

Mindfully Making Our Way in the World: The Exploration of Mindfulness Among Post-  
Secondary Students

Kaitlyn Kerridge

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to those who are pursuing their dreams but feel like they want to give up.

Don't give up and keep pushing forward.

### Abstract

Students across North America are facing new challenges due to the competitive economic climate, increased debt from student loans, and infinite access to technology. The practice of mindfulness shows great promise as an intervention to aid young people to cope with the daily challenges of student life. The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore mindfulness among post-secondary students. The major research question guiding this inquiry was *What is the meaning of mindfulness among post-secondary students?* The design of the study followed a narrative methodology. Data consisted of interview transcripts and journal entries. Six participants were interviewed in the first round and three were selected for a second storytelling interview. Data were analyzed using qualitative thematic techniques and followed narrative principles of re-storying. The central finding of the study is that mindfulness is experiential and comprised of three core elements: the practice, the journey and the impact. Analysis highlighted a) the journey is extremely unique, includes some kind of pivotal moment, and is transformative in nature on the individual's life, b) the practice can be divided into two types of mindfulness: "state mindfulness" or "situational mindfulness" and, c) mindfulness has a positive impact on mental health, perspective, and happiness. Findings suggest post-secondary students who adopt a mindfulness practice find purpose and meaning in their lives and have positive mental health. Building on this study, future research should continue to collect rich qualitative data on the lived experience of students in order to empower them and give meaning to their experience. This research can be used to inform the development of curriculum and programming and community health interventions.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Canadian teenagers and young adults aged 15-24 face the highest incidence of mental health disorders among any age group (CAMH, 2011). The Centre for Addictions and Mental Health (CAMH) defines mental health as:

...finding a balance in all aspects of your life: physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. It is the ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges you face every day - whether that involves making choices and decisions, adapting to and coping in difficult situations, or talking about your needs and desires. (2003, p. 11)

In Canada, over two million of these young adults (approximately six percent of the population) are attending post-secondary institutions. This student population is diverse. For example, nine percent of students identify as Aboriginal and 11 percent are international students. In addition to cultural diversity, the type of post-secondary education among these individuals varies. For example, three percent of students are enrolled in part-time studies, and approximately 15 percent of students are enrolled in graduate studies (Statistics Canada, 2017). Regardless of the demographic characteristics, mental illness does not discriminate; recent data suggests that there are increasing rates of mental health disorders and illnesses across the entire range of students. This increase in mental health issues has been attributed to increased use in technology (specifically the consumption of social media), higher tuition fees, our fast-paced society, and a higher proportion of graduates than in the past and is causing alarm for campus administrators, parents, and students. Finding balance and maintaining positive coping mechanisms amidst these challenges are proving to be increasingly difficult for students today.

Currently, there is an increase in the prevalence of student mental health issues and the treatment of these issues on campuses across North America. A recent study (American College

Health Association, 2016) revealed that 57 percent of college and university students are feeling “overwhelming anxiety” and 38 percent report feeling “so depressed that it was difficult to function”. The study also found that 13 percent of students have seriously considered suicide. Depression and anxiety have been found to negatively influence academic performance, increase the risk of dropping out, lead to self-harming behaviours and even suicide (American College Health Association, 2007; Mackenzie et. Al, 2011). In 2016, a mid-sized Ontario university experienced four suicides in the school year, bringing to light the severity of mental health issues on campuses (CBC, 2016). It is projected that by 2020, mental health issues will be the leading cause of disability at Canadian universities (World Health Organization, 2017). These trends are alarming and campus administrators and government officials are struggling to find ways to address them.

In response, post-secondary institutions are developing a variety of health promotion strategies that are targeted at helping students better cope with campus life. A strategy which is showing immense promise is the practice of mindfulness. John Kabat-Zinn (1982) defines mindfulness as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose in the present moment, non-judgmentally” (p.11). The practice of mindfulness can be achieved in several ways, such as meditation, yoga, active awareness of being, breathing practices, self-reflection, and creative writing. Organizations that study contemplative practices suggest that these practices allow us to concentrate and reflect, find meaning and connection to the world around us, and quiet our minds through stillness (Centre for Contemplative Mind in Society, 2016). Contemplative practices can be seen as counter-cultural and can trigger transformations both socially and within oneself (Giorgino, 2015). These practices can help student mental health by

allowing them to cope with the daily challenges they face while being enrolled in school (Gardner & Grose, 2015).

Previous research has shown that the benefits of mindfulness are far reaching. Psychologically, mindfulness has been shown to reduce stress and anxiety, foster an overall sense of calmness, and improve symptoms of depression for those who adopt a regular practice (John-Henderson, 2011; Keng, Smoski & Robins, 2011; Sharpire, Brown & Astin, 2011). Extensive research has been conducted on the physiological impact of mindfulness. Recent research suggests that reduction in chronic pain, lower cortisol levels, and improved immune response are significant benefits of mindfulness practices (Josipovic & Baars, 2015). From a social perspective, mindfulness has the potential to improve social anxiety and increase meaningful interactions and connections (Carson et. Al, 2004; Sharpire, 2013). These benefits can extend beyond just psychological, physical, and social aspects of well-being. Students may also benefit academically through increased concentration and ability to focus, as well as improved attention span and information retention (Shapiro, Brown, & Astin, 2011). Mindfulness can impact students on a holistic level, potentially helping them balance their stressful lives while completing their post-secondary studies.

To date, much of the research on mindfulness as a mental health promotion tool has been focused on the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program. This program was developed by John Kabat-Zinn and is commonly used in social work and therapy settings. The research on mindfulness and post-secondary students' mental health is growing, but has primarily been studied from a quantitative perspective. Mindfulness programs are most often implemented in the form of intervention programs, using randomized control trials. The measurement and evaluation of the effectiveness of these interventions include the use of

standardized measurement tools and pre-existing scales. Results from scaled data display only a snapshot of how the intervention is affecting the participant.

What is largely missing in the literature is the understanding from an insider's perspective on the real lived experience and pathways to mindfulness among post-secondary students. Some of the questions we have yet to answer include: *Why does the practice work? How does this practice make students feel? How does it make them think? How is the practice cultivated specifically for an individual? How does the practice manifest in daily life? What does mindfulness really mean to students? What do students experience and how/do they think this benefits them? What is the role and meaning of mindfulness on students' mental health?*

## **2.1 Purpose & Questions**

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore mindfulness among post-secondary students from an insider's perspective. The research question was: *What is the meaning of mindfulness among post-secondary students?* Four objectives guided this exploration:

1. To explore the journey to mindfulness (i.e. transitions, triggers, key people, places, activities);
2. To understand the role of mindfulness in students' daily lives (i.e. timing, detail, definition, specific activities);
3. To consider the connection between mindfulness and mental health;
4. To reflect on the overall importance of mindfulness in students' lives.

## **1.2 Importance of the Study**

Increased stress, depression, and anxiety are significant issues faced by students today, and post-secondary institutions are faced with allocating funds appropriately to new and innovative strategies geared toward the protection of student mental health. There is a significant

need for upstream preventative strategies for this population. Not only does mindfulness show promise as a mental health promotion tool, it can also lead to the building of a more positive and accepting campus, where students feel as though their mental health is valued. Mindfulness can promote a more inclusive campus community, which can improve students' ability to cope with mental health issues and engender a sense of belonging on their campus.

Currently, there are gaps in the literature particularly in our understanding of the experience of mindfulness. Specifically, there is a lack of rich qualitative data that informs how individuals experience mindfulness in their everyday lives. We know little about the integration of mindfulness into daily life including the pathways, triggers, and transitions that lead to that integration. There is currently little research studying the meaning of mindfulness to post-secondary students from an insider's perspective.

This study aims to explore post-secondary students' experiences with mindfulness and the impact it has on their mental health. Approaching this exploration from a critical qualitative perspective using a narrative methodology provides an opportunity to better understand the experience of mindfulness among post-secondary students. This study will help to inform future health promotion strategies by highlighting the various pathways to adopting mindfulness practices. It is anticipated that this research will make an important contribution to the literature and will help guide health promotion strategies to aide campuses in fighting the mental health epidemic occurring on campuses across Canada.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Three bodies of literature inform this study: a) mindfulness and well-being, b) mental health and the mental health of post-secondary students, and c) literature concerned with the intersection of mindfulness and mental health literature.

### **2.1 Mental Health & Post-Secondary Students**

Until the late 1990s, mental health was largely missing from health research and the concept of mental health went unrecognized in measurement tools, evaluations, and in the literature (Keyes, 2007). Due to varying opinions, perspectives, and beliefs on mental health and illness, the importance of mental health went unnoticed within different levels of government (Keyes, 2007). The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (2003) defines mental health as:

Finding balance in all aspects of your life: physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. It is the ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges you face every day – whether that involves making choices and decisions, adapting to and coping in difficult situations, or talking about your needs and desires (p. 11).

All individuals possess mental health. However, not all individuals have a mental illness. Mental illnesses are disorders of the brain which are categorized by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders. Mental illness can impact a person on multiple levels, causing disturbances socially, psychologically, and physically. Examples of mental illnesses include depression, anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, eating disorders, and addictions (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2013). The World Health Organization (WHO) states in their constitution that "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (2017, para. 1). Since the publication of this definition, there has been much debate surrounding the role of mental health. The WHO (2016)



states that “An important implication of this definition is that mental health is more than just the absence of mental disorders or disabilities.” (para 1) Mental health is paramount to societies and communities as collectives as it impacts an individual’s ability to make a positive contribution to society, and thus feel like a contributing member. Furthermore, positive mental health enables individuals to think for themselves, interact with others, and maintain a satisfying sense of their overall enjoyment of life (WHO, 2016).

There is a large body of literature showing an increase in some of the most prominent mental health disorders occurring in the post-secondary population. Key factors that have been identified as contributing to this increase include: increased pressure to succeed, high expectations, technology, social media usage, increased awareness, and the competitive economic climate. These can be categorized into academic barriers, social barriers, and financial barriers. Today, enrolling at a post-secondary institution to complete undergraduate studies is a common practice for young people looking to further their education and sustain a career. A study conducted done in Sweden suggested that post-secondary students face higher levels of stress when compared to the population generally (Ferrada-Noli, 2006). Increased levels of stress have the potential to lead to the onset of mental illness, the most common being anxiety and depression. Increased levels of academic stress can be attributed to increased workloads, high-stress examinations, increased access to information, high demand for learning vast amounts of material, and group and presentation work (Parkes and Zimmaro, 2016). Bean and Hammer (2006) found that 55 percent of students ignore one course in their workload to prepare and focus on another. Studies also suggest that timed examinations increase students’ stress and that stress is highest during exam periods (Musso et al., 2008). During these periods, students report increased feelings of “hopelessness” and “helplessness” (Mudhovozi, 2011). Social stressors

play a large role in contributing to overall stress. Students are faced with adapting to new environments with new people. Developing supportive relationships has been shown to decrease overall stress in students. However, making time for friends and socializing can be stressful when students are constantly trying to meet to academic demands (Mudhovozi, 2011). In addition to building new relationships, relationships left at home, specifically between parents and students can cause increased stress. One of the main stressors for students is having to meet their parents' academic expectations (Acharya, 2003). Most students find themselves overworking and setting unrealistic expectations to avoid disappointing their parents. As a result, this has made post-secondary settings increasingly competitive (Musso, et. al., 2008).

Transition and adjustment to post-secondary life contributes to increased stress levels for students. Stressors related to transitioning can include: exploration of identity, mastering new skills, pressure to expand social relations and increased time demands (Mackenzie et. Al, 2011). The combination of these stressors can lead to decreased well-being, decreased ability to reach out for help due to lack of social supports, and can pose threats to campus safety (Wood, 2012). Most students are experiencing a newfound independence for their first time when adjusting into their new campus life. Leaving a nurturing and supportive life to live independently contributes to increased stress levels as students do not have the constant support they may have had at home in the past. Increased levels of freedom and daily decision making can contribute to increased stress levels for students who are newly adjusting in their independence (Mudhovozi, 2011).

Coping with all of these stressors is increasingly challenging for students. Coping strategies are important in stress management and emotion regulation (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980, 1986). Task-oriented coping and emotion-based coping strategies often yield positive results as these coping strategies are focused on the problem at hand (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984).

Maladaptive and negative coping strategies such as avoidance, denial, and disassociation can be harmful to both students and peers on campus (Mudhovozi, 2008). Coping strategies help students deal with the increased stressors they are experiencing while helping them balance all of the demands of their campus life.

With the recent publication of results regarding post-secondary students' mental health (American College Health Association, 2016), campuses are redirecting resources to help students protect their mental health. Recently, the rates and severity of mental health issues are growing at an exacerbating rate that counselling resources cannot keep up with (Lees & Davis, 2012). It is worth noting that there is approximately 1 counsellor for every 1527 students and 1.6 million students in the U.S pursued counselling services in 2008 (Wood, 2012). There is a significant need for alternative interventions which suit the needs of students. These alternatives would need to address the large number of students who do not receive help due to time limitations (46.7 percent), the students wanting to autonomously receive support (73.3 percent), and funding constraints placed on university resources (Downs & Eisenberg, 2012).

Some research has examined the increase in mental health issues and key factors include: technology, the economic climate, and social issues. Today, young people are the largest group of technology consumers (Perry & Singh, 2016). Research has been conducted on the positive and negative consequences of technology use in young people. Some research suggests that positive benefits that accompany the use of technology revolve around mental health awareness and outreach to young people who may have not been reached without the use of technology. Counselling services are now finding new ways to reach out to students via social media platforms and use of the internet (Reavley, Cvetkovsky, & Jorm, 2010). However, the rapid uptake of technology and social media have been found to have many negative outcomes.

Students are using social media for non-academic purposes which can cause threats to privacy, distraction, increase in narcissistic tendencies, and materialistic comparisons to others contributing to a range of mental health issues (Perry & Singh, 2016). Mental health disorders specifically related to online technology use are increasing. For example, the newest edition of the DSM (V), states that Internet Gaming Disorder and Problem Internet Use are being categorized as conditions for further study. These conditions can be conceptualized as behavioural addictions, or impulsive control disorders (Perry & Singh, 2016). The increased use of social media can have negative effects which directly impact mental health. Increased social media use can cause the development of jealousy toward others, decreased sleep, suicide ideation, increased substance use and isolation, higher stress levels, and cyberbullying (Perry & Singh, 2016). Specifically, there is evidence explaining that the phenomenon of taking “selfies” contributes to low-self-esteem and narcissistic tendencies among young people. The manipulation of the “selfie” causes individuals to idolize others, contributing to mental health problems and increased distraction from reality (Kaur & Vig, 2016). The integration of technology into the lives of university and college students is unavoidable; however, the effect of increased technology and social media use needs to be recognized as a contributor to mental health problems on campuses.

The financial burdens placed on post-secondary students are contributing to increased stress and mental disorders. Today, the competitive job market and unstable economic climate make it more challenging for graduates to secure jobs in their field once they finish post-secondary. In addition to this, paying off loans and debts acquired to pay for their post-secondary education is an added pressure to their success. In North America, tuition fees are increasing while government assisted financing programs are decreasing. Tuition fees show no sign of

decreasing and more students are acquiring debt which will carry over after graduation (Kruisselbrink & Flatt, 2013). In 2005, a study revealed that 57 percent of students had some kind of student loan. Furthermore, the average student debt increased to approximately \$18,000 while 27 percent of students had a student loan above \$25, 000 (Luong, 2010). Research has shown that students who accumulate large debt tend to perform lower academically and are at higher risk of developing a mental health disorder (Eisenberg et al, 2007, Ross, Cleland, & McLeod 2006). These statistics support the fact that students carrying financial burdens are more likely to need support for mental health issues.

## **2.2 Mindfulness & Well-Being**

Mindfulness is defined in various ways as it relates to the context and discipline in which it is being used. Two prominent researchers who have been exploring mindfulness since the 1970's and 80's are John Kabat-Zinn, PhD, former Professor of Medicine at Massachusetts Medical School and founder of the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Program, and Ellen Langer, a positive psychologist from Harvard University. While Kabat-Zinn and Langer approach mindfulness from different perspectives, there is a commonality in what they see as the impact of these practices.

John Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose in the present moment, non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1982, p.11). Kabat-Zinn’s formal background is in medicine, however; he believes in merging Buddhist traditions with the science of Biology (Santorelli et Al., 2017). Kabat-Zinn uses the contemplative practice of meditation to help achieve a state of mindfulness. Meditation practices help achieve stillness and can eliminate “zoning out” or “spacing out”, which can result in a loss of focus, contributing to increased levels of stress (Kabat-Zinn, 1982). Kabat-Zinn is the creator of the Mindfulness-

Based Stress Reduction program which encourages people to use their innate resources to help aide in pain management, chronic illnesses, and stress reduction. In 1982, Kabat-Zinn published a study on the impact of meditation on chronic pain management in patients with low back, neck, and shoulder pain, and chronic headaches. The study showed that after participating in ten weeks of meditation, patients showed a reduction in pain and an increase in the ability to manage symptoms (Kabat-Zinn, 1982). Kabat-Zinn also explains that the impact mindfulness has on illness can be both for prevention and management. He says that mindfulness can prompt individuals to become more engaged with their health for purposes of prevention as they become more aware when practicing mindfulness. He also explains that individuals managing symptoms and illnesses may alter pain and the ability to cope with disability enabled by chronic pain (Ludwig & Kabat-Zinn, 2008).

Ellen Langer approaches mindfulness from a secular and a minimalistic perspective. She states “mindfulness is actively noticing new things” (Langer, 1989, p. 36). This involves growing an awareness of oneself and the outside world by actively engaging in the present moment. Langer asserts that mindfulness is learned and through mindfulness, we learn there is no singular perspective that everyone shares (Langer, 1993). Specifically, in one study, Langer measured the effects of a trait-mindfulness training program (learned mindfulness without meditation) on expectant mothers. Results indicated that mothers who participated in trait mindfulness had better health during pregnancy and better neonatal outcomes (Zilcha-Mano & Langer, 2016). Langer believes that if we are not living in a state of mindfulness, we are operating in a state of mindlessness. This concept is paramount to moving from a mindless state, which often is unrecognized by the subject, to a mindful state. Actively noticing new things allows one to

become rejuvenated and enlivened (Pagnini & Langer, 2015). Once we come to understand that everyone has different beliefs based on their experiences, we are able to be mindful.

Mindfulness can have a holistic impact on the body: research shows that mindfulness benefits us psychologically and physically. Within a psychological context, mindfulness has been shown to demonstrate great benefits. Specifically, mindfulness has an impact on reducing negative emotions, including stress. As previously discussed, the MBSR program aids in stress reduction. However, another study, using a small sample of individuals who meditate, showed that participants had an increased sense of well-being due to mindfulness activity and lower negative psychological behaviour. These behaviours include fear of emotion, though suppression and difficulty with emotion regulation (Keng, Smoski, and Robins, 2011). Coping with day-to-day life involves dealing with a wide range of emotions that an individual can experience. A recent study suggests that mindfulness aids in emotion regulation. In Australia, a cross-sectional study performed on 402 adults measured a self- assessment of perceived mindfulness, psychological distress, and emotion regulation. Results indicate that mindfulness can improve psychological distress, also having an impact on the way an individual copes and regulates emotions when in distress. Emotional regulation or self-regulation of emotions is fundamentally important when perceiving how stressful a situation is and how to deal with the impending consequences of stress (McDonald, et Al. 2016). Mindfulness benefits include the improvement of memory and attention which can have a direct impact on education. Marsh and Wong (2011), explain that mindfulness increases focus, ability to concentrate, and information retention. Marsh and Wong also explain that mindfulness has a direct benefit on anxiety and depression and can potentially be used as a supplement for pharmaceutical treatment. Another study carried out in 2014 supports this theory. This study compared aspects of mindfulness, emotion regulation and

self-compassion in 38 individuals suffering from anxiety, depression, and stress who attended a mindfulness meditation training (MMT). Participants completed scale questionnaires rating their level of anxiety, depression and stress, as well as their perceived attitudes toward mindfulness, emotion regulation and self-compassion. Results indicate that participants who participated in MMT showed significant decrease in anxiety, depression, and stress. The authors further state that regardless of the type of mindfulness training program (MMT, MBSR, Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy), the key components of the programs - self-compassion, non-judgement, and emotion regulation combined - all aide in the improvement of well-being (Van Dam et al, 2014).

Numerous studies demonstrate that there are physical benefits to mindfulness, such as reduction in hypertension, increased immune function, decline in chronic pain, and improvements in insomnia. A study led by Dusek et al. (2008), implemented a double-blind, randomized trial comparing an 8 week stress management program, including a relaxation response training (RR) with 61 patients. The results showed that participants who underwent the 8-week RR training program were able to eliminate anti-hypertension medications quicker than those who did not participate in the RR training. Another study examined the impact of a web-based mindfulness program for patients with chronic pain. The study used a randomized control trial design, with 77 patients, 36 in the treatment group and 41 in the control group. The program guided patients through 20 minutes of meditation, 6 days a week, for an 8-week period. The results indicated that the group assigned the mindfulness web training showed increased mindfulness skills, reduced pain intensity and suffering, increased acceptance of their pain, reduced stress caused by their pain, higher ratings of satisfaction in their overall life (Henriksson, Wasara, & Ronnlund, 2016). New strands of infections are constantly emerging causing concern regarding immune function and deficiency. A study completed by Davidson et. al. (2003)



examined the effect of mindfulness meditation on immune response and brain activity. Brain activity was measured, before, after, and 4 months after participants participated in an 8-week MBSR program. 25 participants completed the program and 16 participants on a wait-list were in the control group and were tested at the same points as the experiment group. At the end of the 8-week program all participants were given a flu shot. Results concluded that there were significant impacts and alteration in brain activity, specifically in the left-sided anterior. It was also found that there was an increased immune response to the influenza vaccine, helping fight off the influenza virus. Lack of sleep can lead to other illnesses and disorders and can cause distress and poor quality of life. A sample of 283 participants, aged 18-25, participated in a cross-sectional study about self-perceived mindfulness and sleep patterns. Results indicated that participants who rated themselves as having higher levels of mindfulness, also had better sleep quality. Further analysis suggest that mindfulness was also linked with lower sleep disturbance and lower daytime sleep. Higher levels of mindfulness were related to longer sleep duration and better overall sleep quality (Bogusch, Fekete, & Skinta, 2016). Mindfulness has a wide variety of benefits on a physiological level which can aide in increased overall health and quality of life.

Recently, mindfulness has emerged in mainstream health care and medicine as a tool for enhancing well-being. According to the Centre Centers for Disease Control, “well-being is a positive outcome that is meaningful for people and for many sectors of society, because it tells us that people perceive that their lives are going well. Good living conditions (e.g., housing, employment) are fundamental to well-being.”(CDC, 2016). Well-being is a direct outcome of quality of life. Well-being often takes into account different aspects of a human-being’s life, specifically, physical well-being, economic well-being, spiritual well-being, life satisfaction, engaging activity in life and work, and domain specific activity (CDC, 2016). Well-being is

extremely subjective to individuals and their environments, which poses difficulties when measuring and evaluating well-being. Often, well-being is measured using scaled questionnaires which only describe a portion of how well-being impacts their overall quality of life.

### **2.3 Mindfulness & Post-Secondary Students' Mental Health**

There is a small but growing body of literature supporting the use of mindfulness strategies to aid post-secondary students experiencing mental health issues. Most of the current research surrounds programs which are delivered via intervention in counselling-based settings, programs which are voluntarily sought out, and programs tailored to medical and nursing students. After completing searches on various databases (Web of Science, Super Search, Psych Info), a total of 334 articles were found. The search strategy was altered numerous times and included key words such as: mindfulness, contemplative practices, post-secondary students, college students, university students, mental health, anxiety, stress, and depression.

A recent study revealed the positive results and impact that mindfulness has on post-secondary student mental health. A sample of 71 undergraduate students was studied. Students were required to attend one weekly mindfulness session which focused on training students in mindful breathing. Sessions ran the whole school year (fall and winter semester) and required students to have access to internet, and access to laptop/smartphone. Due to the duration of the study, there was a high dropout rate. Results indicated that there was significant improvement in mood disturbance and anxiety sensitivity in participants (Azam et. al, 2016).

Most prevalent in this literature is the exploration in the use of mindfulness to aid in burnout and exhaustion among medical professional trainees. Curriculum in these programs are fast paced and place a heavy focus on developing pathology skills, and rigorous medical practices, and place less of a focus on resiliency among students learning these medical practices

(Kreitzer & Klatt, 2017). A program called Mind-Body Medical Skills (MBMS) was developed and implemented at Georgetown Medical School to increase self-care and self-awareness among medical students. Over 3,000 students participate in this program, where they meet in groups of 10 over an 11-week period for two-hour sessions with a trained faculty facilitator. Other universities such as the University of Minnesota and Ohio State University are integrating similar programs based on well-being and resiliency into medical and nursing programs to help students experience the benefits of mindfulness during stressful training and academic programs (Kreitzer & Klatt, 2017).

First-year post-secondary students often experience a different level of stress than those in mid to upper years. The adjustment and transition associated with first-year students is a significant stressor. A study conducted at a Pennsylvania university utilized a randomized control trial design on 144 first-year students. Students were assigned groups and attended a program which was structured in meditation and mindfulness techniques. The techniques included meditations, loving-kindness exercises, and body-scan and breathing exercises. Changes in health behaviours were specifically measured using pre and post-test questionnaires. Results displayed significant improvements in life satisfaction, depression, anxiety, sleep, and substance use compared to those who did not participate in the program (Dvorakova et al., 2017).

Overall, the review of the literature suggests that mindfulness has great benefit; however, there is much we have yet to understand.

## **2.4 Identified Gaps**

Three gaps have been identified in the literature:

1. The literature is dominated by quantitative research and qualitative research is limited.  
There has been no narrative inquiry to examine this issue.
2. Little is known about the meaning of mindfulness among students from data collected through a student-to-student (peer-to-peer research) process.
3. There is little known about mindfulness among students from an insider's (mindfulness practitioner and student) perspective.

As a result, the current research tells only a small portion of the different perspectives and experiences of mindfulness and further research is warranted.

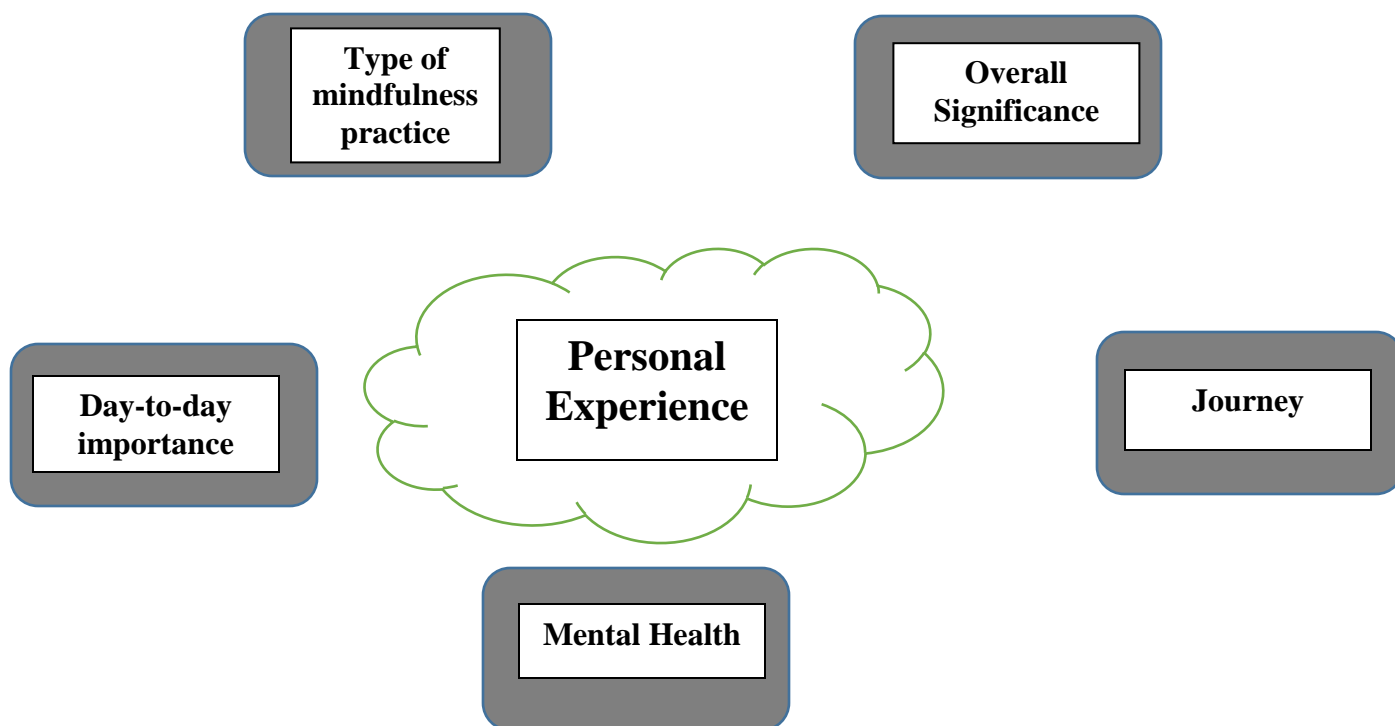
### **Chapter 3 Conceptual Framework and Paradigm**

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore mindfulness among post-secondary students from an insider's perspective. There were four objectives in the study:

1. To understand the student's journey to mindfulness;
2. To identify the ways in which mindfulness affects their day-to-day life;
3. To explore the connection between mindfulness and their mental health;
4. To gain insights into the overall importance mindfulness holds in their life.

#### **3.1 My Mindfulness Experience**

The conceptual framework used to guide this study was derived from my own personal mindfulness experience which has evolved over the past seven years including different practices, studying and assessing other people's techniques and testimonials. Upon careful reflection I identified five components of my own mindfulness experience: a) type of mindfulness practiced, b) day-to-day importance, c) journey into mindfulness, d) overall significance, and e) mental health.



*Figure 1. My Mindfulness Experience Conceptual Framework*

These five components are conceptualized as “floating” because the connection between them between my own personal experience and them was unclear to me at the outset of this study. In my own experience, in some instances all five components may be present whereas at other times only one may be. This I believe, depends on the practitioner and the pathway in which they choose to practice. Questions related to the order and importance include: *Is there a hierarchy that exists among them? Does one precede another? Is there a specific order in which these must exist?*

Today, mindfulness is a broad concept, surfacing in many different disciplines of research. My personal experience served as the parameters of interest and helped to inform how I constructed the study and was also helpful in the analysis process. I will explain the meaning of

each component and where it comes from. Type of mindfulness is derived from two main types of mindfulness developed by pioneers, Jon Kabat-Zinn (1982) and Ellen Langer (1989).

Meditation is my personal contemplative practice of choice; however, not all people understand mindfulness through the use of contemplative practices or through a mainstream definition. The journey to mindfulness is the understanding of pivotal points, key influences, and definable moments which were captured during the revelatory experience of mindfulness. Mental health can be significantly influenced by the implementation of mindfulness and can have great physical and psychological benefits. Mindfulness has the potential to be transformative and impact day-to-day life by shaping the way we live each moment and experience the tasks of daily life. The overall significance of mindfulness can be transformative in a person's life changing the way they think about, perceive and understand the world. Upon further personal analysis I realized that the development of a consistent mindfulness practice created a dynamic narrative which was comprised of these five elements.

### **3.2 Paradigm & Approach**

The concepts of ontology and epistemology seek to answer questions about the nature and existence of reality and knowledge (Ponterotto, 2005). My personal ontology is derived from my belief that reality is constructed based on the individual's worldviews, experiences, and perceptions. Reality varies between each and every individual and is built and constructed. There is not one single reality or truth. Individuals can have multiple realities and their reality can change based on experiences and environment. My personal epistemology is that knowledge systems are subjective and constantly evolving. My knowledge may not be transferred or interpreted to others depending on others' perceptions and/or bias of the individual receiving the knowledge. Knowledge is learned and is usually distributed through complex power structures

and hegemonic / hierarchical structures. Almost all knowledge is biased through the individual conveying the knowledge, especially within the distribution of knowledge through mass media. As a researcher, I acknowledged my own personal biases prior to knowledge transfer with other individuals. Knowledge transfer can take many forms, such as: experiences, narratives, interpretations, scientific data and facts.

These epistemological and ontological beliefs shaped my paradigm of inquiry which is social constructivism. Paradigm is defined by Guba and Lincoln (1994) as the basic belief system that guides researchers in the way they see the world. This involves their fundamental way of knowing, relative to their own experience, from their subjectivist view of the world, and in their choice of method. As social constructivists, we understand that reality is constructed from social interactions, norms, and dynamics (Gastaldo, 2015). Specifically, reality is “constructed through human activity” and is shaped through social atmospheres and contexts (Kim, P.2, 2001). This means that interactions with others and social exchanges shape our personal interpretations of the experiences we have with others. I believe that knowledge is a social construct rooted in human activity. Within this human activity are social processes such as: culture, economics, politics, history and settings. Meaning derived from these experiences are shaped by these social processes. In regards to my study, this means that findings were specific to this point in time and in history at this specific university. As a result of the way I see knowledge and reality it made sense to design the study through this lens. Using a narrative methodology which relies heavily on conversational style data collection, meant the data was naturally co-produced.



### 3.3 Critical Qualitative Research

Qualitative research focuses on the naturalistic behaviours and perceptions of people living in the social world. Qualitative research is more frequently adopted in the fields of health and health care, psychology, and social policy reform (Guba and Lincoln 2005; Lub, 2015; Yin, 1994). Qualitative research paradigms include different forms of inquiry and allow for human interpretation of an individual's own reality which can be influenced by numerous factors (e.g. politics, socio-economic status, discourses) (Centre for Critical Qualitative Research, 2018). Qualitative methods and evaluation support complex ethical considerations and move beyond questionnaire-based evaluations to gather and provide an understanding of people's experiences, emotions, and insights. Specifically, qualitative research provides a deeper understanding within a health context of well-being and mental health (Lub, 2015). The implementation of a qualitative methodology informed my understanding as a researcher to help interpret the meaning of mindfulness among post-secondary students beyond scaled-based questionnaires. The meaning of post-secondary students' experience with mindfulness was explored through a qualitative lens which provided an opportunity for participants to be forthcoming about their experiences. Using a qualitative approach for this study was necessary as it allowed participants to be open about their experiences on their own terms. The experiences of the participants was completely subjective and independent to each participant and was respected and honored using a qualitative methodology.

Critical qualitative health research refers to a process of challenging pre-existing notions and dynamics in the field of health studies. Specifically, this involves challenging power assumptions, asking how and why knowledge exists and is created, and going beyond assumptions and understandings regarding certain populations and their characteristics (Centre

for Critical Qualitative Research, 2018). In this study, the use of a critical qualitative approach was beneficial when studying a population who often go unnoticed and unheard. Today, the youth and millennial generation are often seen as lazy, money-driven, and having poor work ethic (Bingham, 2017). Some research suggests that millennials struggle to integrate work and personal life to achieve a work-life blend (balance). It is often these stereotypes which create the stress and anxiety millennials are constantly faced with when searching for a “purpose driven life” (Bingham, 2017, p. #). The use of a critical lens helps challenge stereotypes and empower this unheard demographic.

Andrews, Gillett, & Voros (2016) discuss the foundation of critical qualitative health research (CQHR). They state that this field involves challenging social norms, different models of thinking, and the power relationships that govern our societies and health institutions. They also state that as critical qualitative researchers, it is our job to advocate alongside marginalized and oppressed individuals and populations. Groups often face marginalization in health policy, school policy, administration and research. Although the research on mental health disorders in post-secondary students is growing, there is little being done on policy implementation and administration. Andrews, Gillett, and Voros (2016) state that the most vulnerable of these populations often “fall off the map” (p. #). Thus, it is the work of CQ researchers to address this neglect and emphasize the high risk and vulnerable states that these individuals lie in. In post-secondary institutions, vulnerable populations such as students who suffer from concurrent disorders including mental illness and substance abuse, may be faced with additional obstacles. Andrews, Gillett, and Voros (2016) state nine core competencies for consideration when challenging certain situations critically. Below is a chart constructed with these concepts along with the relation to this specific study:

Table 1

*Andrews, Gillett & Voros (2016) Critical Core Competencies in Relation to Study*

Core Competency	Relation to Study
<b>Addressing pressing social health issues</b>	A serious social health issue is increase of mental health disorders on campuses. This is an elevated public health concern.
<b>Drawing on philosophy and social theory to inform research</b>	I drew on a critical social perspective to inform this research.
<b>Involving communities as partners in research, developing a public approach</b>	The local community was involved through recruitment. The research question was derived from an interest from the community.
<b>Thinking and acting “outside of the box”</b>	Mindfulness is an “outside of the box” approach labelled as “counter-culture”.
<b>Understanding how local situations and events are related to global scale processes</b>	The WHO has recognized mental health as an area of concern. Furthermore, mental health has been a growing global epidemic, specifically in young adult populations.
<b>Expressing aspirations of and for individuals and society</b>	As CQ researchers this means advocating for those who are marginalized (post-secondary students with mental health disorders). This allows for those peoples to be optimistic and hopeful about the future.
<b>Being Humble &amp; Reflexive</b>	A highly reflexive stance was adopted in the research process. Being reflexive is also a core component of contemplative practices and mindfulness and was practiced by the researcher conducting the study.
<b>Expressing Solidarity</b>	Researchers who study those who are oppressed act in solidarity with the marginalized community. They give them a voice if they do not have one, or are unable to express it. In this case, post-secondary students are those suffering with mental health disorders who may be struggling to get help. I stood and will continue to stand in solidarity with students to support student mental health.

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**Questioning the nature of evidence**

Using narrative inquiry in Critical Qualitative Health Research challenges the biomedical evidence that dominates the literature.

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## Chapter 4: Methodology

The methodology employed in this study was narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry refers to storytelling, with a focus on the way in which the story is told. As human beings, we use stories to connect and share with others as a means of understanding who we presently are, who we have been in our past, and who we are working on becoming. Storytelling exists cross culturally, is an age-old method of knowledge transfer, and is a means of addressing the complex aspects associated with the human race. Narratives can be interdisciplinary and diverse, all while being traditional and innovative. Narrative offers opportunities to explore new ideas, methods, and questions through a partnership (Chase, 2005). Narrative has been found to be useful in: a) health research to explore the patient's experience, b) mental health research to understand patient journeys, and c) peer-to-peer research to engage in more forthright storytelling between friends.

My own journey as a mindful practitioner and researcher is understood through a narrative context. Connecting with others in meaningful ways can be best achieved through storytelling versus structured interviews. Using a narrative framework for this study was appropriate, because the nature of the study included sharing personal experiences. Mindfulness is an extremely independent journey and can only be told by the person who is experiencing it, and narrative provided that opportunity. The openness of the narrative methodology interconnects with the goals of mindfulness practice.

Polkinghorne (1988) stated that narrative inquiry is best performed through the basis of the practitioner's work. He explains that the practitioner has an invested interest as they are deeply concerned with people's stories as they work with these cases and can use narrative explanations to interpret and decipher why people act, behave, and engage the way they do.

Through my own personal evolution as a mindful practitioner I have tried to find more ways to introduce mindfulness to others and the narrative methodology was able to do this.

#### 4.1 Participants

In order to gain a deep understanding of the role and meaning of mindfulness in post-secondary students' lives, I inquired about their personal experiences with mindfulness.

Participants were enrolled in post-secondary studies; three were graduate students and three were undergraduates. Table 2 provides details about each participant.

Table 2

*Participant Demographics*

<b>Name (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>How many interviews</b>
Greg	Completed MA in Recreation and Leisure	2
Steve	Second year Concurrent- Education	1
Jasmin	1 <sup>st</sup> year Medical School	2
Tonya	2 <sup>nd</sup> year Masters of Science	1
Mike	4 <sup>th</sup> year Sport Management	2
Daniel	2 <sup>nd</sup> year Kinesiology	1

##### 4.1.1 Recruitment.

Students were recruited from the Niagara Region, from a local yoga studio and Brock University. I utilized a purposeful sampling strategy to recruit participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In order to ensure the eligibility of the participants, recruitment posters (See Appendix A: Recruitment Posters) were geared toward people who specifically practice mindfulness. The

posters asked questions like: “Do you practice mindfulness?” and “Does it impact your well-being?” It was important to tailor the posters specifically to the use of mindfulness as this allowed for students to self-identify as being mindful, assuming there was familiar awareness of their mindfulness practice. Recruitment inquiries were as follows:

Table 3

*Study Inquiries*

<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Reasoning</b>
<b>1</b>	No show
<b>1</b>	Conflict of interest
<b>2</b>	Wanted a research credit for participation
<b>1</b>	Was too busy to partake once we connected
<b>1</b>	Did not respond after initial e-mail
<b>1</b>	Did not practice mindfulness consistently
<b>2</b>	Inquired after the study closed
<b>1</b>	I interviewed as participant 7 but unfortunately the data was not able to be used as she did not have an active mindfulness practice and just wanted info on mindfulness, she also wanted credit for her participation
<b>6</b>	Participants interviewed for interview 1
<b>3/6</b>	Participants interviewed for interview 2

Posters were placed strategically around the university in high traffic areas and in areas that focused specifically on wellness, such as Student Health Services & Personal Counselling, Recreation and Athletic Services. In total, two participants were recruited from the yoga studio and four from the university. Those who were recruited from the university saw posters in a variety of different locations on campus. I corresponded with students via e-mail after they inquired about the study (See Appendix B: E-mail Response Script). I did not recruit any participants that I knew personally.

#### **4.1.2 Selection.**

Using my selection criteria, I selected six participants during recruitment. It is stated that in narrative research specifically, the researcher carefully considers who the sample will be due to fact that participants are openly sharing lived experiences about their personal stories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Selection criteria was as follows: students self-identified as being mindful and were required to “actively” practice mindfulness. Mindfulness is an ongoing practice and the study pursued participants who incorporated mindfulness consistently in their lives. Mindfulness practice was not limited to meditation and could be whatever the student felt allowed them to actively practice mindfulness. Examples of “active mindfulness” can be ongoing meditation practice, weekly/daily yoga practice/routine, daily/weekly journaling and self-reflection, and living life in a way which is mindful of the environment and others (e.g. practicing self-compassion, kind attention, mindfulness to the earth and environment). Students needed to self-identify as being mindful. This meant students had to have an understanding of mindfulness and had to feel like this was a part of their identity. Students had to be comfortable sharing their stories and personal information in narrative format.



Table 4

*Participant Eligibility Criteria and Rationale for Participant Selection.*

Criteria	Rationale
<b>Mindful Post-Secondary Students</b>	
Second year and above post-secondary students	Students in first year were excluded due to inexperience in post-secondary and different stressors than those in upper years.
Identifies as having an active mindful practice	The study aimed to explore the meaning of mindfulness, thus, the student possessed an <b>active</b> mindful practice. This meant that students must practice consistently/routinely.
Consider themselves a mindful individual	The student had to consider themselves a mindful individual to ensure that there was an understanding of mindfulness which was meaningful to them.
Willing to share personal information	The study sought to explore the impact on the student's mental health. Given the personal nature of mindfulness and the stigma related to mental health, students needed to understand that they may be sharing intimate details about their life.

**4.1.3 Study Locations.**

Face-to-face interviews took place on the Brock University campus. Two interviews were conducted via telephone to accommodate students who were not at Brock University.

**4.2 Data Collection**

A biographical, narrative framework was used in this study. Biographical studies involve the telling of one's experiences and life as told by the participant. The researcher listens, records, observes, and writes during this process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The biographical storytelling process offers insight into personal experience which can be contrasted and compared later in the data analysis stage. Two types of data were produced in this study: a) interview data (audio

recordings and transcripts) and b) research journals (these are described in depth in 4.2.5). The following figure illustrates each component of the data collection process:



*Figure 2. Steps in the Data Collection Process.*

#### **4.2.1 Initial Interview (Semi-Structured Interview).**

The first interviews were called initial interviews and were semi-structured. The objective of the interview was to gather an understanding of how participants incorporated mindfulness into their lives and how they self-identified with the concept of mindfulness. Interviews ranged from 10 to 40 minutes in length. Interviews were audio recorded and I transcribed them. Immediately after the interview I made in-depth summary notes about the content of the interview, early analysis notes, and personal reflection notes. I asked questions (See Appendix C: Letter of Consent & Appendix D: Interview Guide: Semi-Structured Interview Guide 1) directly related to mental health which helped me to identify a) which participants were comfortable sharing their experiences, and b) which participants felt like there was a relationship between their mental health and their mindfulness practice. The first interview allowed me to develop a rapport with the participants, which enabled me to obtain a deeper understanding of who was a “good” candidate (i.e. meeting my study eligibility and objectives) for moving on in the study. It also assisted me in modifying the interview guide as at times I felt I needed to ask more specific questions related to the study objectives. I anticipated these interviews as “pre-screening” interviews; however, most participants were eager to delve into more depth including stories

related to their journey, mental health, and mindfulness practice. For example, it was impossible to discuss and share definitions of mindfulness without delving deeper into stories related to how they started their practice and how significant their practice is in their life. After reflecting on each participant's experience and consulting with my supervisor, I contacted three participants for a second interview. The three participants I chose were a) natural storytellers, b) students I felt were forthcoming, and c) students with whom I fostered a natural connection. Based on these criteria and in combination with the research question, study objectives and personal notes in my research journal I selected three participants for the next interview.

#### **4.2.2 Research Journals.**

I made in-depth notes in a journal directly after the interviews occurred (See Appendix E: for Journal Template). These notes included my summary of the interview, some early analysis notes, comparisons to myself and my practice (if any) and my personal reflections on the interviews. Journaling throughout the process was an important tool to help me see differences and similarities between my participant's journey and my own. Journaling was extremely helpful in interpreting what the participant's authentic experience was and in understanding my practice and experience further. Journaling created a space for me to cultivate my own practice and went beyond the purpose of a field note as the journal was more than just documentation of the interview.

#### **4.2.3 Storytelling Sessions.**

The second interview was structured as a storytelling session. After the participants agreed to participate in a second interview, I sent them the interview guide (See Appendix F: Interview Guide: Story Telling Session) ahead of time so that they could think about a topic which is complex. I chose to do this because I felt that asking them to share their experience

would be challenging to do so spontaneously. Instead, I wanted the participants to have meaningful and purposeful responses which were not rushed or ill-prepared. The format of the interview was completely open, giving them the space to create their story and tell me about their experience on their own terms. Once they told their story, I probed further into a) the research question and study objectives, b) new comments and c) the 5 components of the conceptual framework (mental health, day-to-day importance, overall significance, type of mindfulness and journey). In doing this, I gathered rich details about their journey into mindfulness, the significance of mindfulness in their daily and overall life and how they perceived the relationship to their mental health. These interviews were between one and one-and-a-half hours in length and took place either on the phone or in person.

#### **4.2.4 Audio Recordings & Transcripts.**

All interviews and storytelling sessions were audio-recorded. Audio-recordings were stored on a password protected computer and were deleted from the original recorder. I re-listened to the audio-recordings in-depth, multiple times during analysis. Re-listening to the audio helped me relive the interview experience. I transcribed the audio-recordings personally verbatim. I inserted pseudonyms in order to protect the anonymity of my participants and their stories.

### **4.3 Data Summary**

Extensive data was collected via two in-depth interviews and detailed journal memos.

Table 5

*Data Summary*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Recorded Interview (minutes)</b>	<b>Transcript (typed pages)</b>	<b>Journal Memos (hand-written pages)</b>
<b>Greg</b>	18 + 45= 63	28	3+3= 6
<b>Steve</b>	12	6	2
<b>Tonya</b>	14	8	2.5
<b>Jasmin</b>	28+ 49= 77	35	3+5= 8
<b>Mike</b>	39+60= 99	46	5+6=11
<b>Daniel</b>	35	16	4
<b>Totals</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>139</b>	<b>33.5</b>

**4.4 Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis is a continuous process that begins in data collection and continues through the final write up of the study (Creswell, 2012). There are numerous ways to analyze narrative data. I used a hybrid analysis process which merged with those described by scholars in the field (i.e. Clandinin & Connelly) and personal strategies which I found helpful. These are described in the following section.

**4.4.1 Summary Data Collection & Preliminary Analysis**

Analysis began at the time of data collection. The following steps summarize data collection and analysis process and are an adaptation of Creswell's (2003) and Clandin & Connelly's (2000) approaches. Journaling occurred throughout.

- **Step 1: Re-listening to audio.** I re-listened to audio recordings immediately after the interviews which helped ignite the analysis process. Re-listening to the audio allowed me to re-position myself back into the interview.

- **Step 2: Production of journal notes.** Journal notes contained early analysis notes that detailed any interesting comments and/or comparisons. I wrote in detail about how the interviews went and began to identify common themes among the participants.
- **Step 3: Developed themes.** After I made journal notes on each interview I pulled quotes that I found represented emerging themes within each interview. I created a visual “process” (See Appendix G). This process aided in identifying common themes among the participants (e.g. type of practice, impact), while also highlighting individual themes.
- **Step 4: Created summaries and full profiles.** These profiles summarized the interviews and were important in the restorying process. Included in these summaries were major themes within each individual interview which were supported by participant quotes.
- **Step 5: Restorying.** This involved the creation of storyboards where I mapped out starting points, turning points and key elements in their story. Restorying began by visually drawing out each individual’s story (See Appendix H). While doing this, I was able to clearly see the common themes that were shared among participants. Restorying was a challenge as I needed to negotiate and interpret the story that was shared by participants. Restorying involves placing the stories into a framework which makes sense to the researcher, while connecting the ideas in the story through a common link (Sinclair, 2006). In this case, it was linked chronologically and thematically. I decided that all aspects of the life story have significant importance and all turning points and key elements were included in analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Sinclair (2006) states that participants construct stories which support their interpretation and identity of themselves which represents their reality. Thus, the analysis focused on the meaning and

interpretation of the participant's reality and experiences. This aligns with the social constructivist philosophy.

- **Step 6: Linking mindfulness concepts.** After identifying individual and common themes, I took the common themes and looked for linkages to already existing mindfulness concepts. I did this through analyzing the quotes in Step 3 where I aimed to get a deeper understanding of the essence of mindfulness in the participants' lives through already existing concepts.

#### 4.5 Quality Assessment

Tracey (2010) recommends eight criteria for achieving quality in qualitative research, they are: worthy topic, rich rigour, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethical, and meaningful coherence. These criteria differ from the traditional reliability, validity, and generalizability that are often used in quantitative research and are tailored specifically for qualitative studies. See Table 6 modified from Tracey (2010) for a description of each of these criteria, and how I employed them in my study.

Table 6

*Tracey's (2010) Quality in Qualitative Research Criteria and the Plan to Enhance the Quality of this Study.*

Quality Criteria	Meaning	Employing them in my study
<b>Worthy Topic</b>	The topic of research is relevant, timely, and interesting (challenges well accepted ideas and questions assumptions).	The topic of mindfulness is growing significantly in the literature. It is relevant specifically, in relation to mental health, and can have great potential with the student population. Mindfulness is an effective health promotion strategy.

<b>Rich Rigour</b>	The study uses sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and complex theoretical constructs, data and time in the field, data collection and analysis processes.	The study is based off of an experiential conceptual framework. All data collection was done via in person interviews and were audio recorded.
<b>Sincerity</b>	The study is characterized by self-reflexivity about subjective values, and biases, and the researcher is transparent about the methods and challenges.	I was explicit about how this study holds personal significance and how this was the main motivation behind the study (see Role of the Researcher section). There were challenges and limitations to this study and I was transparent about these (see Limitations section).
<b>Credibility</b>	The research is marked by thick description, concrete detail, triangulation (the use of multiple methods to study a single issue (Patton, 2002)), and multivocality (addressing participants' different perspectives especially those that diverge from the majority).	Thick description and concrete detail was provided through journaling, transcriptions and re-listening to audio multiple times. This study employed triangulation through the use of multiple in-depth interviews and journaling. Additionally, accepting, listening, and encouraging the perspectives of each student interviewed addressed multivocality.
<b>Resonance</b>	The research influences, affects, or moves particular readers through naturalistic generalizations (feeling of personal knowing and experience).	This research intended to impact readers (i.e., other researchers, individuals who use mindfulness, and those looking to pursue mindfulness), from a place of similar experience. This was achieved through detailed description of these cases, relationship to the core tenants of mindfulness, the use of quotations when applicable, and sharing of the key findings.
<b>Significant Contribution</b>	The research makes a significant contribution conceptually/theoretically, practically, or heuristically.	This research could be useful for going beyond the a neuroscience approach in understanding the holistic experience of mindfulness.



<b>Meaningful Coherence</b>	The study achieves what it purports to be about, uses methods and procedures that fit its stated goals and meaningfully interconnects literature.	This study was best suited to an interpretivist approach and narrative methodology, and benefitted from the use of interviews and journaling.
<b>Ethical</b>	The research considers procedural, situational, relational, and exiting ethics.	See section titled Ethical Considerations.

#### **4.6. Researcher's Position & Creative Presence**

I constructed this study due to my own personal investment in the practice of mindfulness, specifically with post-secondary students. Reflexivity was a critical component of the study as it helped me work through each interview experience. Reflexivity helped me to understand how significant my personal investment in this study was, and the importance of being forthcoming about that investment.

I chose to conduct research on this topic as it holds a personal significance and I have first-hand experience with the use of mindfulness for enhancing my mental health and overall well-being. My experience with mindfulness has allowed me opportunities for growth in numerous ways, including academic growth. During an earlier time in my life, I experienced deep distress, high anxiety, and low self-esteem. I was a student, coping in negative ways, and my academics suffered. Mindfulness was something that was engrained in my upbringing as I was raised with exposure to holistic and contemplative practices. I began doing research by way of reading and listening to many spiritual teachers and philosophers. Through deep meditation and self-reflection, I began to understand and explore the meaning of mindfulness in my life. During this process, I came to learn that being mindful was a choice and that I no longer could turn my head and return to a state of unawareness. This was not a switch which I could turn off. Being present in every moment, every day, meant experiencing life in a brand-new way with a

deep sense of gratitude and fulfillment. I began to wonder why more people were not choosing to embrace this. It was through this awakening that I realized that most people are unaware that they are unaware.

In the final year of my studies, I was given the opportunity to practice meditation in a classroom setting. It was here that I was able to start my work on “The Mindfulness Experiment” where I have been the Research Assistant for four years. This project focuses specifically on an in-class meditation and seeks to understand the impact on students, the classroom environment, and the instructor. Through this work, I realized that other students were embarking on mindfulness journeys and that they too were changing and growing. I was learning and understanding the benefits of mindfulness on a population that are deeply distressed and suffering.

Conducting this research allowed me to understand and explore the different ways which students are experiencing mindfulness in their lives. Furthermore, this opportunity allowed me to connect with students through the commonality of our mindfulness practices. I was curious to understand the variety of avenues students took to begin their practice, why they came to it, and how it manifested itself in their lives. Connecting with each other in meaningful ways is one of the many benefits of mindfulness. Furthermore, understanding different perspectives and approaches to mindfulness will allow for the expansion and adaptation of the practice for not only myself, but as an intervention for those who are struggling.

My position as a researcher on this project is deeply personal; however, the practice of mindfulness itself has allowed me to develop a deeper awareness of myself, as a researcher and human being. Longing to connect with others over our common practice should not be seen as a disadvantage or disservice, but as an advantage to position myself as an insider, and as a result,

gather an insider perspective which may not be achieved if this personalized aspect was missing. I believe that being both a student, and a mindfulness practitioner created a safe and open environment for participants.

#### **4.7 Establishing Trustworthiness and Reflexivity**

Reflexivity is a practice for establishing confirmability in qualitative research where the researcher is highly aware of their influence and bias. Due to the nature of the study and my personal investment, I had to be forthcoming about the significance of the study and acknowledge my personal positionality. It was important to be hypervigilant through reflexivity and check in with myself throughout the process. Trustworthiness and authenticity were supported by the use of a journal which provoked a highly reflexive stance throughout the research process. Due to the fact that I have a personal mindfulness practice I often found myself comparing and questioning my already existing understandings. Journaling and maintaining consistent meetings with my thesis supervisor were key components in debriefing my own personal feelings toward the research being conducted and checking in with my thoughts and any new experiences I was having. Maintaining this level of transparency allowed me to be extremely aware of my personal beliefs, assumptions and expectations I had going into the research and allowed for me to have honest communication about those feelings after reflecting on interviews. The analysis process was deep and as a result I learned many new things about myself and my practice which, at times, became hard to separate from the research being conducted. Journaling allowed time to reflect upon the general research process as well as my own behaviours, successes and struggles at the research site, as well as growing and learning deeper about my own personal practice and identity as a researcher.

## **4.8 Ethical Considerations**

Several ethical considerations were considered in this study- informed consent, mental health, and confidentiality.

### **4.8.1 Informed Consent.**

I brought two copies of the informed consent to each interview (See Appendix C: Letter of Consent). The informed consent was read together with the participant in the first session, which allowed them to ask any questions that arose. I explained to each participant that they were able to withdraw from the study at any time, informed them of the minimal risks involved, and the precautions taken to reduce those risks. Participants signed and dated the informed consent and were given a copy to keep for their records.

### **4.8.2 Mental Health.**

Participants were asked to discuss their mindfulness practice in relation to their mental health. Participants recounted stressful situations but did not dwell on these situations in a negative light. There were no triggering or traumatic events that were brought up in the interviews. Participants were given a mental health resource sheet (See Appendix I: Mental Health Resources) to take with them if they needed to access any of the resources at a later time.

### **4.8.3 Confidentiality.**

Anonymity was protected, and participants were reassured that all information shared is strictly confidential. Due to the fact that I was personally affiliated with the study sites, the participant was told that I respect his/her anonymity and personal information shared will not be disclosed.

## **4.9 Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand, from a narrative and an insider's perspective, the role of mindfulness in post-secondary students' lives. The conceptual framework outlined in Chapter 3 and paradigm of inquiry shaped the framework. A critical qualitative health research approach directed the narrative methodology and the data collection methods, along with the analysis process. This study embodied the eight criteria for quality in qualitative research and followed ethical protocol.

## Chapter 5: Findings

The aim of the study was to explore the experience of mindfulness, from an insider's perspective, among post-secondary students. Analysis highlights three major themes and sub-themes of their experience. These are summarized in Table 7 below.

Table 7

*Summary of findings - Major themes and sub-themes*

Major Theme	Sub-theme	Explanation	Supporting Quote
<b>Practice</b>	State	Participants embodied and integrated the practice holistically in their lives.	"Mindfulness is a heightened awareness, higher sense of self-awareness and being at peace with the circumstances of life." (Mike)
	Situational	Participants used the practice in times of need when it served them in a specific context.	"You need to take a breath and re-look at the situation or calm yourself before you continue in an action." (Tonya)
<b>Journey</b>	Unique	Each participant had a unique journey to mindfulness. Motivation varied across all participants.	"I watch a lot of YouTube videos on how to better yourself, and they always point to meditation." (Daniel)
	Pivotal Moment	Participants had/experienced specific turning points which prompted them to integrate mindfulness into their lives.	"But I had a breakdown, and the next week I signed up for the yoga membership. I knew it was going to be good for me and that was the turning point." (Greg)
	Transformational	Mindfulness affected some kind of change in each participant's life.	"I noticed a difference when things would come up how they would effect me." (Greg)
<b>Impact</b>	Happiness	Participants experienced improved mood and higher levels of happiness.	"What I did experience was freedom from darkness."(Mike)

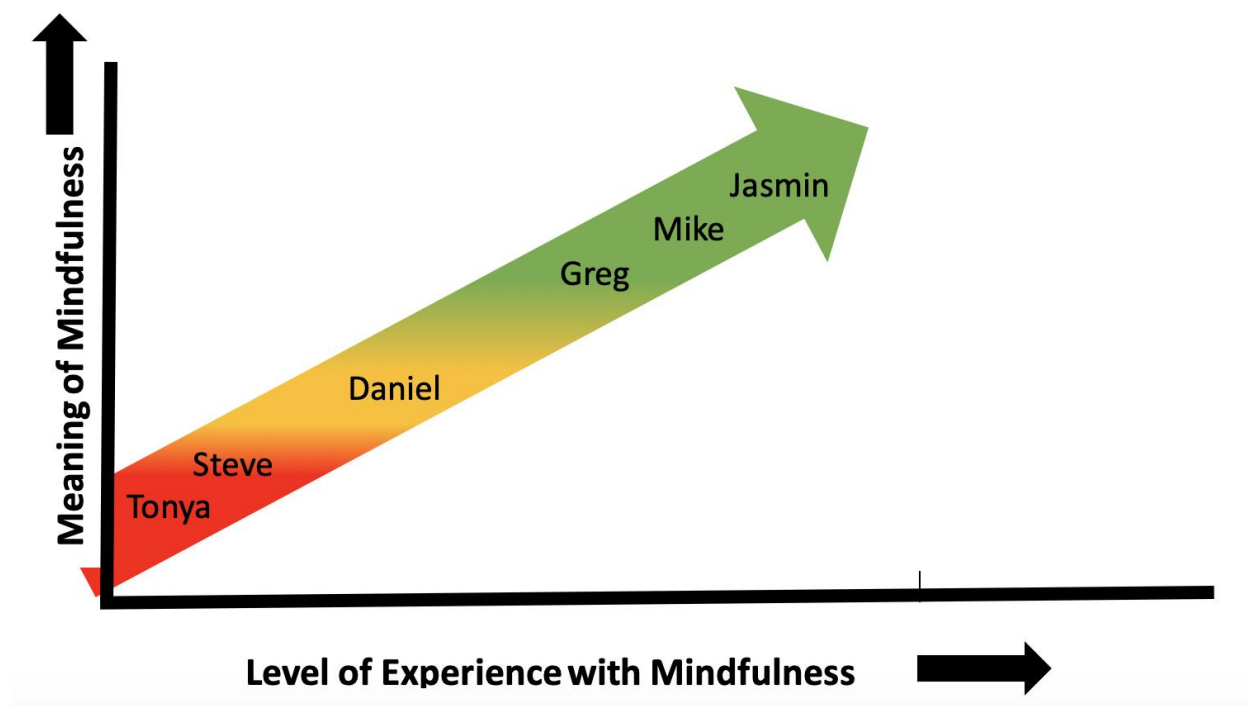
Critical Eye	Participants perceptions – of themselves and the world – were altered.	"I think that when you're so caught up in worldly interactions, like day to day life, it helps me see and like cope with something a little bigger then myself and not be so caught up in everyday stuff."(Jasmin)
Mental Health	Participants felt their mental health and overall well-being were improved through the practice.	“That presence, allowed me to hold everything in balance without letting stress cripple me.” (Greg)

The above chart displays three key elements of participants’ experiences. The findings suggest that students participate in a variety of mindfulness practices which are triggered by different experiences in their lives. As I restoryed the participant narratives, I learned that while students share the universal experience of mindfulness, the experiences themselves have been vastly different and have meaningfully impacted their lives in a multitude of ways. Finally, students describe that after integrating mindfulness into their lives, the experience provokes life changing outcomes in their day-to-day lives, mental health, and worldviews. These outcomes are the result of a complex and dynamic process in which students become increasingly aware of themselves and the world in which they dwell. I will explain each of these in the following chapter. Each of these components act as a fundamental building block in each participant’s story.

### **5.1 What is the practice?**

Participant stories revealed that having a practice, whether it be physical or psychological, helps them feel more grounded and brings them closer to mindfulness. The practice can be categorized into a type- the actual practice itself is either situational or a state of being. Situational practices depend on the environment which the individual is in at the time and what is going on in that environment and how it makes the participant feel. The

state of being practice is a practice which is heavily incorporated into the individual's everyday life, regardless of the environment or day-to-day activities. All participants are on a continuum (as seen in *Figure 3*), ones in green are further along in their practice with more experience.



*Figure 3. Meaning of Mindfulness in Relation to Level of Experience*

Participants in the study were placed on the continuum in order to illustrate the level of meaning of in their practice. For each of the participants in the green, their level of experience was also connected with how long they had been practicing. Each of these participants shared that they had integrated mindfulness into their lives for minimally two years. Time however, was not the only criteria for placement on the continuum. Location was also determined subjectively as I utilized their passion and emotion when telling their story and my own “felt sense” as the researcher to determine their position. In other words, the way the story was told provided rich insight into the lived experience of their practice.



### **5.1.1 The Physical Practice.**

Participants had a physical practice that they turned to in order to enhance their mindful lifestyles and help with clarity, focus, and creativity. Participants engaged in a variety of practices which helped shape their mindfulness experience. Practices included yoga, prayer, journaling, deep breathing, meditation, running, art, and playing music. These practices are at the core of the experience as they are the physical manifestation of mindfulness. They are the tangible source that participants either turned to in times of need or sustenance. Practices were used for a variety of reasons including, self-therapy, emotion regulation, in the moment counselling, improvement on focus, attention to detail, and concentration.

When I discussed with Daniel what his mindful practices are he stated that his avid running practice naturally evolved into a mindfulness practice. The physical practice of running acts as a release for him. Seeing running as a mindfulness practice has allowed Daniel to go deeper into himself when it comes to finding ways to relieve stress, depression and anxiety. He discussed that running gave him clarity, he told me, “when I run I feel like I’m breaking through a glass of negative comments, running over my shadow.”

Greg’s main mindfulness practice is yoga. He is truly committed to yoga after remembering a time when he did not have it in his life and experienced stress to a higher degree. Greg describes his yoga practice as a reset and recharge. He told me, “I had more capacity for my emotions and to hold things in balance and be present through yoga.” He said he noticed a big difference on how things would affect him when things came up. The key to success in Greg’s practice is consistency and routine. He cited consistent practice as allowing him to be “more intentional in how I choose my time and choose what to spend my energy

on.” Greg’s physical yoga practice has helped him gain more respect for the present moment and enables him to lead a more purpose driven life.

Mike explained to me “I’d like to meditate everyday but sometimes I will go a week or so without but I have other mindfulness practices I do, like I play music and I draw.” Mike has found that these practices give him the same benefits as meditation, but allow him to actively exercise his mindfulness in a different way. He told me “I try to find benefits of mindfulness in other things in my life. It helps with my focus, drawing specifically... it works my patience, focus, and attention to detail, and its stimulating, it’s a challenge.” Mike’s ability to apply mindfulness to other facets of his life and more importantly, to things he enjoys doing, displays the value it has in his life. He is consistently practicing mindfulness intentionally, thus, driving him deeper into the experience and amplifying the meaning and significance it has in his life. Mike’s journey is further along, and as a result, his practice is more expansive.

Jasmin practices in a variety of different ways which include yoga, prayer, and journaling. For her, each of these practices represents mindfulness in a different way and provides her with a different outlet. When discussing yoga, she told me, “Yoga is a great practice. It also has the physical side of it which helps just take me out of my mind a bit.” She primarily journals and uses this as an opening to go deeper within herself. She explained, “Getting my thoughts out of my head and onto paper is just really therapeutic for me.” When she was discussing prayer she told me, “It helped me not get so caught up in everyday stuff.” These practices are cathartic for her and are something she can physically rely on when she feels she needs to find space. For Jasmin, participating in these practices is physically

important to her for her health. Manifesting mindfulness through these physical practices have helped her self-growth, mental health, and overall perspective on life.

Participants who had adopted a more physical and tangible practice were more committed to the practice and used the principles of the practice in their lives. These participants embodied more of a mindful lifestyle instead of just using the practice on a “need-to” basis.

### **5.1.2. The Situational Practice.**

All narratives pointed to direct psychological benefits after using mindfulness, however, only two participants used mindfulness in a purely psychological way. These participants were not attached to a physical practice and adopted a practice in which they used mindfulness in a situational and temporary way. For these two, mindfulness was not a core part of their life but it helped them in difficult situations.

Tonya, a Masters student and outreach worker with autistic children described using mindfulness when she gets stressed at work. Her practice was not consistent or routine, but she reaped the psychological benefits of the practice. She was able to slow down, make more clear decisions and be present with her clients. Tonya described her mindfulness in this way: “At work there are times when I can feel I’m getting anxious and I know I just have to stop and take the time.” She told me, “It’s not like I use it for an hour a day, its just when I need it.” Tonya was able to observe her thoughts and reactions without possessing a physical practice. Her ability to witness her thoughts and biases are still a form of mindfulness without the lifestyle attachment. Steve described mindfulness to me in a way which was directly related to being more conscious of things he was doing. He specifically noted that he had an increased awareness when it came to eating. Steve’s practice was relatively new and was

something that did not involve a lot of intention. During our interview, when I was prompting him on certain questions, he was learning new things about his practice in the moment. He said, “I try to be more mindful around eating and listening to what my body is telling me. Being aware of my body and what its telling you.” He told me that “When it comes to eating I try to eat more intuitively and listen to my body’s cues. Am I hungry? What do I feel like?” He confessed that in the past he used to “restrict himself” when it came to food and now he is trying to integrate mindfulness specifically to help with that. Steve’s mindfulness is temporary in the sense that he only uses his ability to listen to his body when he is eating. Both Steve and Tonya have not been engaged with mindfulness for a long time and are less engaged in mindfulness in the sense that they do not embody mindfulness as a lifestyle.

## **5.2 Lived Experience is Foundational**

The lived experience of mindfulness is revelatory and drove students to become engaged and fulfilled in their lives. “Experience is understood as the continuous interaction of human thought with our personal, social, and material environment” (Clandinin, p.52, 2013). Experiences occur consistently throughout one’s life, and lived experience is a fundamental aspect of qualitative research. Experiences shape our perception of how we live and see the world and they help us interpret our reality, consciously or unconsciously. Dissecting the experience answers the fundamental “what” question of the narrative. The first piece of the experience is the journey. The journey provides context in understanding the nature of mindfulness for each individual. In analyzing the journey I discovered three main sub-themes: 1) the journey is *unique*, 2) there is a *pivotal moment* in each journey, and 3) the journey itself is *transformative*. I will describe each of these in detail as they relate to the

participants in the study. All participants had independent experiences from each other, so the experiences vary in what was actually experienced and how it was experienced.

### **5.2.1 Every Journey is Unique.**

Each participant had a unique journey into mindfulness; there is no formula to integrating mindfulness into your life. The journey was a complex process and was extremely unique and independent to the participant. Although all participants shared the concept of the experience, each experience was different. I will explain this as it relates to four participants in the study and I will give an example for each in their supporting story. The journey into mindfulness is a significant piece of the experience that allowed me to understand how and why they discovered mindfulness in the first place. This is extremely important as it gives a variety of insight into multiple approaches supporting mindfulness even though there is “no one size fits all” method to achieve mindfulness. The journey answers two important questions in the narrative, “why” and “how”? Moreover, the journey acts as a continuum in which we can see the progression of mindfulness. Each participant had different reasons for why they came to mindfulness and how they incorporated it into their lives.

#### ***Greg.***

Greg’s mindfulness journey was rooted in the unique spirit of opportunity. For him, mindfulness through yoga provided the opportunity to become more present, to re-charge, to release his high expectations of himself, and create space. He experienced some minor turbulence in his life which provoked stress but overall he described mindfulness as “the opportunity to recharge.” Like everyone, he experienced overwhelming feelings managing school and work, but tried to prevent these feelings from bombarding his life through yoga. His practice was inconsistent at the beginning but he was aware of the benefits it brought to

his life. He told me, “Beyond my body feeling refreshed, if I went on a Friday night I felt I was more clear for the weekend and I would be able to enjoy my time with my friend more.” Through yoga, he learned to release his high expectations and the pressure he put on himself. Yoga was an opportunity for him to overcome these pressures and expectations and move beyond these constraints. He explained “As someone who holds themselves to a high expectation of doing well, there’s lots of pressure, and I definitely noticed I was cloudy.” When Greg released those expectations, when he was able to be present and re-charge, he was left with space in his mind. The opportunity to create space was something that Greg didn’t know he needed until it was there. Greg’s journey into mindfulness was not a grandiose gesture, it was one that was rather simple and triggered from a place where he wanted to remember how to enjoy life and feel more purposeful.

### ***Mike.***

The nature and uniqueness of Mike’s journey was intrinsic. Mindfulness was a notion that came very naturally to Mike and ignited a change which he had been longing for. Before he found mindfulness he was unhappy, unmotivated, and unengaged in his life. Mike was seeking everything that mindfulness offered- purpose, fulfillment, and freedom, however he had yet to discover the actual concept of mindfulness. Mike’s dad was a main source of encouragement in his journey, and prompted him to sign up in a life class program. The classes had no mindfulness component to them, were not based in conscious living, but were structured for people looking for change. He described the program to me, “The program is intensive... I went into it with this expectation that I was gonna find you know, my right career goal, and solve all my problems and I was gonna feel fantastic. And I got none of that. But what I did get out of this program was complete freedom from the anxiety and depression

I had been feeling for so many years.” When Mike described this to me, it was apparent that he was able to craft his own unique understanding of mindfulness from freedom. His release of expectations into acceptance allowed for his change to begin.

Another unique piece of Mike’s journey which is worth mentioning is his non-conforming style. After Mike connected the dots with what he had learnt in his classes, he began using recreational marijuana. This was extremely unique because instead of using marijuana as an escape, Mike used the drug to dive deeper into himself and alter his perception of the world. He said, “I changed the way I perceived my life, it was a very, very defining moment. Back to the metaphor I used about the small, dark, rooms, after smoking some weed, this was like a spotlight. For a brief moment in time, I saw all the possible rooms I could exist in, I saw what my entire life could really look like, I had access to my life, to integrity, and communication, all these things I knew about but I didn’t know about.” This integration was extremely unique to Mike and that it enhanced his mindfulness experience and journey on a whole new level.

### ***Jasmin.***

Jasmin’s unique journey into mindfulness stems from her curious nature. Her curiosity is rooted in rebellion, reflection and independence. These elements come from a place of restriction in her childhood. At a young age, she turned to journaling as a way to reflect on herself and her environment. Her family was a huge influence in her mindfulness journey, but in a more indirect way. Coming from a strict and religious family, Jasmin cultivated the practice of prayer as a form of mindfulness. When I asked Jasmin to discuss with me how she discovered mindfulness and what her journey was like, she shared with me, “I always wanted to question things. A lot of the time I found that in my family I wasn’t able

to question things as much or explore that curious side and journaling gave me a different venue.” Her longing for self-expression was a way for her to grow deeper into herself and find out what she really wanted instead of listening to others tell her what she wanted. She longed for a certain independence where she could grow and learn in a safe space.

Mindfulness provided this for her: “A lot of things got hidden under the rug in my family and my curious and creative mind came from the fact that I had to seek out different mindsets.”

The uniqueness of Jasmin’s mindfulness is that it is not a static practice. It occurs constantly and has been developing with her as she evolves. Her journey was not triggered by one definitive moment, rather a compilation of moments where she was seeking release.

Mike, Greg, and Jasmin each share the fact that they have incorporated mindfulness in their lives. However each one of them has done it in an extremely unique way. As a result, their construct of mindfulness, the way they practice it, and the way they manifest it into the world varies amongst each of them.

### **5.2.2 Pivotal Moments.**

Each participant had some kind of turning point or pivotal moment in their story which enabled their spiritual awakening into mindfulness. The pivotal moment in the story is a moment where each participant was awakened and came to the realization that mindfulness was a significant component of their life. The pivotal moments were unexpected but welcomed by each as they moved deeper into their journey.

#### ***Daniel.***

Daniel’s pivotal moment was not as clear as other participants because his journey into mindfulness is still relatively new to him. Daniel, a mature student, spoke to me about struggling with depression, lack of motivation, and low self-esteem. He described to me first



how he got into running and then described how his running practice has evolved into a form of mindfulness. Similarly to Jasmin, Daniel has a curious nature, and has been focused on cultivating self-growth and self-improvement through running. He told me that when he was younger he was “anti-social” and one day “googled ways to get motivated”; as a result he discovered coffee. With his increased energy levels, he decided to embark on a run and has been running ever since. After developing a strong running practice, he said he was struggling with some “minor depression.” He explained that, “In the month of November, I participate in *Movemeber*, and instead of just growing a mustache I wanted to do something more to help me get through my depression, so I ran 5K every day.” He explains that running turned into a mindfulness practice when he realized “I wasn’t in a better mood, I was just able to think more clearly.” He is still learning about the practice and his personalized running practice but his pivotal moment was one that sparked that need for learning and evolution.

***Greg.***

Greg had a few pivotal moments in his mindfulness upbringing which quite literally allowed him to create more space in his mind for being. A turning point for Greg was when he had planned a trip and he knew he wasn’t going to be able to enjoy it because of all of the pressure he was experiencing trying to work full-time and complete his Master’s degree. “I didn’t have the capacity or space to enjoy anything. I guess I hit that tipping point where my out of control car hit a barrier.” Greg knew that the ability to enjoy his life and lead a purpose driven life was through creating space for being present through yoga. “It felt like the clouds had parted after I started going to yoga everyday. Taking that hour everyday was important.” Once Greg was able to find the space in his mind, he was also able to find the space in his

being to commit to a yoga practice which he experienced great benefit from. Greg explained to me another pivotal moment when he was able to become the observer in his life. He recalled “I saw all these stats of humans in terms of measuring happiness, and saw that we are the least happy we’ve ever been and to me, that was super, super, tragic.” Greg’s revelation clearly shows that he was now able to “step back” from things that could not provide him with the space he needed and only find time for the things that encouraged that space and purpose.

Jasmin’s pivotal moment was not something that she could easily recall because mindfulness was something that was incorporated into her life at such a young age from a place of self-initiation. I had to probe further and ask her if there was *anyone* specifically in her life opposed to anything in her life that triggered her mindfulness revolution. Once I asked her this, she began to recall a time where she was travelling. Her pivotal moment was not necessarily a break through as she had already had a mindfulness foundation, but it was one that helped her build that foundation stronger. She recalls going on a trip to Germany in her second year of university and she spent some time with an aunt who lived there who helped her cultivate her curious spirit and helped her dive deeper into her own self-reflection and growth. She told me, “My aunt is a dance therapist and a psychologist and I remember every night after dinner we would have these deep conversations about life and humanity. I would go back after dinner and journal. And journaling was really my way of growing deeper into myself.” It appeared as though over a period of time her aunt encouraged her to explore her true self, something that no one besides Jasmin herself had done before. This was critical for her as someone else was acknowledging the importance of her own self opposed to trying to suppress her curious self.

### **5.2.3 Transformation of Self.**

The integration of mindfulness triggered a transformation for each participant which allowed them to grow deeper into their authentic self. The transformative experience was one that shaped, guided, and moved three of my participants, Greg, Mike, and Jasmin on a more intimate level, which eventually lead them to a higher level of spiritual maturity and awakening. The awakening was a personal discovery which transformed their mind and soul into a further realm of consciousness.

#### ***Greg.***

Prior to practicing mindfulness, I believe Greg had a reasonably good idea of who he was, his approach to mindfulness was not so much to reach transformation like Mike, but to be more in control of his life. Once Greg adapted a consistent mindfulness practice into his life, he explained “I felt less like a person behind an out of control car... I know so much of school is unpredictable, and for a lot of people it can feel like the world is crashing on you. I felt more like I was the driver and I can control how I react to it.” Greg’s need to regain control in his life stems from the lack of space and limited mental capacity he had experienced prior to experiencing mindfulness. The experience was transformative for him because it allowed him to feel like “he was the driver of his own car” but also like he could handle things with more ease, purpose and balance, something he was unable to do before. Finding purpose allowed Greg to regain mental clarity in his life. He explained, “I felt like I was at the wheel but my hands were off of it, I was out of control and really speeding down the highway without purpose.”

***Mike.***

Mike's transformation triggered a deep self-awakening. When he discusses his personal transformation, he is extremely clear and concise, illustrating his consciousness around how impactful his transformation was. Mike told me, "something wasn't working for me, I felt like I was trapped in a limited set of rooms in my home, they were dark, like 3-4 of them. This was all I had, then all of the sudden, this light came on, and I started to see the rooms a bit differently." Mike's lived experience details his self-discovery. He describes his life prior to exploring mindfulness as "loveless, aggressive, and unhappy." Mike's experience with mindfulness has now catapulted him into living with more authenticity, presence, and value. He no longer takes things for granted. He explained, "mindfulness has given me a better appreciation for life, in the sense that I'm very in tune with the fact that I only have one life, one shot." Mike's experience is not closed; even though he has reached self-transformation, it is something that he still practices, works on, and incorporates into his life. "It's very significant and important in my life. It's essential."

***Jasmin.***

Jasmin's experience varies from Greg and Mike's because it is apparent that Jasmin's authentic self had existed from a very young age through being mindful. Her experience with mindfulness did not necessarily transform her way of thinking or her personhood, but rather gave her an outlet to express who she really is. Her transformation was rooted more so in self-growth, and being able to live more true and authentically to herself. She told me "I can't imagine my life without this- I probably wouldn't have a life, I would just be stuck with negative energy and not be able to flow." Jasmin's curious nature is both the unique and transformative element of her experience. Although she always had this curious side, she

could never find a proper outlet to be able to question or explore her personal ontology or the ontology instilled in her life from her parents, culture, religion, and education. At the core of Jasmin's experience, although it is rooted in self-growth, is liberation, freedom to explore who she is, why she is that way, and how she fits in the world. She explained, "mindfulness becomes more of a mindset, you really do become more conscious and aware of the energy your giving off. It's transformative, it transcends everything. It turns you into a constant learner. You start to observe small things and minute details, it is really beautiful and you realize your needs are very simple, it's an awakening."

### **5.3 Impact**

Narratives from each individual show that adapting a mindfulness mindset and/or practice into their lives showed great benefit in relation to their overall happiness, their perception of the world and their mental health. Participants who adopted a mindful lifestyle displayed an enhanced sense of spiritual maturity and integrated key tenants of mindfulness in their lives.

#### **5.3.1 Happiness.**

Throughout my interviews with Mike, Jasmin and Greg, one thing was clear: these students were passionate about their purpose, growth, and happiness. When discussing their experiences with mindfulness, each participant possessed a level of passion and we had more of a conscious discussion that I did not encounter with the others. Whether it was discussing what or how they practice, how it impacted them, or how they experienced mindfulness, each participant spoke with intention, direction, clarity and showed a deep love for what they were discussing. Experiencing mindfulness on a deeper and transformative level which was now

incorporated into every facet of their lives, provoked a very passionate understanding and depiction of the practice.

***Greg.***

Greg wasn't as well versed in his recollection of his experiences but his consistent use of metaphorical language signaled to me that he really wanted to be clear on what his experience was and how he conveyed that information to me so I got the full picture. I wrote in my field notes of Greg:

Greg's language and use of metaphors indicates that he has thought a lot about his experience. He is trying to convey his experience in language and terms that everyone understands in hopes that they too will become as passionate as he is about the practice. The fact that he continuously references "happiness" and "purpose" in his interviews indicate that he is devoted to the big picture of mindfulness.

Greg's passionate use of language illustrated that the presence and peace he had now achieved through mindfulness had impacted his life in a very positive way. He had surrendered to himself and that space he was longing to find was filled with happiness.

***Mike.***

Mike spoke to me with intention, clarity, and thoughtfulness. He was really eager to convey to me the transformation that had occurred in his life. I didn't know him before the transformation, but I did know now that he was full of life, eager to live what he had missed out on before, not taking anything for granted. Mike was intentional and I think his biggest intention was to achieve happiness. I wrote in my field notes of Mike:

Mike is full of fire and clarity while he discusses his understanding of the practice with me. He is transcending the practice right in front of me through words. It's not

necessarily that he is an expert on mindfulness, but he is an expert on his experience, and comes through very clearly when we are talking. His attention to detail, tone in voice, and his need to be clear to make sure I understand what he is saying is boundless.

For Mike, it was his attention to detail and his intense description of experiences that first ignited this thought for me. At the end of the interview I concluded that Mike was enthusiastic for the practice which translated into an overall enthusiasm for the life he was living. He was genuinely happy which came from a place of ease and acceptance.

***Jasmin.***

Jasmin's passion was evident through her analysis of her mindfulness practice. The level of thought she had put into how her practice impacted her and how transcendent it was for her was deeper than most. Her mindfulness practices were holistically a part of her, living with her in each moment. Mindfulness was extremely intuitive for her. I wrote in my field notes of Jasmin:

Jasmin's ability to engage me in everything she says is quite surreal. Her passion for the practice is evident right off the bat. I can tell that being passionate about something is a motivator for her, that she would never do something if she wasn't all in and dedicated to it.

Additionally, Jasmin's knowledge and commitment to learning and understanding mindfulness on a more theoretical and fundamental level clearly enhanced her mindfulness ability and passion. She told me "I'm always listening to some kind of podcast; it takes up a lot of my day." Experiencing this kind of learning and growth made Jasmin genuinely happy.

It made her feel as though she was contributing to herself on a bigger level so that she could move deeper into herself.

These participants used more spiritual language than the other participants and were very clear about how their experience had impacted them. Each of them described what mindfulness meant to them, and even though this was different, they all had the same core values: awareness, acceptance, presence, and authenticity. Their ability to put things in perspective and see that the world is much bigger than just them was something that signaled an enhanced maturity, showing that they were able to put the skills they've built from their mindfulness practice into action.

### **5.3.2 Developing a Critical Eye.**

As participants moved deeper into their mindfulness experience, I discovered that they were beginning to see themselves and the world they lived in, with a more critical and reflexive eye. Due to the fact that each participant is now able to observe themselves and their thoughts through their mindfulness practice, each of them possess a deeply reflective stance on life. Through this reflexivity they have established a more critical lens and perception on how they see the world they live in. Each bring insights, on both the micro and macro level, as well as a heightened awareness of their meaning in the world, and deep analysis of what it means to be able to look outside from within.

Mike changed the way he saw the world even though the world around him wasn't changing. Once he had experienced his newfound freedom and acceptance, his perception was seriously altered. He looks at the world and his experiences and relationships with others through a more critical view in order to make the most out of every situation. Mike explains his analysis of his mindfulness experience to me, "My entire life changed, but nothing



changed. My mom was still my mom, my friends were still my friends, my shitty job was still my shitty job. Nothing changed, but everything changed. It was like I was wearing these pink shaded glasses and the world was pink. Then all of the sudden not only did I understand that there is blue, orange, yellow and red glasses, but I know I can also wear them whenever I want. I don't have to see the world in one colour." Mike's analysis of how he sees the world shows the drastic change he encountered through his mindfulness experience. It also shows his ability to be able to look outside by looking inside. After finding meaning through mindfulness, he was able to release criticism of himself and his life that he was unaware of before. He said, "Instead of looking at my life as problems and difficult situations I was able to see things differently."

Building perspective through critical thinking allowed Greg, Jasmin, and Mike to come to the realization of what was really important to them and what wasn't. Jasmin goes beyond analyzing her place in the world and thinks most critically about her reactions, interactions, and connections with others. She goes deeper when thinking about change and pressure and is easily able to see physical manifestations of this in her life. She explained to me:

At the end of my showers, I turn the water really cold for like 30 seconds to try to build up tolerance. I noticed that this was very mindful because whenever I was faced with external change or pressure, I got really tense and that actually hindered me from getting through that moment. So the cold shower is actually an analogy because that's reflected in my life through resisting transitions.

Her ability to consciously analyze her behaviour, specifically in what one would categorize as a negative behaviour (resistance) demonstrates her intuitive and analytical power which

she has grown further into through experiencing mindfulness. Additionally, she is able to analyze her relationships with a critical eye. Without judgement, she takes everyone's perspective into consideration and tries to see things from a more well-rounded perspective. Her analysis of her connection with her sister is impressive. She states "I think of times with my younger sister and we're not getting along and she will say- I hate your psychoanalysis, can't you just have a normal conversation. And it's funny, because in those moments I want to be so mad and just say this is who I am but I just stay strong because even though they may not appreciate who I am it doesn't mean I'm wrong or they're wrong." Overall, the ability to be reflexive is not something that everyone possesses. In fact, some people go to great lengths to deny reflecting on their own selves, whilst the exact opposite is true for these participants who experience mindfulness. They fully embrace reflection and critical thinking on their own experiences in a way which drives them further into mindfulness.

### **5.3.3 Mental Health.**

Each participant unequivocally stated that mindfulness had a significant impact on their mental health. Whether it was dealing with stress, emotions, or encounters of daily life, each of them stated that mindfulness enhanced their ability to cope and be resilient. Mike suffered from mental health issues in the past and credits mindfulness in helping him cope with those issues. Mike was feeling lost and could not seem to manage his mental health in a positive way. He entered his life classes with expectations and high hopes for his future but instead was granted serenity from his mental health issues. He described one of his key moments to me, "I had this expectation that I was going to come out of the Landmark classes with my career goals figured out. But none of that happened. Instead I was completely freed of my anxiety and depression." This freedom enabled Mike to build resiliency skills and

become more in touch with his emotions on a regular basis. Through the release of his depression and anxiety, he learned how to bounce back in tough situations instead of being held down by these emotions.

Both Jasmin and Greg discussed the impact mindfulness had on their emotion regulation. Mindfulness is a key component of emotion regulation and Greg and Jasmin were able to become more aware of their emotions which in turn helped with their mental health. Being able to analyze your emotions and know how to find balance with tough emotions is not easy, but through mindfulness, both were able to stop and observe their thoughts and emotions instead of letting them take over. This displayed an improved sense of resiliency in both participants and encouraged them to cope with negative and unpredictable feelings in a more positive way. Greg says he was able to deal with the unpredictable a lot better. He said, “I know for a lot of people it (school) can feel like the world is crashing down on you. For me, I felt more like I was the driver and I can control how I can react. Even if there are crazy emotions tied to it, I can help manage and regulate how I approach that.” When Jasmin was discussing her journaling she said “it helps when I’m dealing with a lot of stress, especially during school, or when I was younger in my pre-teens and lacked a lot of, what I would say, emotional regulation, and was a bit impulsive, and journaling just really helped me go through those feelings.”

Jasmin spoke to me about how her practice helped in regards to competition and pressure. She said, “It’s easy to get caught up in your head, especially when I started medical school I found that I was getting almost paranoid and frustrated with how I was perceived by others, by the competitive environment, so practicing mindfulness, just really kind of helps to ground me.” Jasmin experienced increased stress from school and leaned on her mindfulness

practices to help her cope with these stressors and build her resiliency. She also discussed her feelings of loneliness and feeling left behind. She said “In school everyone’s kind of doing their own thing, and it’s easy to get peer pressured, but sometimes that’s not always authentic to yourself.” Jasmin credits her mindfulness practice with developing increased trust and assertiveness in order to stand up for herself during challenging situations.

Overall, the robust findings of this study display the power that mindfulness plays in each individual’s lives. For those who adopted a situational practice, mindfulness was there to support them when they needed it the most. For those who incorporated mindfulness into their whole lives, mindfulness helped shape them and the growth they had experience and will continue to experience. Mindfulness was a significant aspect in shaping beliefs and values and improving their mental health. The way each individual experienced mindfulness was extremely different than others, but the universal concept of mindfulness and the individual adaptation in their lives made it an extremely worthy experience in their lives.

## **Chapter 6: Discussion**

My experience as a mindfulness practitioner, student and qualitative researcher serves as the root for this exploration. I constructed the conceptual framework for this study from my own personal experience. This framework, derived from extensive personal reflection, consists of five concepts: the journey, the practice, the impact on mental health, the importance in daily life, and the overall meaning of mindfulness in life. These concepts align with the objectives of this study. My intention for this research was to further understand the experience of mindfulness and in particular how mindfulness impacts the life of a student. In this chapter, I will critically discuss the findings in relation to the conceptual framework, research question and objectives. This will include a re-structuring of the conceptual framework post data collection and analysis, highlighting what I learned during this process, and how it has changed the framework and my thinking. Additionally, I will use the literature on the emerging adult demographic to help inform and interpret my findings.

### **6.1 Summary of Research Question, Objectives and Findings**

The research question was: What is the meaning of mindfulness among post-secondary students? Four objectives guided the inquiry:

1. To explore the journey to mindfulness (i.e. transitions, triggers, key people, places, activities);
2. To understand the role of mindfulness in students' daily lives (i.e. timing, detail, definition, specific activities);
3. To consider the connection between mindfulness and mental health;
4. To reflect on the overall importance of mindfulness in students' lives.

*The Journey.* The journey begins with a pivotal moment of realization. In some way, shape or form, something for students was not working. Whether it be high levels of stress, a breakdown, or just wanting to be proactive in self-growth, each had an experiential moment which triggered them to make a change. This change led to a major transformation guided by mindfulness. Some students were motivated by particular people in their lives or goals they wanted to pursue. Each student had a very unique journey and the journey was/is constantly ongoing as the heightened level of consciousness they experienced does not end.

*Role of Mindfulness.* Mindfulness manifests itself in many different ways. The main manifestation was through a practice. Practices varied among participants and included: yoga, meditation, journaling, prayer, playing music and drawing. The practices were not routine, but were flexible dependent on what the participant was going through. These manifestations were physical, tangible practices. Some participants practiced in situational contexts. This means that mindfulness was a tool for them only when they needed it, for example, in stressful situations at work or decision making around eating choices. For others, even though the practice was “inconsistent” in the sense that they did not practice routinely, they incorporated mindfulness into their perceptions and ways of thinking. Mindfulness for these participants was more of a “state of being”; regardless of the physical practice, mindfulness shaped the way they lived.

*Mental Health.* The impact that mindfulness has on the mental health of students was strong and positive. Students experienced improvements in their overall mental health – maintaining a happier demeanor and attitude after experiencing mindfulness. Students were able to see themselves and the world through a more mindful lens. Students discussed better coping with life’s stressors and demonstrated increased resiliency in tough situations.

*Overall importance.* Students who integrated mindfulness into their lives through a “state of being” experienced a critical transformation in their lives. Mindfulness was a governing aspect in the way they lived their lives, interacted with others and shaped their decision making, beliefs, and perspectives.

*Conceptual Framework.*

New insights from this study allowed me to re-visit my conceptual framework, integrate these teachings and re-structure the framework as illustrated in Figure 4.



*Figure 4. Revised Conceptual Framework*

The framework visually illustrates the journey begins with a pivotal moment which launches the student into a mindful way of living. On this journey, they develop a practice/s, see the impact mindfulness has on their mental health and experience mindfulness in their day-to-day life. Through this process mindfulness becomes a part of their identity. I was able to re-imagining this updated conceptual framework when I began to reflect on my own practice and saw the parallels between my practice and experience and the participants’. It was only through this reflection that I was able to identify these components and their meanings.

I will use three bodies of literature to help me interpret my findings and this new version of the conceptual framework: emerging adulthood, mental health, and the mindfulness literature. The new body of literature on “emerging adulthood” will act as an umbrella for this discussion.

## **6.2 Emerging Adults**

Emerging adults are categorized as a new life stage which occurs between the ages of 18-29 years old. Emerging adults face a longer transition period between adolescence and adulthood, thus, making it more challenging for them to create stability when entering the adult phase of their lives (Arnett, Žukauskienė and Sugimura, 2014). It is important to note that during this time, emerging adults experience a great deal of change which can create underlying anxiety. Some key characteristics about young adults in this developmental stage are that they are focused on themselves, are exploring their identity and are feeling lost, but all the while are still optimist about the future (Munsey, 2006, p. 68).

We know that emerging adults are a population which face their own set of challenges which have not been seen in the past. This population has transitioned from youth and young adulthood and are facing the future while still maintaining close and sometimes, dependent relationships, with their families (Munsey, 2006). As an “emerging adult” myself, I can attest to these characteristics. After pursuing school, and in an effort to be financially conscious, I moved back in with my parents in my late 20’s as a means to be able to finish school with the hopes of starting a future without much debt. The pressures to finish school and start my life weigh heavily on me.

## **6.3 The Journey**

The pivotal moment is what triggers the mindfulness journey. This moment is negative in nature and serves to be problematic to the student. It could be anything from a personal crisis to



an “aha moment” which stemmed from curiosity. A significant characteristic of the pivotal moment for this particular population is that it occurs while the student is attending school and in some cases is directly related to their education. In the case of Greg, his pivotal moment occurred in the form of a “mini breakdown” where he was feeling stressed and overwhelmed about handling the duties and priorities of both school and a job. Bishop et. Al (2019), explains how emerging adults have a complicated relationship with balancing different roles during this period of their lives and report the end result can be depression and/or anxiety. This was the case for Greg, he suffered from high anxiety levels as a result of not being able to find balance in his work and school lives.

Although emerging adults are at a higher risk for presenting with depression and anxiety, the fact that they are at school may provide a unique opportunity to reach and support them. Findings from this study suggest the choice of mindfulness as the way forward during a pivotal moment is linked to previous exposure to contemplative practices. This means that exposing students to mindfulness practices while at university provides them with an option or tool they can use while in school and afterwards. Emerging adults are often in a state of instability and are experiencing a major transition from a stable environment (adolescence with their parents) to living autonomously and juggling various responsibilities. This adds stress to their lives on top of the stress coming from school (Hanna et. al, 2018) which may be managed through mindful practices.

In addition to facing increased stress levels, students are perpetually “plugged in”. Students today have a unique relationship with technology and are categorized as “digital natives” (Kvavik, p. 2, 2005). For some, technology use may be a hindrance in their lives as they become distracted and use it as an avoidance technique. However, the use of technology also

provides a unique opportunity for “self-care”. Self-care support is increasingly with the uptake of self-care apps and accounts on social media. Self-care apps like “Shine” and mindfulness apps like “Headspace” create easier ways for students who are constantly plugged in to unplug (Economides, Martman, Bell & Sanderson, 2018). Greg, a student in this study specifically referenced the “Headspace” app as a part of his mindfulness journey. He credited the app in helping him learn about mindfulness when beginning his practice. His main practice was yoga and when he wanted to branch out into other mindfulness practices he looked to the help of apps to educate him. Recently, an RCT was conducted using the Headspace app and measured stress overload, irritability, and experience of positive and negative emotions. The study found that the Headspace app helped students improve in each of these areas. Currently, there are over a 1,000 mindfulness based apps available for download (Economides, Martman, Bell & Sanderson, 2018). The use of mindfulness and self-care apps align well with this online population and provide great promise as a starting point for students to their journey into mindfulness.

#### **6.4 Role of Mindfulness**

The literature on emerging adults points shows they are in an era of “self-focus”. This means that emerging adults are described as being free from constraints from their parents and can make autonomous decisions (Munsey, 2006). This has an impact on the way they practice mindfulness as their approach is more freeform and they construct their own practice without feeling a need to follow rules or norms. Participants in the study practiced mindfulness in a “non-prescribed way”, meaning they integrated the practice into their lives at their own rate and in their own way. This can be seen for both “types”.

Findings illustrate that students practice two “types” of mindfulness: situational or state-of-being. Students who practice mindfulness within a situational context (for example, in a

stressful situation at work, or in situations where they are problem solving or decision-making) follow a more “Langerian” approach, supported by the research of Ellen Langer.

Ellen Langer, a social psychologist at Harvard University, discusses the concept of mindfulness as a social phenomenon which targets human beings to think of themselves more holistically and eliminate the “mindlessness” in their lives. She describes mindfulness as a cognitive ability to actively notice and distinguish new things and stimuli and Langer achieves this without contemplative practice (Pirson, Langer & Zilcha, 2018). Participants Steve and Tonya achieve mindfulness in this way. Langer argues that this kind of mindfulness includes taking in the external, material and social happenings of the individual instead of trying to clear them from the mind like traditional or “Eastern” mindfulness. Steve and Tonya did exactly this: whatever challenge they were facing in the moment, they actively accepted this and worked through it by being fully aware and present with it. Steve explained this in detail when discussing how thinking mindfully and listening to his body helped him choose what he was going to eat more meaningfully when tuning in with his body’s cues, instead of compartmentalizing them. Langer states that an individual can learn in the moment by being mindful, moving away from being mindless, and can incorporate in the moment problem solving by paying attention to every moment (Baer, 2003; Langer, 1989). Langer focuses heavily on the individual’s motivation for new perspective and awareness of context. However, she explicitly states that this type of mindfulness “guides” individuals but does not govern (Langer and Moldovenau, 2000). This characteristic is what separates Steve and Tonya’s mindfulness from the other participants. Their mindfulness depends on the situation they are in and the context of their environment. They look for new perspectives but they do not embody them.

Participants who integrate mindfulness into their lives more holistically and treat it as more of a lifestyle adopt a state-of-being approach. These participants incorporate mindfulness into their lives daily and incorporate mindfulness into their lives more fundamentally. It is something that is always there, not something that can just be picked up when a situation requires it. Mindfulness is a more governing aspect of their life and impacts them on a deeper level. This approach is supported by the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn. Kabat-Zinn approaches mindfulness as a form of consciousness and thus believes that as we utilize mindfulness we can expand our consciousness which impacts things such as health, belief systems and attitudes. Kabat-Zinn states that mindfulness directly impacts the brain which is the organ of experience. Thus, when we are acting more consciously through mindfulness, we are experiencing things differently- mindfully (Paulson, Davidson, Jha & Kabat-Zinn, 2013). The remaining participants in the study personify mindfulness in this way. They are functioning at a higher point of consciousness after experiencing a deeper transformation. Mindfulness does not depend on where they are or what they are doing; more so it exists on a constant level for them impacting everyday decisions and day-to-day tasks.

Emerging adults find what works for them. A key ingredient in their practice was that there was some kind of “previous exposure”, whether that be independent learnings or exposure from a family member, students turned to mindfulness in some manifestation because they wanted to try it, not because they were “forced” to. This parallels my own practice. I had been previously exposed to mindfulness as a child and when I was experiencing distress in university I decided to make a conscious effort to integrate this into my life. This was not a prescribed practice however; I practiced based on how I was feeling and what felt right for me.

## 6.5 Mental Health

Forty percent of emerging adults are at risk for developing a psychiatric disorder (Arnett, Žukauskienė, Sugimura, 2014). This is a major concern for both emerging adults and university institutions who are responsible for the mental health of their students. Stressors including uncertainty about the future, paying off debts, finding full time employment, and starting their adult lives weigh heavily on students in addition to their school related stressors. Mindfulness helps ease these stressors while creating resiliency among young people to embrace the life they have and control the thoughts of the mind to that in the present moment. According to Zubair, Kamal and Artemeva (2018), Pakistani and Russian university students showed positive associations between mindfulness and resiliency when assessed on a variety of mindfulness scales. The study also explained that resiliency was connected with positive well-being. After experiencing their mindfulness transformation, students in this study described improved resilience when discussing the future and being able to be present in the moment when dealing with stress. Another study by He et. al (2018) assessed undergraduate nursing students' positive well-being. The study had significant results that supported mindfulness and resiliency techniques for increased sense of positive well-being. The study suggests that curriculum be developed around mindfulness and resiliency techniques to further support students. All students in this study, regardless of their practice, explained that mindfulness had benefitted their mental health. For some, it wasn't so obvious until we started discussing their personal experiences with mindfulness and they were able to reflect on how it had impacted them. For others, the motivation for utilizing a mindfulness practice was solely for improved mental health. We now know that emerging adults are at a higher risk for developing mental illness, but we also know

that based on the experiences of those in this study, mindfulness can boost resiliency and support positive mental health.

Another key characteristic of this population is that they are in the process of identity-formation (Arnett, 2000). Who are they as individuals and what is their role and place in the world? In this study, we learn that students practicing mindfulness integrate this into their identity. It was not just something that they used once in a while, but something they connected with on a deeper level. A clear example of self-identification with mindfulness was through recruitment for this study. Recruitment posters targeted individuals who were “mindful”, requiring them to self-identify as mindful. Students in this study clearly identify as ‘mindful’ as they integrate mindfulness in the form of a practice as well as taking this on as way to reflect themselves to the world.

Mindfulness is a key component of my personal identity. It helps govern the way I think, perceive, and respond to situations and people. Integrating mindfulness into my life as an expression of my identity has given me more meaning and purpose.

## **6.6 Overall Importance**

The learnings of the study extend to illustrate how the emerging adult population is specifically suited to mindfulness practices because of where they are in the developmental stage. An important contribution of my research is the explicit connection between mindfulness and the specific characteristics of the post-secondary population.

The study also provides a unique perspective through the insider and peer-to-peer aspect. I was able to relate to the population because I practice mindfulness and I am a student. This allowed me to ground the study and findings on my own experience and personal practice. Like my participants, my personal practice serves me in a very unique way and provides endless

opportunities for growth and improvement on my own mental health and well-being. Lastly, the study focuses on the richness of the experience through a qualitative lens. The experiential aspect of mindfulness allows for it to be told as a story and provides meaning and depth to both the practice and the practitioner.

### **6.7 Understanding Through a Social Constructivist Lens**

Finally I would like to make explicit the way my social constructivist paradigm guided my new understanding. This perspective frames the construction of knowledge, reality and learning through social processes. One of these social processes is the process of conversation and narrative understanding. Conducting research is a social process and knowledge was co-produced between myself and participants. In the case of my study, I understand that data rather than being collected was co-produced with my participants through the social enterprise of interviewing. Findings that emerged from these interviews were this result of a social process.

A second way in which social constructivism guided my understanding in this study is that social processes such as culture, economics, politics and history played an important role in the way the knowledge was co-produced. An example of how the current cultural context has influenced the study and findings is the prevalence of yoga practice and current interest in self-help and self-growth. The conversations we had around these phenomena are contemporary social topics. For example, Mike's attitudes and beliefs toward mindfulness were constructed through a culture of self-growth and self-development. Another example was Greg's mindfulness practice which was situated through a yoga practice. The yoga culture had a substantial impact on the way Greg saw the world and his mental health. Social processes are constantly emerging throughout history depending on the political and social climates of society. As these climates change new phenomena emerge which in past historical contexts may not have been studied or

discussed. This is especially important because the social context in which we live provides new insight into new phenomenon not seen in the past.



## **Chapter 7: Conclusion**

This chapter summarizes the study, addresses the research questions, adds contributions to knowledge and provides recommendations for future directions for research in this field.

### **7.1 Overview of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore, from an insider's perspective, the experience of mindfulness among post-secondary students. In order to explore mindfulness experiences in post-secondary students, I spent several months interviewing students about their experiences. The main focus of these interviews was to gain an in-depth understanding about the meaning of mindfulness in their lives, the significance it has in their life overall, and to gain insight into the influence it has on their mental health. Data from these interviews consisted of audio recordings and transcripts, and journal reflection on the individual experiences of mindfulness from my participants. Data were analyzed using general qualitative analysis and interpretive analysis.

### **7.2 Addressing the Research Question**

The purpose of this study was to gain in-depth perspective from students on their experience of mindfulness. The research question addressed the meaning of the mindfulness experience for students and four objectives concerned with the students' journey, mindfulness in daily life, mindfulness and mental health, and the overall significance of mindfulness. The findings revealed new knowledge about mindfulness as a holistic experience. Findings illustrated that mindfulness was an ongoing journey for students comprised of three different components. The experience of mindfulness was relevant in their life through the implementation of some kind of practice- either in a situational or "state of being" context. Finally, the experience had a significant impact on students directly on their mental health, worldview and perspective, and happiness.

**The Journey.** Each student experienced mindfulness through an ongoing journey. The journey had a very pivotal moment where the student realized that mindfulness was providing them with a transformative experience. For some of the participants, mindfulness was life changing. For all of the participants, mindfulness was unique, something that was exclusive to them.

**The practice.** Mindfulness may have been unique for each student, but there were some commonalities. Mindfulness was not something that was just hypothetical or thoughtful; it was physical or psychological and performed through a practice. The practices differed among all participants but two aspects became clear: participants practiced in either situational contexts, where they used mindfulness only when it applied to certain circumstances, or, they integrated mindfulness into their lives and it became a “state of being” practice for them.

**The impact.** Mindfulness had a profound impact on students throughout their whole journey and preferred practice. Mindfulness had a undeniable impact on students’ mental health and well-being. Additionally, it increased their happiness levels and allowed them to feel purposeful and provided meaning into their lives. Mindfulness also shaped the way students began to see the world and their role in that world.

### **7.3 Contributions to Knowledge**

This study provides insight into the growing body of literature on mindfulness and the intersection of mental health and the post-secondary student demographic. Little is known specifically on the intersection of these three bodies of literature. Mindfulness is a well-supported intervention for promoting positive well-being and decreasing stress. This study supports that while emphasizing the importance of the experience. Mindfulness research is predominantly quantitative and is studied from a medical perspective; however, this research

challenges that. In addition to this, this adds to our understanding of the mindfulness experience by analyzing the qualitative experiences as perceived by the practitioners. This research also explores the impact mindfulness has on perspective and identity. Additionally, this research explores the transformative effect mindfulness has on those who practice it and frames mindfulness as more of a unique experience opposed to an intervention. From a spiritual perspective, this research projects that acceptance, awareness and presence are direct benefits of mindfulness, even for those that do not consider themselves spiritual or use mindfulness in a spiritual context.

Mindfulness was studied from a narrative perspective which allowed participants to openly tell their stories on their terms. However, in the past, mindfulness has mostly been studied from a “well-being” approach in a neuroscience dominated field. This study and the findings illustrate how complex mindfulness is when you approach it from an experiential perspective. The benefits of mindfulness and the impact it has on the brain are only one piece of the captivating puzzle that is mindfulness.

Using a narrative inquiry in this research gave permission to participants to speak their truth and their story knowing they wouldn’t be judged. Narrative research could be beneficial in this field of research because there is “no one size fits all approach”. As critical qualitative researchers we are constantly looking for ways to challenge what we know and how we know it. The combination of implementing a narrative framework which allows participants to express themselves on their terms and critically studying concepts which we think we’ve already conquered in traditional science allows us to challenge basic knowledge assumptions- how do we know what we know? And where does that knowledge come from?

## **7.4 Applications of Knowledge**

The findings from this study can be used in a variety of different ways. Mindfulness does not discriminate: as the findings illustrate, it is not for just one person and it does not have an application in just one discipline. The findings from this study can be used to inform future programming in education and health care. Mindfulness has benefits across the board and can help researchers and program managers make program development choices in diverse areas, such as educational institutions, community health initiatives, counselling services, and hospital services. Specifically in regards to curriculum opportunities mindfulness should be considered for integration at the lower learning states (e.g. Junior Kindergarten, Senior Kindergarten). In the post-secondary environment, mindfulness can help shape the structuring of classes and exams. The upbringing and adaptation of mindfulness can help in devising programs that are situational for short-term use or state of the art for more long-term use.

## **7.5 Limitations of the Study**

These limitations were acknowledged by the researcher. The specific focus on the Brock University community can be seen as a limitation as the university is a mid-size Canadian university. Other universities may not be able to be compared to this population as they may have different demographics. The culture and communities created at each university vary depending on many different aspects such as size, location and students. Not all students that attend post-secondary can be generalized. In addition to this, the study follows the experiences of only six individuals and explores their own personal practices. If the study was repeated with a different population or an integration of a different population then we could compare practices and/or commonalities between the two. The scope of the study is limited within the participant population.

Another limitation identified was the use of the term “mindfulness”. The framework of the study allowed the population to speak in an open context, students were targeted through the word “mindful” and “mindfulness”. This term is an umbrella term and some people may not identify or situate their practice within the scope of this terminology. Participants were required to self-identify as being mindful. This can be viewed as a limitation as the parameters surrounding mindfulness are broad. The interpretation of the word and the meaning it has in our society today has given it a certain definition. Self-identification could have excluded people who practice mindfulness but do not “consider themselves mindful.” The opposite could have also been true where people consider themselves mindful but did not meet the selection criteria for the study. Thus, there may have been confusion about what this actually meant or removed opportunities from some students who practice “mindfulness” but have created their own interpretation. Additionally, because mindfulness is currently a popular topic, students could have been looking for information on mindfulness (this did in fact happen) but the study was not geared toward educating others on mindfulness.

## **7.6 Future Directions**

Post-secondary campuses are localizing resources in an effort to support students and their mental health as this is becoming an undeniable concern. Health services, counselling and other related programming require a lot of monetary resources and don’t always promote resiliency among students as they are more focused on treatment. Mindfulness can aide in prevention and promotion of positive mental health and resiliency, while also being a cost-effective alternative. Students who from a young age are educated about mindful opportunities are encouraged to have space and resources to promote mindfulness. Knowing that mindfulness is beneficial to students can help in educational outreach to parents to help integrate mindfulness

into their homes and everyday lives. The use of qualitative research and the richness of the findings in this study confirm that experience is valuable and is enough. There are some concepts that cannot be measured empirically. Thus, the value of experience and storytelling can be more beneficial than the standardized measurement of those experiences.

In this study, one of the major findings was that mindfulness is an individualized and complex experience which is different for everyone. Future research should be directed towards furthering the understanding of the nature of the experience. For example, studying mindfulness from a phenomenological perspective, where essence is the primary purpose, could provide new insights into the lived experiences of students practicing mindfulness. In a body of literature that is dominated by a quantitative and biomedical approach, studying essence may allow us to understand the holism of mindfulness from an integrated mind body approach. Research from this perspective may help us translate the complexity of mindfulness. Distributing information and education on mindfulness versus intervention approaches may help students find an individualized mindfulness practices that works for them. “Planting the mindfulness seed” could potentially enable students to engage in mindfulness in a way that suits them personally.

From a personal perspective this study fueled my love for qualitative research and enhanced my personal mindfulness practice. After designing and conducting the study I became more aware of the ways in which qualitative research can be utilized more frequently in our world today. Furthermore, the rich information and vivid recounts I gathered from my participants allowed me to realize that qualitative research is a necessity in understanding people’s identities and individuality. With the current global climate in suppressing people’s voices and experiences, qualitative research allows for people’s voices to be heard and to prioritize the human experience. This experience has enhanced my own personal practice in

many different ways. First of all, conducting a study on student mental health and having struggled with my own mental health, this constantly pushed me to check in with myself. This was no easy task and having my practice to support me during this process was critical. It also allowed me to connect with my participants in a much more meaningful way than if I was an outsider to the practice. I felt that my mindfulness practice allowed me to bring my whole self to my research and participants and allowed me to really hear them with purpose and meaning. Hearing other students' stories about their own personal journeys helped me to remember that even though we may feel alone at times, we are not. Even though we criticize, blame, judge and guilt ourselves pretty constantly as students, we are not perfect, and neither is the practice. I have learned and will continue to learn that my practice provides a space and place to grow from the tough experiences, reflect on all experiences big or small, and embrace the really special moments life offers us each and every day, even when we feel too foggy to see them. Finally, conducting this study provided a new sense of hope for myself, my practice and the growing collective consciousness which is striking millions around the globe. I truly feel that after listening to other young people who have embraced and opened themselves to mindfulness that the idea of mindfulness being a "new aged hippy phenomenon" is slowly dissolving. As more people are reflecting and coming to terms with their own suffering we are able to move forward and shift others away from the undercurrent of pain and distress into more blissful and loving experiences.

*"Life will give you whatever experience is most helpful for the evolution of your consciousness. How do you know this is the experience you need? Because this is the experience you are having at this moment."*

— Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*

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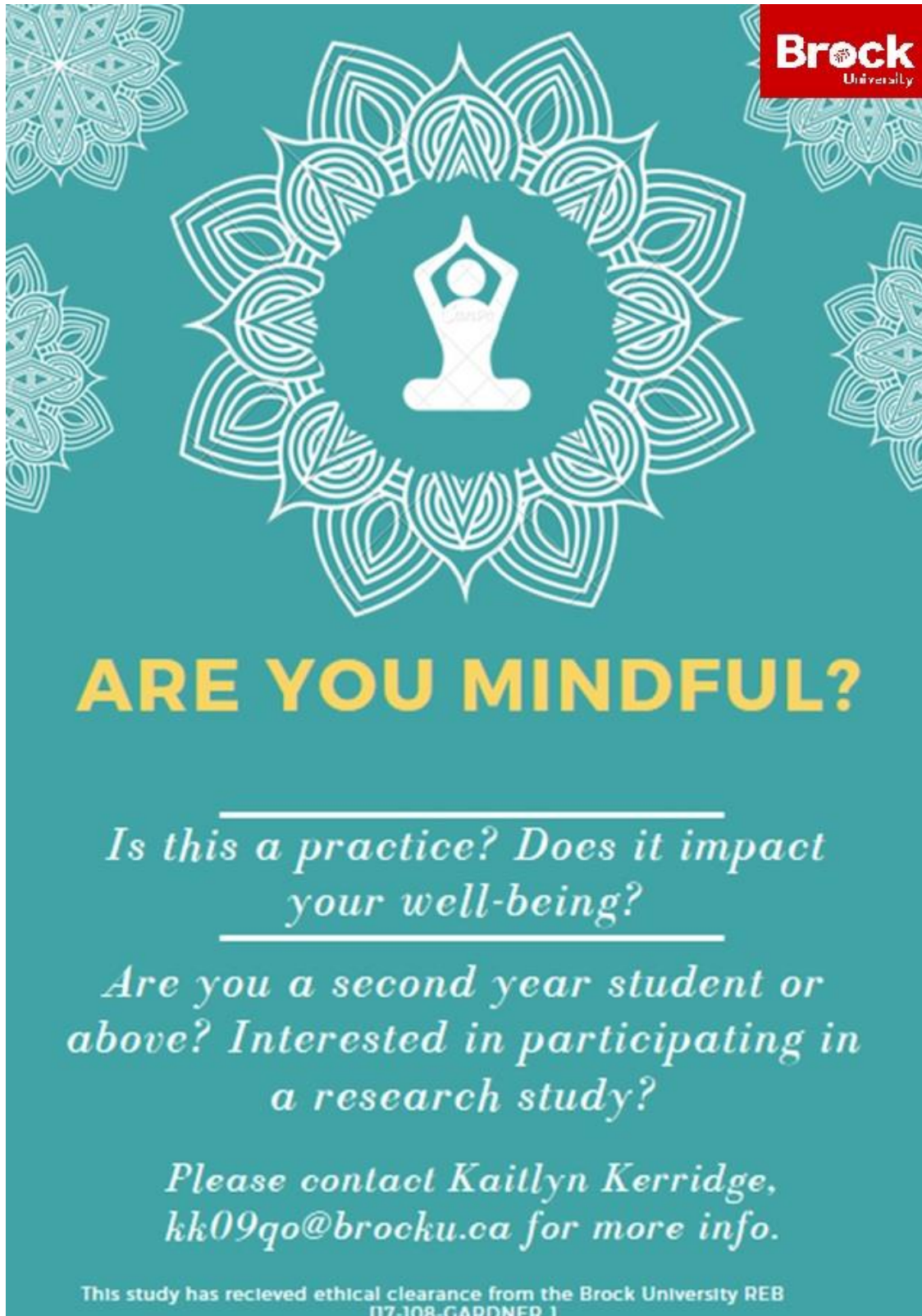
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## Appendix A: Recruitment Poster 1



**Brock**  
University

# ARE YOU MINDFUL?

*Is this a practice? Does it impact  
your well-being?*

*Are you a second year student or  
above? Interested in participating in  
a research study?*

*Please contact Kaitlyn Kerridge,  
kk09qo@brocku.ca for more info.*

This study has received ethical clearance from the Brock University REB  
[17-108-GARDNER ]

**Appendix A: Poster 2**

**DO YOU LEAD A  
MINDFUL LIFE?**



**IS THIS A PRACTICE? DOES  
IT IMPACT YOUR WELL-  
BEING?**

Are you a second year student or above? Interested  
in participating in a research study?

Please e-mail Kaitlyn Kerridge ([kk09qo@brocku.ca](mailto:kk09qo@brocku.ca))  
or Paula Gardner ([pgardner2@brocku.ca](mailto:pgardner2@brocku.ca)) for more  
information on this study

This study has received ethical clearance from the Brock  
University REB [FILE # 17-108-Gardner]

## Appendix B: E-mail Response Script

Hi \_\_\_\_\_,

Thanks so much for your interest in participating in my study. I'd like to let you know more about what the study entails. I am currently pursuing my MA in Applied Health Science and am looking to understand post-secondary student's experiences with mindfulness. I am asking participants who have self-identified as having an active mindfulness practice to participate in two sessions with me. The first session will be an introduction session where we meet, talk about what will happen in our second session, and fill out the letter of consent. In our second "story-telling session", I will ask you to openly discuss your journey and experience with mindfulness.

In the first session we will go over the letter of consent, discuss the study, and answer any questions you may have.

In the second session we will discuss your personal experience with mindfulness. This will be done in a very open way with plenty of opportunity for you to tell your story the way you want to. My job as the researcher is to listen to your story. With your permission, I will audio-record our session and make some field notes. There may be opportunities and times when I will ask prompt questions, however, it is your choice whether you choose to answer them. The interview will take a very open-ended format.

If you decide to participate in this study, I want to let you know you can drop out at any time, with no repercussion. I appreciate and value your time and understand that post-secondary students take on many roles and responsibilities.

If you are interested in participating or want more information on the study in general, I would love to set up a date for our first meeting. Please let me know what your availability is like.

Best,  
Kaitlyn Kerridge  
(416) 729 9404



**Faculty of Applied Health Science**

**Appendix C: Letter of Consent**

**Letter of Consent**

**Date:** TBD

**Title:** Do You See What I See? Exploring the Relationship Amongst Mindfulness and Post-Secondary Students

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**Principal Investigator (PI):** Kaitlyn Kerridge

**Department/School:** Health Sciences, Brock University

**Contact:** [kk09go@brocku.ca](mailto:kk09go@brocku.ca);

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## **INVITATION**

You are invited to participate in a study that involves research. The purpose of this study is to understand the meaning of post-secondary student's experiences with the practice of mindfulness.

## **WHAT'S INVOLVED**

As a participant, you will be asked to participate in two interviews regarding your personal experience with mindfulness. The first interview will be approximately 30 minutes, where we discuss the letter of consent, what the next story telling session will entail, and address any questions you may have. The second session will be the story telling session where you describe in detail your personal experience with mindfulness. The focus of the story telling session will be on your experience with mindfulness, specifically, how you came to it (your journey), its impact on your mental health, and how it manifests itself in your daily life.

## **POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS**

Possible benefits of participation include potential stress and discomfort. Discussing an intimate subject such as your personal practice of mindfulness may bring up some emotional distress. The researcher is fully trained in mental health first aide and a mental health resource list will be provided.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

All of the information you provide is considered confidential; your name will not be included or, in any other way, associated with the data collected in the study. You will not be identified individually in any way in written reports of this research. In addition, the following measures will be used with regard to the questionnaires to help to safeguard your privacy and confidentiality:

1. Any identifiers (e.g., if you inadvertently include your name or the name of another student) from the interview will be removed during the transcription process
2. Access to the transcripts will be limited to the researcher and supervisor.
3. Once the interview data has been inputted and any identifiers removed.
4. Data will be stored on a password-protected computer and restricted to the researcher, transcriber and supervisor.

**VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You wish you may withdraw from this study at any point, decline to answer any questions or participate in any component of the study without penalty or impact of any kind including your grade for the course.

**PUBLICATION OF RESULTS**

Results of this study may be published in professional journals and presented at conferences. Feedback about this study will be available by emailing Kaitlyn Kerridge, [kk09qo@brocku.ca](mailto:kk09qo@brocku.ca)

**CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE**

If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact Kaitlyn Kerridge using the contact information provided above. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University [insert file #]. If you have any comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 688-5550 Ext. 3035, [reb@brocku.ca](mailto:reb@brocku.ca).

Thank you for your assistance in this project. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

**CONSENT FORM**

I agree to participate in this study described above. I have made this decision based on the information I have read in the Information-Consent Letter. I have had the opportunity to receive any additional details I wanted about the study and understand that I may ask questions in the future. I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## **Appendix D: Interview Guide**

### **Individual Interview 1**

The goal of the first interview will be to a) explain the study to the participant and go over the letter of consent, and b) identify if the participant meets the objectives naturally,

Data will be collected using questions/prompts. The interview will be audio-recorded.

#### **Script:**

- Thanks for agreeing to be a part of my study and thank you for coming today. Our meeting today is just to go over some logistical pieces about the study and answer any questions you may have.
- I'd like to ask you some questions that specifically align with the objectives of this study:
  - You've identified yourself as an "active mindful being", can you tell me more about what that means?
  - How did you begin your practice? Can you give specific examples?
  - Can you tell me how mindfulness plays a role in your daily life?
  - Can you give me a specific example of how you practice mindfulness daily?
  - I personally have used meditation to help cope with stress and anxiety, have you had a similar experience?
  - Do you find mindfulness benefits for your mental health?
  - There is lots of emerging research on mindfulness and how it helps with mental health, what do you think of this?
- Listening for: how mindfulness manifests in your daily life, how you found mindfulness, and if mindfulness has any impact on your mental health.
- Now we'll go over the letter of consent and if you have any questions
  - Reiterate that you can drop out of the study at any time
  - Go over LOC piece by piece
- Would you be open to participating in another potential interview which would last approximately 1-2 hours?
- Chance for questions

## Appendix E: Journal Template

**Field Notes:**

**Date:**

**Time:**

**Participant:**

**Recruitment:**

**Other notes:**

### Comparative Analytic Memos

Participant	Myself	Analysis	Next Steps

### Questions to consider for journaling:

- 1) How did the interview make you feel?
- 2) What things stuck out about the interview?
- 3) Do you have follow up questions for this participant?
- 4) What was new in this interview and what was similar to other interviews?
- 5) Did you get an understanding of who this person was before mindfulness and if they are the same or different after?
- 6) What kind of approaches did they take for integration of mindfulness into their life?
- 7) What were the authentic pieces of their story and did they connect with any principles of mindfulness
- 8) Short summary of their story including “who is this person really?”

## Appendix F: Interview Guide

### Story-Telling Session

The goal of the story-telling session will be to gain an understanding of the participants experience with mindfulness through a detailed narrative story telling session. Specifically, I will be listening information pertaining to the participant’s journey, the role in their daily life, and the relationship between mindfulness and mental health.

Data will be collected using one open-ended question with prompts if needed, observations as well as field notes. The interview will be audio-recorded.

Thanks for giving me some insight in interview 1, I’d like some more details to gain a deeper understanding of mindfulness in your life. I would like to further understand what we discussed in our first interview. Last time we met I asked some very specific questions, I’d like this session to be more open.

**The main interview question is:** Please tell me about your experience with mindfulness in as much detail as possible.

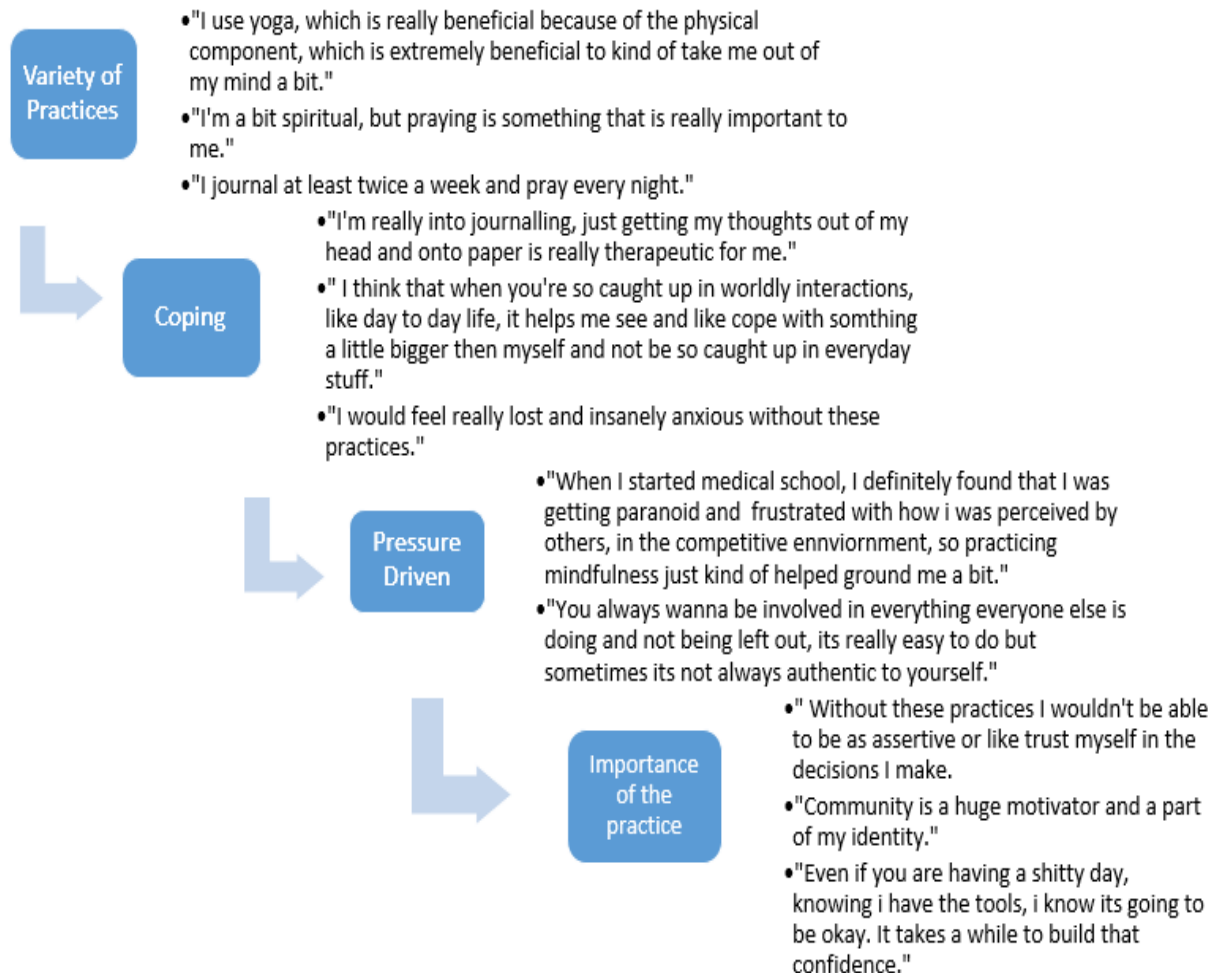
**Key types of information that I will be listening for:**

- What was the journey/trajectory into mindfulness?
- Pivotal and key moments?
- How do they think it has impacted mental health?
- What does it mean to them personally?
- How does it feel for them- physically and mentally?

<p><b>Prompt questions:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) How did you come to mindfulness? Explain your journey</li> <li>2) Were there any key people, figures, books, strategies, places, activities, triggers which influenced your journey?</li> <li>3) When did you first start practicing mindfulness?</li> <li>4) How does mindfulness manifest itself in your daily life?</li> <li>5) What does it mean for you to “be mindful”?</li> <li>6) What kinds of practices do you use to be mindful?</li> <li>7) What is your personal definition of mindfulness?</li> <li>8) How does mindfulness feel for you? Physically? Mentally?</li> <li>9) How does mindfulness impact your mental health and well-being?</li> <li>10) Does your mindfulness practice serve as a coping strategy?</li> <li>11) What kinds of changes have you experienced in your life since adapting mindfulness?</li> </ol>
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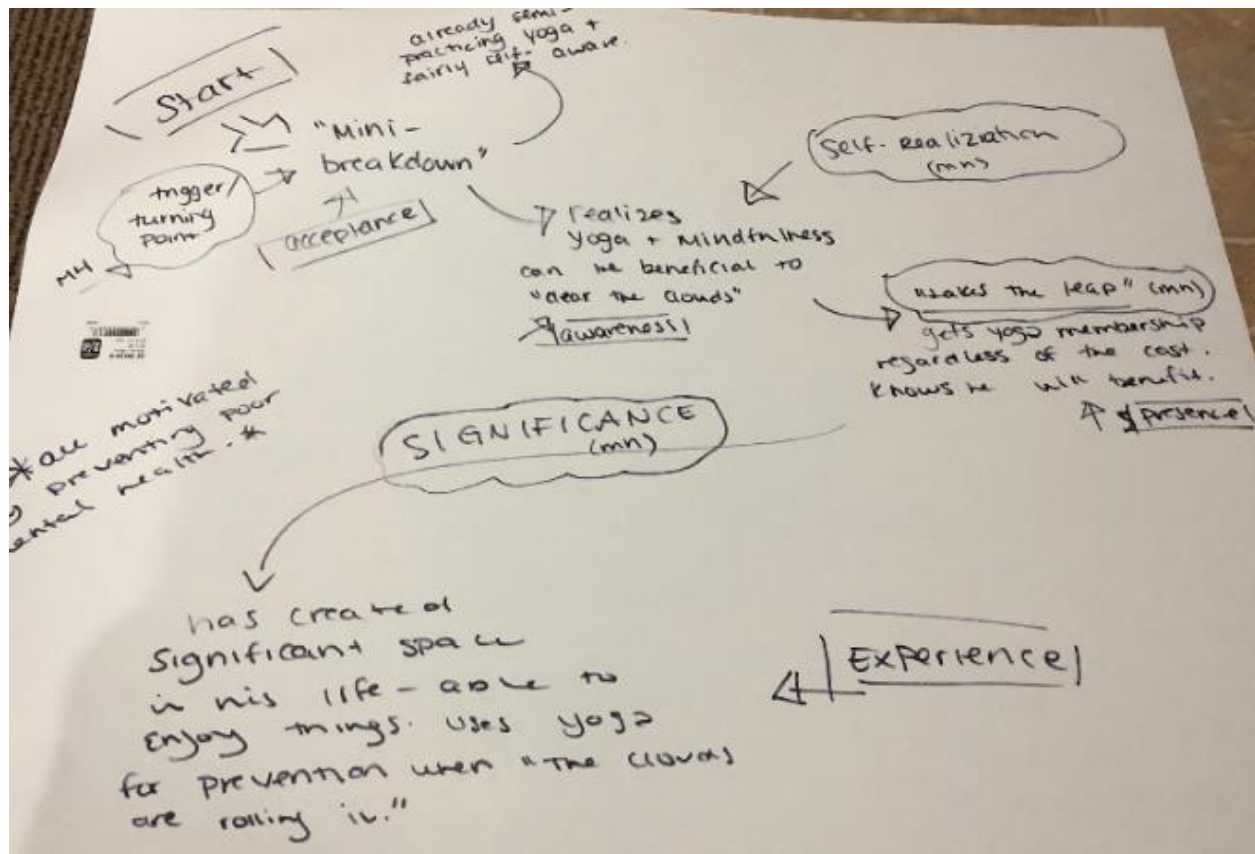
## Appendix G: Visual Analysis Process

After each initial (Semi-structured) interview I created profiles for each individual. Profiles were generated through a process of thematic analysis. I analyzed the interview for individual themes and made a visual representation of those themes using supporting quotes. The individual profiles made visible aspects that were emphasized in the interviews which enabled early interpretation across narratives. This is an example of the profile I created of Jasmin's interview.



## Appendix H: Restorying Process

After each storytelling session I created storyboards for each individual. Storyboards were generated through my interpretation of interviews and highlighted major points in the participant's stories. The storyboards made visible aspects of the journey and turning points in the story that aligned with the research objectives. This is an example of the storyboard I created of Greg's interview.



## **Appendix I: Mental Health Resource List**

### **Student Health Services (Now a part of Student Wellness and Accessibility Services):**

Student Health Services is located in Harrison Hall (next to Campus Security).

Phone: 905-688-5550 x3243

SHS has doctors, physicians, a mental health nurse, and psychiatrists on duty to accommodate students with a wide variety of needs.

### **Personal Counselling & Student Development Centre (Now a part of Student Wellness and Accessibility Services):**

Personal Counselling is located on the fourth floor of the Schmon Tower in the SDC (ST 400).

To book an appointment please call: Phone: 905-688-5550 x4750

The SDC provides both male and female counsellors who are available to help students. If this is an urgent situation, a student will be seen same day.

### **Niagara Health System:**

The Niagara Health System services the Niagara Region. The St. Catharines Hospital provides in-patient mental health services.

Call: [\(905\) 378-4647](tel:9053784647) , In case of Emergency call 911

Address: 1200 Fourth Ave, St. Catharines, ON L2S 0A9

### **CMHA Niagara:**

The Canadian Mental Health Association's Niagara Chapter provides mental health services including a safe bed program, crisis intervention, and counselling.

Call: [\(905\) 641-5222](tel:9056415222)

Address: 15 Wellington St, St. Catharines, ON L2R 5W4

Website: <http://cmhaniagara.ca/>

### **Distress Centre Niagara:**

Distress Centre Niagara free support to those in need or in crisis. They also provide educational support to community members.

Call the distress centre at: St. Catharines, Niagara Falls And Area – **905-688-3711**

### **Good2Talk:**

Good2Talk is a free, confidential and anonymous helpline providing professional counselling and information and referrals for mental health, addictions and well-being to post-secondary students in Ontario, 24/7/365.

Call: 1-866-925-5454 or connect through 2-1-1.