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The Effects of the Stress Management Program, Unstress II, on Relationship Satisfaction

A Senior Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for Graduation in the Honors College

By

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Abstract

Romantic relationships are a satisfying and important part of people's lives. Successful, healthy relationships produce general life satisfaction, health benefits, and other positive outcomes. With half of all marriages ending in divorce, it is essential that psychologists determine the predictors of relationship satisfaction and factors that play a role in maintaining a satisfying, healthy relationship. Previous studies have shown that communication, coping, and stress levels play a role in relationship satisfaction. Researchers have also found that mindfulness can positively effect relationship satisfaction. Therefore, it was hypothesized that a mindfulness-based stress management program, Unstress II, would improve relationship satisfaction in participants who were in romantic relationships. A randomized controlled trial was completed with participants from the students, faculty, and staff at the College at Brockport. The Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS) was used to assess participants before and after participation in Unstress II. Data were analyzed using a 2x2 mixed ANOVA, and results were statistically insignificant. Future studies should be done using a greater number of participants, and it is suggested that both partners in the relationship attending the Unstress II sessions.

The Effects of the Stress Management Program, Unstress II, on Relationships Satisfaction

Romantic relationships are often one of the most important aspects of people's lives. Researchers have found that forming and maintaining romantic relationships are important life goals, especially for emerging adults (Collins & van Dulmen, 2006). A person's well-being and general life satisfaction are affected by the relationship with their romantic partner (Impett, Kogan, English, John, Oveis, Gordon, & Keltner, 2012; Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000). Romantic relationships can affect a multitude of variables including physical health, mental health, sexuality, and financial status (Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005). Additionally, mental and behavioral health is significantly improved when individuals are a part of a stable, satisfying, and close romantic relationship (Rhoades, Kamp Dush, Atkins, Stanley, & Markman, 2011; Whitton, Weitbrecht, Kuryluk, & Bruner, 2013). With the numerous benefits and importance of healthy, satisfying relationships, it is important to continue studying the causes of both successful and unsuccessful relationships.

It is not surprising that when relationships dissolve, whether they are casual dating relationships or marriage, there are negative consequences (Amato, 2000; Forste & Heaton, 2004; Williams & Umberson, 2004). For example, individuals who are separated or divorced report lower levels of well-being than individuals in their first marriage (Forste & Heaton, 2004). In the past few decades, divorce rates have skyrocketed in the United States (Forste & Heaton, 2004). It is estimated that about half of all first time marriages now end in divorce (Amato, 2000; Forste & Heaton, 2004). Because so many marriages are unsuccessful, it is important to study the predictors of both successful and unsuccessful relationships. If researchers can pinpoint the factors that improve relationship satisfaction, it will be easier to educate couples on how to improve their relationship and to live a more satisfying life together.

It is important to determine patterns or predictors associated with relationship satisfaction in romantic relationships. Researchers suggest that stress has a largely important and harmful role in modern society, and stress has been correlated with relationship satisfaction and relationship stability in various studies (e.g., Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). One study in particular found that communication behavior, stress levels, well-being of the individuals in the relationship, and individual and dyadic coping skills are all predictors of relationship satisfaction (Ruffieux, M., Nussbeck, F. W., & Bodenmann, G., 2014). Researchers suggest that programs developed to improve partners' coping skills when dealing with stress would promote a healthy and successful relationship (Sayers, Kohn, & Heavey, 1998; Carson, Carson, Gil, & Baucom, 2004). Further, mindfulness-based programs for relationship enhancement have been shown to improve stress coping skills in couples and overall functioning within the relationship (Carson et al., 2004). Mindfulness is a relatively new area of study which emphasizes experiencing and accepting the present moment and not fixating on thoughts or emotional reactions in situations (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). In the mindfulness-based relationship enhancement implemented by Carson et al., (2004), mindfulness successfully enriched relationship functioning and psychological well-being in happy, non-distressed couples.

If mindfulness and stress coping skills in relationships are associated with greater well-being and enriched relationship functioning, it is possible that a mindfulness-based stress management program would have positive implications on relationship satisfaction. While there has been recent research correlating mindfulness-based relationship enhancement programs and improved relationship functioning, there is a lack of research determining whether the learning of mindfulness and stress management skills for individuals is effective in increasing relationship satisfaction. In previous studies, programs designed for couples to attend together have shown

improvements in relationship functioning and well-being. However, it is possible that learning and implementing mindfulness and stress management skills in general, even in programs not intended for couples, will have an effect on the relationship as well. More research should be done looking at the effects of programs utilizing mindfulness and stress coping skills on relationship satisfaction.

The present study was done to determine if a mindfulness-based stress management program, Unstress II, had an effect on relationship satisfaction. Unstress II is a stress management program that is an updated version of Unstress, which was created by Dr. John M. Raeburn and implemented universally throughout New Zealand (Raeburn, Atkinson, Dubignon, McPherson, & Elkind, (1993). This program was peer-led, did not actively require the presence of a licensed professional, and was found to have significant effects on individual's stress, health, and well-being. Dr. Jeffrey Snarr updated the original program and created Unstress II with mindfulness skills, innovative theories, and an Americanized language. It was hypothesized that Unstress II would improve relationship satisfaction in individuals who are in a relationship before and after the program.

Methods

Participants

Participants were students, faculty, and staff at the College at Brockport. They were recruited at The College at Brockport via flyers and electronic messages. Flyers were posted across the college campus offering a stress management program and entry in a raffle for \$500. An announcement describing the study was posted to Brockport's online daily news page and emails were sent to psychology students, students enrolled in Abnormal Psychology, and to students who were previously interested in the pilot study, which took place over the summer. If

potential participants were interested in the study, they were asked to email the researchers expressing interest, and were then sent more information regarding participation. If potential participants read further details of the study and were interested in participating, they signed up for an informed consent session. A total of 67 participants were given informed consent and assessed. However, this study specifically was interested in effects for individuals in romantic relationships, so data was only used for the participants who were in relationships before and after the program.

Measures

The Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS) was used to measure relationship satisfaction (Busby, D. M., Christensen, C., Crane, D. R., & Larson, J. H., 1995). This is a 14 item measure and is a briefer version of the original Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) which is 32 items. There are three sub-scales included in the RDAS: the Dyadic Consensus Subscale (six items) which assesses decision making, values, and affection, the Dyadic Satisfaction Subscale (four items) which is concerned with conflict and stability, and the Dyadic Cohesion Subscale (four items) which involves activities and discussion. Participants responded to each item on a five or six point scale. Total scores range from 0-69 with higher scores indicating higher levels of relationship satisfaction. Scores of 48 or higher indicate no relationship distress and scores 47 or below indicate relationship distress (Crane, Middleton, & Bean, 2000). The RDAS has internal consistency with a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of .90, indicating that it is a reliable measure. Researchers have also found the RDAS to be valid with a Spearman-Brown coefficient of .95. The RDAS has construct validity with a .68 ($p < .01$) correlation with the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (MAT) and a .97 ($p < .01$) correlation between the RDAS and the

original Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Busby et al., 1995). Discriminant validity was also found with an 81% differentiation between distressed and non-distressed couples.

Procedure

Participants were recruited at the College at Brockport and were asked to attend a group consent session if interested. At the consent session, trained research assistants explained the purpose of Unstress II and emphasized that the study was not intended to help or treat severe psychological problems. Participants were told to seek professional help instead of or in addition to their participation in Unstress II if they were experiencing serious psychological distress. At this session, research assistants also informed the participants of the rules and roles associated with participation in Unstress II. Participants indicated their availability for sessions for the Fall 2014 semester and were given an overview of the weekly sessions that would ensue. Finally, participants received a packet with a demographic form and seven additional measures, including the RDAS. Participants handed in the assessment packets anonymously, using three-digit participant numbers to keep any data from sessions and assessments collected throughout the study together.

Once all of the participants were consented for the study, they were randomly assigned to either the Fall 2014 semester or the Spring 2015 semester (waitlist control). The participants who were assigned to Fall 2014 attended a total of eight sessions which were approximately 60 minutes each. The weekly Unstress II sessions followed a particular pattern of activities, though not always in the same order. Each session involved reviewing skills learned the previous week, learning new skills and techniques, and small group discussions. Participants attended their group sessions with the same people each week and were randomly assigned by group monitors (research assistants) to smaller groups each session. Unstress II is a peer-led program and there

were numerous opportunities each session for small group discussion. Participants completed Session Feedback Forms at the end of each session and Program Feedback Forms at the completion of the program. Following each individual session, participants in the Fall 2014 Unstress II groups were emailed a summary of the session topics, provided links to additional information associated with the covered topics, and given a reminder of the assignment for the week. This ensured that participants who missed a session would be able to review what was covered and practice any skills/techniques taught so they could return the following week and be caught up with the group. After the completion of the eight sessions, all participants (regardless of whether they were assigned to the Fall 2014 or Spring 2015) were invited to come back for the second assessment session. Participants completed the same demographic form and seven questionnaires. These forms were anonymously collected by research assistants and entered in a data collection spreadsheet. All data was kept in a locked laboratory and entered by research assistants in an Excel file which is only accessible through the laboratory computers.

Results

Data from participants who were in a relationship and completed the RDAS at both assessment 1 and assessment 2 were analyzed using their total RDAS scores. The RDAS scores range from 0-69 with a cutoff score of 47. There was a total of 27 participants who were in a relationship and attended both assessment sessions with N=14 in the treatment group (participants who received Unstress II during Fall 2014) and N=13 in the waitlist control group (participants who would receive Unstress II during Spring 2015). Relationship satisfaction scores were compared using a 2 (group; control group vs. treatment) x 2 (time; time 1 vs. time 2) mixed analysis of variance. There was no main effect of group, nor was there a main effect for time. Participants in the control group scored no differently on the RDAS at time 1 (M=51.26,

SD=11.28) than they scored on the RDAS at time 2 ($M=51.31$, $SD=7.42$). Participants in the treatment group scored slightly higher at time 2 ($M=52.72$, $SD=6.41$) than they did at time 1 ($M=51.38$, $SD=6.13$), but not at an amount that is statistically significant. Participants scored equally on the RDAS at time 1 and time 2 regardless of the group (treatment vs. control) that they were in.

Discussion

The relationship satisfaction of participants did not improve significantly after participating in the Unstress II program, which does not support the hypothesis. It was predicted that there would be an improvement in relationship satisfaction following the Unstress II program. However, participants who were in a relationship before and after completing Unstress II did not have significantly different RDAS total scores than participants who were in relationships and in the waitlist control. There are several possibilities for why statistically significant results were not found. Although there were almost 70 participants, the number of participants who were in a relationship during the study excluded almost half of the participants. Further, only about two thirds of participants who were in a relationship and went to the first assessment session came to the second assessment session. Therefore, the number of participants whose data was usable for the present study looking at relationship satisfaction was significantly less than hoped for ($N=27$) with ($N=13$) in the control group and ($N=14$) in the treatment group. It would be advantageous to continue the study with more participants to determine whether relationship satisfaction is improved after implementing mindfulness-based techniques and stress management skills learned during the Unstress II program. With a larger sample size, the likelihood of seeing statistically significant results would be greatly increased and the study would be more reliable. Future studies should look at a longer period of recruitment time and

other means of recruitment to make the study known to a wider range of students at the college. It may also be advantageous to offer extra credit, especially for college freshmen, so that there is a greater motivation for students to participate, without giving an excessive incentive. By using at least 200 participants, the likelihood of participants in relationships and completing the assessments increase significantly.

It is also possible that if both partners were able to participate in Unstress II, there would be an even greater likelihood that relationship satisfaction would improve for the individuals. Because romantic relationships involve two people, it is important to consider both partners' stress levels, mindfulness, and coping skills when determining relationship satisfaction for the couple. The RDAS is often used to assess relationship satisfaction for both partners in a relationship rather than just one (Crane, Middleton, & Bean, 2000). Because the RDAS is a dyadic scale, it involved two individuals and it is necessary to take the interactions between the two into consideration. In the mindfulness-based relationship enhancement programs in previous studies, both partners participated in the relationship enhancement program and were assessed individually and as a couple (Carson et al., 2004). While relationship satisfaction may improve after learning the mindfulness-based techniques learned in Unstress II, relationship satisfaction may be even more significantly improved if both partners in the relationship learn the skills and techniques in Unstress II. If both partners appreciate mindfulness, being in the present moment, and utilizing stress management techniques, they will likely experience a synergistic effect and an improvement in relationship satisfaction and functioning as a couple. Future studies should be done to determine if there is a difference in relationship satisfaction when one individual in a relationship participates in Unstress II rather than both partners in the relationship participating.

It is also possible that the participants learned the stress management and mindfulness techniques, but were not able to translate them to their relationship immediately. The data from the other measures in the study have not been analyzed yet, so it will be interesting to correlate the data from the RDAS with the data from the other measures that were included in assessments as well. It is possible that participants learned and even implemented the mindfulness techniques and stress management skills, but do not utilize these skills in their relationships immediately. In the Unstress II program, Dr. Snarr emphasizes focusing on one life domain at a time. For example, a participant might brainstorm their core values for the life domain of work/education and then set goals to achieve in this specific area. By heavily focusing on work/education, he/she may not be allotting as much time and energy into other areas of their life at the given time. The participant may work toward living their values in the realm of work/education and set specific, realistic goals to complete in this specific area. Therefore, the participant's coping skills in work situations, overall stress level for work/education, and thoughts and feelings about work/education may change and be positively affected; however, the participant's relationships or spirituality may not be improving as quickly or effectively. It is possible that the participant's may systematically work through determining core values in different domains of their life, with one domain receiving more attention than others at any given time. If the participant did not have a large focus on using the mindfulness skills and techniques in the relationship domain, there may not be as large of improvements in the areas of relationship satisfaction. It is important that researchers assess the participants using the RDAS more times after the completion of Unstress II. A participant may experience an increase in relationship satisfaction once they use the tools from the Unstress II program specifically in his/her romantic relationship. If a participant specifically focuses on his/her relationship and utilizes the mindfulness skills including defusing

from thoughts and accepting feelings, he/she may gradually begin to see an increase in their relationship satisfaction. This study collected assessments (including the RDAS) two additional times after the completion of Unstress II, which is crucial for observing effects long after the actual program ended. This data has not been analyzed yet, but may show a time-delay in the effect of Unstress II on relationship satisfaction. While mindfulness skills and other techniques may have been taught and discussed throughout the program, it is important to consider that these skills may not be implemented fully and effectively immediately after the program is complete.

Finally, it is important to consider the extent to which the participants attended sessions and completed assignments. Although relationship satisfaction was compared between participants who completed the Unstress II program and participants who were in the waitlist control, it was not taken into consideration how many sessions the participants attended or how involved the participants were. If a participant came to every other session, it is likely that he/she missed a great deal of information necessary to build new skills upon. It is also unknown whether the participants practiced the program and exercises outside of the weekly group meetings. While Session Feedback Forms were collected after each session, the completion of assignments and attendance at sessions was not taken into consideration when analyzing the RDAS data. It is very possible that a participant who attended every session and practiced mindfulness techniques daily may have seen a greater improvement in their relationships and scored higher on the RDAS than a participant who did not regularly attend sessions. Future studies or analyses of RDAS data should take into consideration the extent to which participants attend sessions and the degree to which participants are attempting to practice the exercises outside of the weekly sessions.

Relationship satisfaction was not significantly affected by the mindfulness-based stress management program, Unstress II. The hypothesis was not supported, but future studies should repeat the study with more participants, encourage both individuals in a relationship to participate in the Unstress II program and analyze differences in RDAS scores, assess with the RDAS as a follow-up for participants who completed Unstress II, and consider the attendance and involvement of the Unstress II participants. It is important that researchers continue to look at the effects of stress on relationships and specifically determine techniques and skills that can be implemented by individuals or couples to improve relationship satisfaction and quality. With previous research demonstrating that mindfulness-based programs have a significant effect on relationship satisfaction, researchers should continue to study Unstress II and other similar programs as easily-disseminable tools for improving romantic relationships. Relationships are an extremely important part of people's lives; therefore, it is crucial that psychologists continue to study specific factors that play a role in maintaining a satisfying and healthy relationship.

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