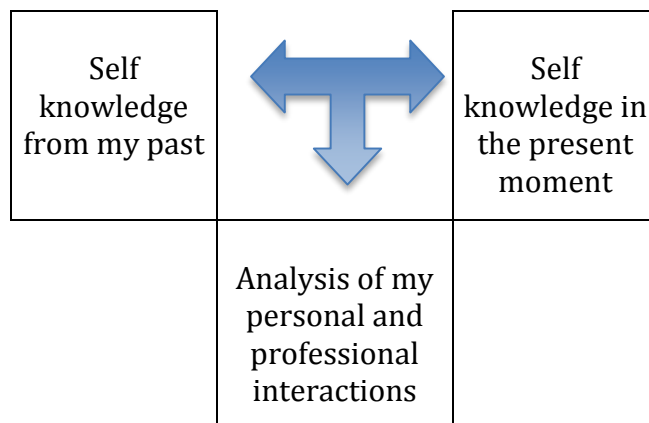
Contemplative pedagogy is a new discipline used in several universities in the United States. Its purpose is to teach theoretical and practical aspects of mindfulness in order to enhance students' personal wellbeing, concentration and attention capacity and interpersonal abilities. It is based on scientific studies showing the benefits of contemplative practices and it is used in several academic fields such as physics, computer sciences, religious studies, psychology and social work (Barbezat et Bush, 2013). The purpose of this article is to describe how contemplative pedagogy is used within the context of an undergraduate class for future social workers.

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Purposes of the course

The course is offered to first year university students who undertake an undergraduate diploma in social work. The first purpose of the course is for students to get to know themselves from their own life history. They have to identify the family, social and cultural influences that have contributed to the person they became (self concept and self esteem) and to analyze the impact of these aspects on their interactions with others (including future clients). The second main purpose of the course is that students get to know themselves in the present moment using mindfulness theoretical backgrounds and techniques. In this part of the course, students are encouraged to take a step back from their personal story to learn to concentrate on who they are right now. From the understanding of these two types of analysis (past and present), students have to identify their strengths and challenges in the context of interactions with others (personal relationships and eventually professional relationships). The purposes of the course are showed in Figure 1. This article pertains to describe this second part of the course into more details.

Figure 1. General purposes of the course



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Specifically, the next sections will present how mindfulness is introduced to students including the relationship between mindfulness and social work, the types of exercises that students need to do in class and the home works they have to do to show what they have learned.

Introduction to mindfulness

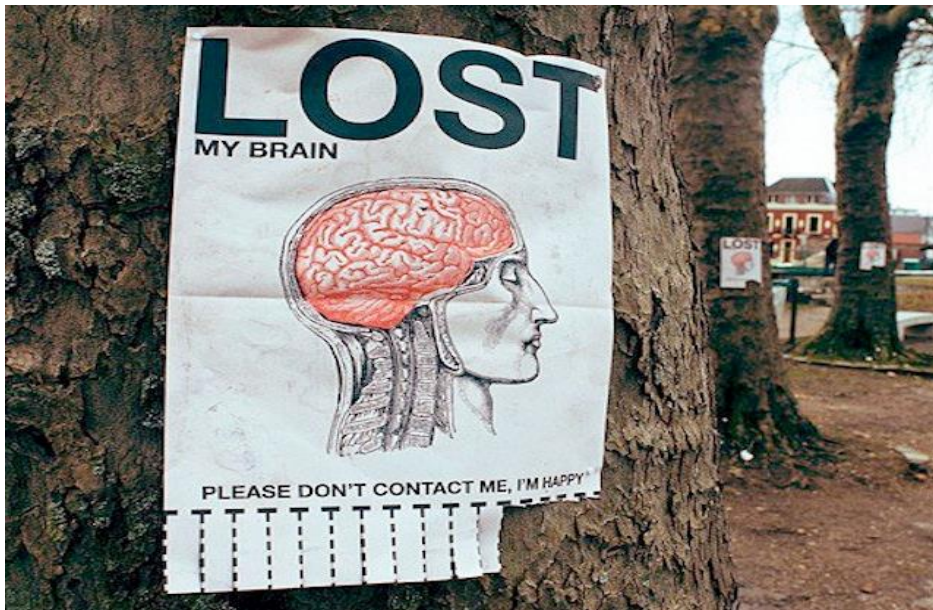
According to Barbezat and Bush (2013) and to McCown, Reibel and Micozzi (2011), it is very important to explain to students why the notion of mindfulness is taught in this course. For my part, there are four reasons why I decided to introduce mindfulness in my classroom. First, my experience as a social work professor and researcher with practitioners for the last 16 years has showed me how social workers are overloaded with work (heavy caseloads, social workers are asked do more with less, etc.) and how students experiment a lot of stress in the course of their studies. Second, my own practice of meditation is made clear right from the beginning as well as the benefits I feel in my own wellbeing and interactions with others. Third, social workers being their own work tool, they need to develop attention, concentration and compassion toward themselves and others. Fourth, the important demands associated with social work means that they need to protect themselves from burnout.

Stress issues represent a good way to introduce mindfulness to students because everybody has heard of the existence of stress and of ways to fight it. Discussing stress issues gives the opportunity to present different ways of dealing with it and to specify strategies inspired by the mindfulness literature. For instance, in their website, Health Canada offers some tips to reduce stress. They suggest to people who suffer from stress to identify the sources of stress, to evaluate the impact of stress, to modify stressful thoughts, to control stressful emotions and to look for

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social support. These tips don't represent bad ways for dealing with stress but they are based on a very different perspective than a mindfulness point of view. Specifically, these strategies come from a pure behavioural cognitive perspective. They suggest that people should change things and fight them in a very active way by identifying, controlling, modifying their thoughts and actions. This orientation is also very much oriented toward the cognitive work that needs to be done in order to fight stress such as modifying one's thoughts and controlling one's emotions. On the opposite, a mindfulness perspective suggests that accepting the way things are instead of trying to change them is a good start to fight stress. This perspective also suggests to focus less on thoughts and more on the body because thoughts can be very distracting and distressing. Figure 2, found in the Street Art Utopia website, shows with humour how much spending too much time thinking can be tiring.

Figure 2. Lost my brain



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A research conducted at Harvard University conducted by Killington and Gilbert (2010) reveals that people spend 46,9% of their time thinking about something else than what they are actually doing and that this wandering mind makes people unhappy because most of the time the thoughts are about trying to explain the past or plan the future.

According to Chu (2009) « people who engage in mindfulness meditation try to cultivate a new relationship with internal experiences by regulating such things as attention, awareness of present experiences, emotions and thoughts through non-judgmental acceptance of those emotions and thoughts without avoiding them or overengaging with them » (p. 170).

The following table 1 (Devault, 2014) compares the mindfulness perspective with a cognitive perspective process.

Tableau 1. Distinctions between a mindfulness perspective and a cognitive perspective process

Mindfulness perspective	Cognitive perspective
Pay attention to the body and its relationship with the mind	Concentrate on thoughts and ignore the body
Look at emerging thoughts without judging and letting them disappear	Analyze one's thoughts and try to explain and understand why you think this way
Accept the presence of thoughts	Modify thoughts that are inadequate or irrelevant
Concentrate on the present moment	Analyze the past and try to control the future
Accept that suffering is part of life	Do everything you can to make suffering disappear

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Mindfulness and social work

More and more social workers use mindfulness to take care of themselves, to make their practice with clients, groups or community more rich and to develop better therapeutic relationships with clients (Hick, 2009). It's important at this point to specify to students that mindfulness does not mean to passively accept everything and to feel helpless in front of problems. Mindfulness suggests not to resist to what is already present (sensations, emotions or thoughts). The tensions, stress and unhappiness coming from thoughts are the results of the stories we build around thoughts or emotions, the elaboration that our mind constructs that leads to more suffering. That's why meditation practices suggest to look at the formation of a thought, as an observer, and to let go of this thought without starting to build a story around that thought just like a cloud coming and passing in the sky. There are some attitudes to cultivate in order to be mindful: be curious about one's own thoughts, sensations and emotions; accept the present moment just as it is, including thoughts or emotions that are unpleasant; be open to what is presenting. This curiosity, openness and acceptance are often related to as the beginner's mind, that is the person who has a fresh look at things without constantly referring to categories and judgments. This is an attitude that can be extremely useful in clinical intervention to understand the real experience of the client and to create a therapeutic alliance in which the client feels understood and accepted.

Impact of a contemplative practice on social workers

Another way of informing students about mindfulness is to present results from studies that show the benefits of a mindfulness practice. There are more and more researches that have been done in the last decades, so it is very easy to find research results. The Mind and Life Institute, an

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American organization conducting researches on mindfulness and promoting contemplative practices used “PubMed” to compile the number of papers that were published between 1951 and 2012 that contain the word “meditation”. The result shows a drastic progression of such publications with 50 articles published in 1970 to more than 200 in 2012. Specifically, researches conducted in the helping profession fields, show that mindfulness as a positive impact on practitioners on the compassion they feel for themselves and toward their clients, it facilitates their ability to feel and communicate how the client feels, it helps them be more present to the suffering of their clients and it helps clients develop the ability to express their sensations and emotions (Davis & Hayes, 2011). Another study realized with social work students show that meditation has the potential to help students become more conscious about their internal processes (sensations, emotions and thoughts) and more able to openly explore their own self image as a future professional (Birnbaum, 2005b in Birnbaum, 2009). Another study conducted by the same researcher (Birnbaum, 2009) with 112 social work students reveals that after meditating regularly for 8 weeks, students report more positive emotions like generosity, compassion and empathy. They also report feeling more calm and at ease with regulating their emotions.

Applications of mindfulness techniques in different contexts and in different ways

It can be useful for students to learn how mindfulness is now used in combination with other approaches. There are several approaches that can be related to mindfulness: MBSR, MBCT, DBT, radical mindfulness, and ACT.

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The Mindfulness based stress reduction program (MBSR, Kabat-Zinn, 1994) is a very well known program, especially in the United States, that has been offered in more than 250 hospitals for patients suffering from chronic diseases. There is also the Mindfulness based cognitive therapy (MBCT, Seagal, Williams & Teasdale, 2002) that has showed its potential to reduce the risk of relapse in people who suffer from depression symptoms by educating people about the role of avoidance or suppression of negative thoughts that can enhance emotional distress instead of making them disappear. Finally, the Dialectic behaviour therapy (DBT, Linehan, 1993) introduces some mindfulness notions with people who suffer from borderline personalities. The main purpose is for them to find a middle way between acceptance and change.

Mindfulness can be understood as an individual practice that has little to do with a structural perspective taught in the social work fields. For this reason Hick and Furlotte (2009 in Hick, 2009) have developed an approach based on social justice called radical mindfulness. The authors developed this approach in the context of an action research conducted with homeless people. This approach includes but goes beyond individuals. It can be used with groups and with communities. At an inner level, the mindfulness practice of a practitioner can help him become more conscious of his tendency to focus on the past or to fantasize about the future. The focus on the present moment can help him cultivate an inner peace and consequently be more able to focus on another person. At a microsystemic level, the social worker, in contact with his clients, can be fully attentive to his clients. He can be more aware of his interpretations and judgments about the client and his choices and put aside these judgments to be completely present to his clients. Mindfulness enhance the capacity of the worker to be pay attention to the world of his client without having his own thoughts come in the way. In terms of community work, radical mindfulness is based on the values of compassion and social justice. During his interventions

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with clients, the professional will pay attention to the way his actions can be related to social changes. His actions will make sure that support is given to the ones who need it and that all the voices can be heard.

Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT, Hayes, Strosahl & Wilson, 1999) is also known to have close ties with mindfulness. It is based on the idea of accepting the problems we encounter and to live accordingly with our values. This therapy has six fundamental principals that have the purpose to help people develop a psychological flexibility: 1. Defusion is based on the idea that our thoughts don't define who we are. The practice of defusion diminishes the power of the thoughts on oneself; 2. Expansion is related to acceptance because its purpose is to make room for uncomfortable emotions and sensations and to let them go away after they appear; 3. Connexion is to open to what is going on here and now. It means to live the present moment, concentrate and engage fully in the experience that is presenting; 4. Be the observer means to become conscious of this part of oneself who is peaceful and reassuring. This part of each individual who has the necessary resources to face life can help face difficult thoughts and emotions; 5. Identify your values help people decide who they really want to be and what's important for them. Clarification of values can enrich life and give it meanings; 6. Engage in a meaningful life is the pattern following the identification of values.

Exercises offered to students

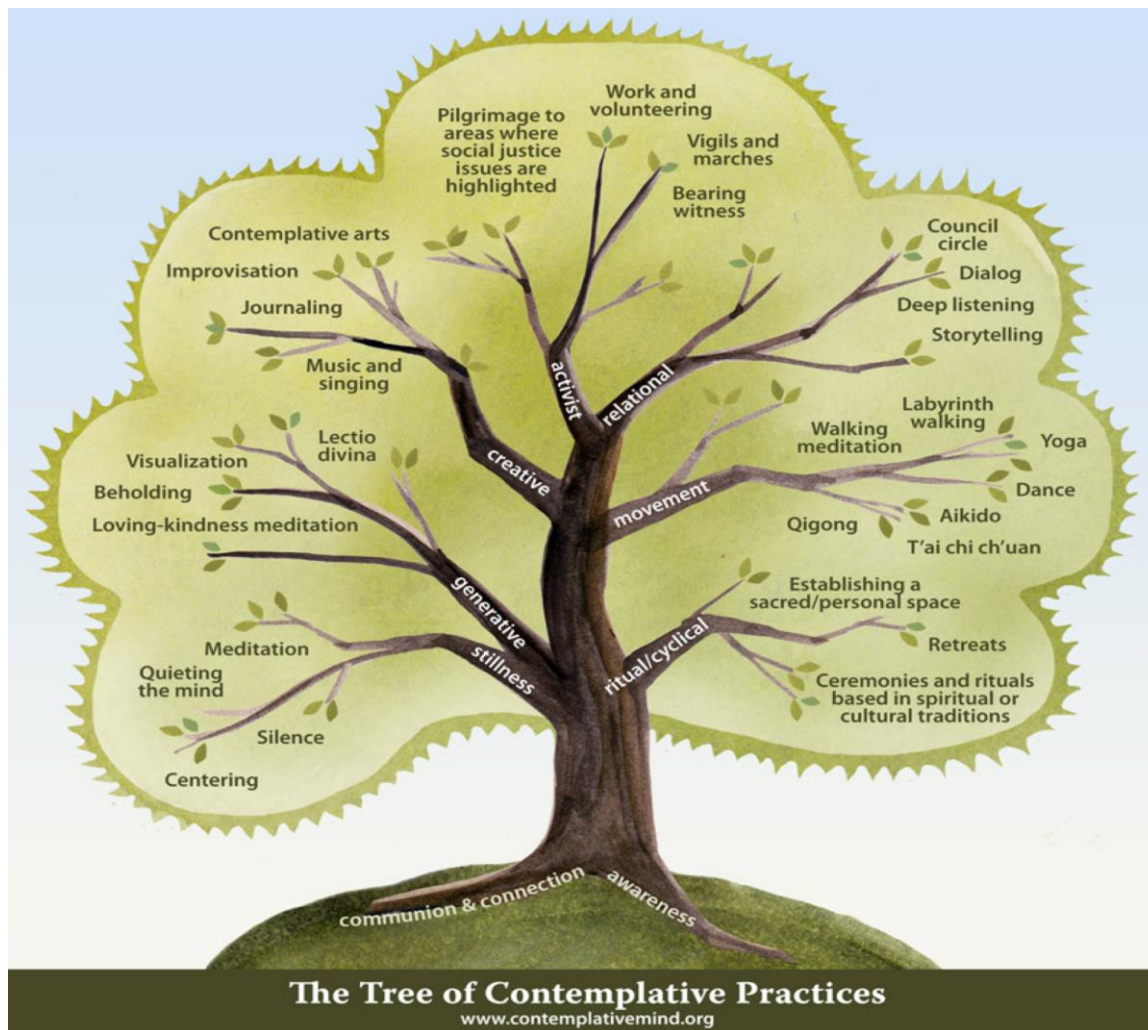
An important way of learning about mindfulness is to practice it. A first exercise that is offered to students is to help them identify their own mindful practices or the ones they would like to develop. The Tree of contemplative practices (figure 3) can be very useful for this purpose

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because it gives a larger view of mindful practices than just the traditional sitting meditation.

Students are invited to find ways by which they already have mindful moments, that is present to their present experience without thinking about the past or the future.

Figure 3. The Tree of contemplative practices



Also, early in the semester, students are invited to go outside of the class and to participate to a walking meditation through a path that goes to a river nearby the university. They are encouraged

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to watch their thoughts come and pass while they walk, to feel their feet moving on the ground and their body in the space. Arrived at the river, they are invited to sit down, close their eyes and listen to the sounds of the river and feel the wind and the warmth on their skin.

Tara Brach's (2003) R.A.I.N. exercise is also offered. Thinking of a difficult situation, eyes closed, students are lead to: **R**ecognize what is happening in their body in terms of their sensations, emotions and thoughts; **A**llow life to be just as it is. In other words accept whatever is presenting to them; **I**nvestigate inner experience with kindness; and **N**ot identify with their thoughts or emotions.

Another exercise involving listening is done in which students team two by two and they listen to each other one after another while they explain why they want to become a social worker. While they are listening, students are asked to observe what is happening in themselves on the physical level (visual contact, position of the body, rhythm of the breath, internal tensions...), on a cognitive level (internal judgments, thinking of the next question, interest for the shoes of the other, judging my ability to listen...) and on an emotional level (which emotions were present, how did I react to them...).

Other exercises are offered to students all through semester: journaling about the things they learn about themselves, songs are played and poetry is read for concentration on sounds and content. In particular, we play Leonard Cohen's "Anthem"¹ because of its focus on self acceptance:

¹ From the Album « Live in London » 2009.

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“ Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget about your perfect offerings
There is a crack in everything
That’s how the light gets in...”

Images can also be used like the following picture from the Christophe André (2011) book « Méditer jour après jour » that we can see in Figure 4. In a very interesting way André uses images of paintings to talk about different mindfulness concepts. Pierrot (Figure 4) is used to discuss how to inhabit your body: “That’s funny how we tend to forget our body, mindfulness recommends to pay regular friendly visits to our body : reconnect with sensations, see what is going on in different parts of the body, while falling asleep, waking up, when we can rest. Just observe”.

Figure 4. "Pierrot, dit autrefois Gilles", Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684-1721)



Evaluation of the students

Evaluation is an interesting part of teaching about mindfulness because one cannot evaluate the quality of meditating especially as meditation is actually suggested but is not a requirement for the course. So, of course, students have an exam in which they have to show their understanding of the concepts related to mindfulness but they also have two main assignments to do.

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In the first one, students are asked to reflect on their use of Facebook. For this purpose they need to become conscious of all the sensations, emotions and thoughts that are present while they navigate on this website. For a week, they take notes of what is present when they have the impulsion to go consult Facebook, when they read something, when they receive a message or post something. Students' reports are interesting. If the body sensations are often for them difficult to identify in this context, they report a lot of different emotions but more often emotions that are related to social rejection, the need for attention and for love. The fear of being judged is also very common. Several students concluded that for the first time they realized how Facebook make them feel and some of them decided to go less because of the emotional stress it was causing them. Other concluded that they were happy that this website was existing because it was helping them stay close to their family living far away.

In the second homework student have to find an object and bring it in class (picture, poem, musical instrument, running shoes, spoon...). This object needs to represent a moment in which they feel mindful (sensations, thoughts and emotions) and in peace with themselves. In the homework they have to report on how does this object help them be in touch with the present moment helps to be in peace. Students appreciate this exercise because it makes them realize that they already have a mindful practice once in a while in their day to day life. They also report getting more conscious of the things that make them feel good.

Conclusion

The course described in this article was first experienced one year ago and is offered again in the fall semester. The content, the exercises offered as well as the evaluation are all

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subject to change. Students' evaluation of the course show that overall they have a very positive appreciation of the content and the exercises. They especially appreciated the meditation walk outside, the exercises in which they can learn more about themselves and about taking care of themselves. Anxiety is part of their lives and they are pretty conscious about the negative impact their profession can have on their mental health. They want to learn even more about how to deal better with anxiety and stress. In this sense, it is not possible in one class to give them all the information that can be useful for them. Different resources are offered to them throughout the semester. These resources can help students go deeper in their knowledge and for the meditation practice. There is a Facebook page called Mindfulness for students that is particularly interesting for them because they report research results on the impact of mindfulness but they also offer guided meditations that can be very useful for someone who begins in this area. Other resources are offered as Mindfulness in schools project, the Center for contemplative mind in society, the Association for contemplative mind in Higher education, the Mind and life institute as well as local and not local meditation retreats. Very few students report meditating at the beginning of the course. At the end, curiosity is raised and the combination between this curiosity and their desire to become a good social worker and taking care of themselves make a lot of them want to go further in their knowledge and practice of mindfulness.

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