

An Approach to Integrating Mindfulness into the Social Work Curriculum



Bemidji State University

Dr. Sue Rickers
Social Work Department

Literature Review

Stress and Social Work Students

Social work students, similar to all college students experience stress. However, it is noted that social work education exposes students to emotionally charged content. Students are exposed to case studies, discussions, and information related to client trauma and experience (Napoli & Bonifas, 2011).

This exposure potentially heightens the experience of stressful situations for social work students (Humphrey, 2013).

In addition, social work students often come to the profession having experienced their own trauma and pre-existing mental health conditions (Reardon, 2012).

Mindfulness and Social Work

Mindfulness is an approach to social work practice that is practiced, modeled, and taught by social work practitioners (Rickers, 2012).

Mindfulness practice assists students to stay focused on the present moment and to deeply attune themselves to client experiences (Napoli & Bonifas, 2011).

Mindfulness is also a technique that social workers teach to their clients (Napoli & Bonifas, 2011; Rickers, 2012).

Similarly, Gockel (2010) found that students trained in mindfulness acquired necessary clinical skills and attitudes, demonstrated increased self-care, and understood and were prepared to incorporate mindfulness into their clinical interventions.

Mindfulness and Social Work Education

Due to the high levels of stress among social work students and in the profession in general, social work education has been called to incorporate self-care into the curriculum. However as noted by Birnbaum (2008), mindfulness training has largely been absent from the social work curriculum.

McGarrigle and Walsh (2011) found that incorporating mindfulness into the social work curriculum was helpful. Specifically, the authors found that time, permission, and creating a space for not only learning but also practicing mindfulness was helpful. Individuals that learned and practiced mindfulness had lower levels of stress.

Gockel (2010) found that training students in mindfulness as part of the social work curriculum is beneficial.

In a study on self-compassion, participants expressed their desire that self-compassion and mindfulness be incorporated into social work education (Rickers, 2012). Two participants noted that their social work practice would have benefited from the very first day had they been aware of mindfulness and self-compassion.

Inclusion in the Curriculum

Introduction to Social Welfare

Define and describe mindfulness

Incorporate mindfulness into learning about working with individuals and families. Discuss mindfulness as a tool that we teach, practice, and model in the profession

Teach specific mindfulness practices and incorporate a regular 5 minutes of mindfulness to start each class period. Consistent practice of circular breathing and include opportunities to try various approaches to mindfulness such as mindful eating, body scan, music meditation

Human Behavior & the Social Environment: Individuals & Families (HBSE I)

Incorporate mindfulness into learning about neuroplasticity and biological aspects of development. Provide information about what mindfulness is, how it relates neuroplasticity, and what the current literature says about the outcomes of mindfulness practice.

Class activity to discuss the implications of mindfulness and goals of the social work profession.

Explore multiple approaches to mindfulness: meditation, qi gong, walking meditation, mindful eating

Students respond to experiential activities through journals

Human Behavior & the Social Environment: Organizations & Communities (HBSE II)

Incorporate readings related to mindful leadership and discuss as part of class activity.

Discuss the integration of mindful supervision into social work organizations.

General Practice II: Group Work

Incorporate mindfulness into learning about working with groups. Examine mindfulness as a tool that we teach, practice, and model in the profession.

Students co-facilitate group activities that utilize mindfulness approaches as part of a course assignment. Activities include visualization, body scan, breath work, and, meditation.

Guest speaker discusses leading MBSR groups and students review the MBSR curriculum as a way of learning about facilitating groups with a pre-existing curriculum.

Research Seminar

Utilize mindfulness as a topic throughout the course to learn about the research process, research, and, methodology including sample, data collection, data analysis, presentation of findings.

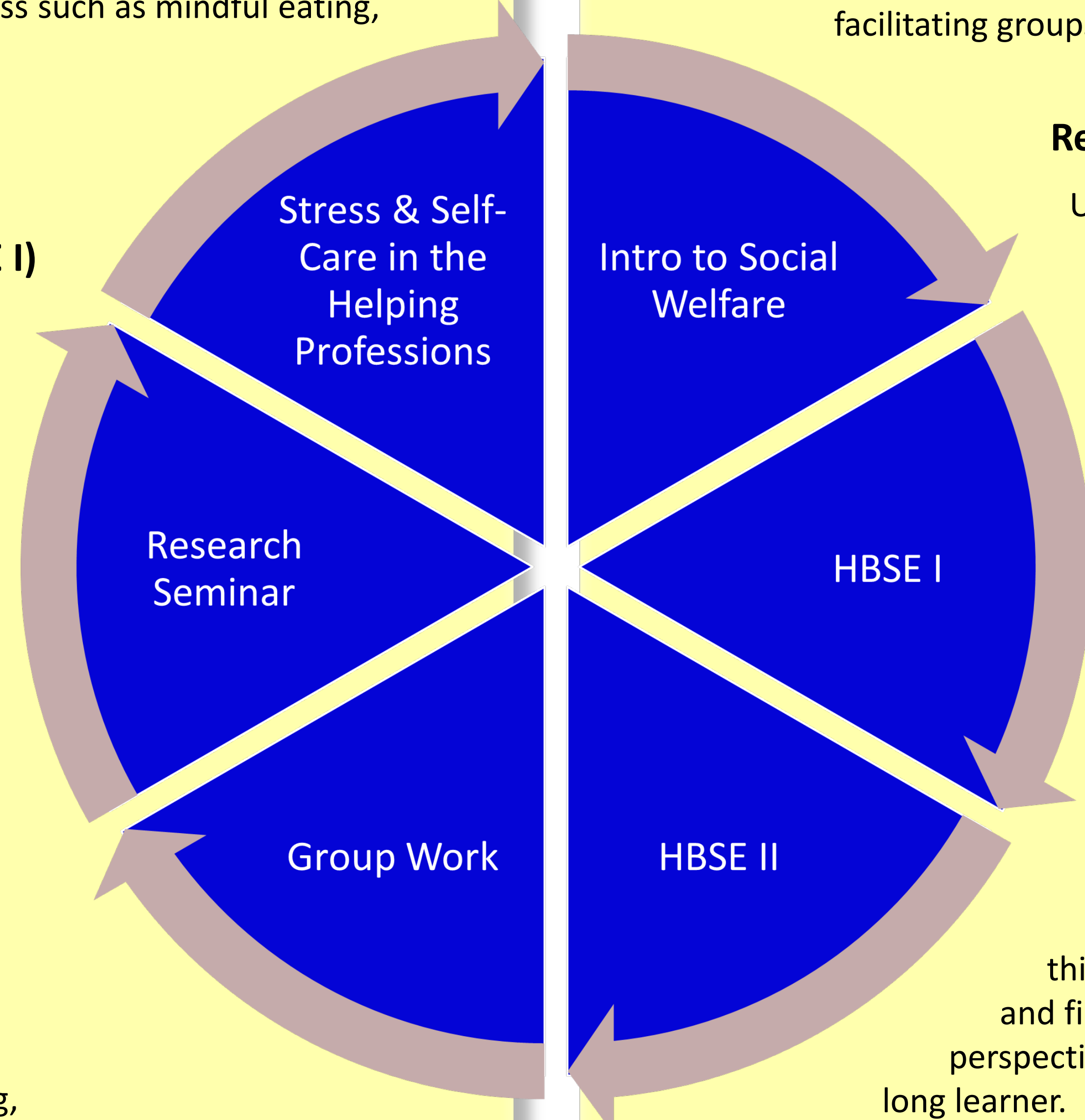
Review scholarly articles they relate to mindfulness, social work education, the social work profession. These articles provide students the opportunity to learn about literature reviews, formatting an article, critical thinking in the presentation of data and findings, integration of multiple perspectives, and viewing self as a life long learner.

Stress & Self-Care in the Helping Professions

This course is designed specifically to understand and examine stress as it relates to social work. In addition, the course focuses on the ethical responsibility to create a healthy environment, both individually and organizationally, for practice.

Provide knowledge about mindful practices in all class sessions as well as facilitation of mindful practices. Students join in these leading the mindful practices.

Students develop an individualized plan for self-care that includes mindfulness practices.



Evaluation

Garland (2013) recommends a mixed methods approach to evaluate and research mindfulness. Consistent with this recommendation the following approaches are used:

Intro to Social Welfare

Pre- and post-test using the Kentucky Inventory of Mindfulness Scale.

Student written response to four questions: Were you aware of mindfulness prior to this course, what were the strengths of practicing mindfulness in this course, what were the challenges of practicing mindfulness in the course, and how will you use mindfulness in the future?

As part of a more broad written evaluation, students are asked what is helping them to learn in the course.

Stress & Self-Care in the Helping Professions

Pre- and post-test using the Kentucky Inventory of Mindfulness Scale.

Weekly student reflections on mindfulness and their experiences related to mindfulness and self-care.

References

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