

Mindfulness-Based Strengths Practice (MBSP) Group Intervention: A Systematic Review

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A systematic review was conducted to examine the evidence base for Mindfulness-Based Strengths Practice (MBSP) as a group intervention. Four studies met the eligibility criteria for inclusion. Results indicate MBSP is an effective group intervention yielding significant positive outcomes. Recommendations for researchers and group practitioners are provided.

Keywords: Mindfulness-Based Strengths Practice (MBSP), mindfulness, character strengths, systematic review, group interventions

Mindfulness is defined as staying in the present moment and noticing thoughts non-judgmentally (Kabat- Zinn, 1994). Through experiential exercises such as meditation, breathing exercises, and yoga, individuals may incorporate mindfulness-based practices (MBPs) into everyday life (Segal et al., 2013). MBPs offer an effective modality for promoting wellbeing in varying settings, such as schools and workplaces, and across

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disciplines, such as counseling, coaching, medicine, and law (Chiesa & Serretti, 2009; Grossman et al., 2004; McKeering & Hwang, 2019; Niemiec, 2014; Weare, 2013; Wingert et al., 2020). MBPs are linked to increased resiliency, higher cognitive functioning, greater self-awareness, improved emotion regulation, enhanced academic achievement, positive relationships, and lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Langer et al., 2017; Saltzman & Goldin, 2008; Sharp Donahoo et al., 2018; Zenner et al., 2014). Numerous established programs incorporate MBPs, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (Kabat-Zinn, 1990), Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (Segal et al., 2002, 2013), Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (Linehan, 1994), and Acceptance Commitment Therapy (Baer, 2010; Hayes et al., 2006). These evidence-based mindfulness programs are effective in enhancing outcomes such as personal accomplishment, occupational burnout, self-compassion, quality of sleep, relaxation, interpersonal skills, chronic pain, and alleviating depression (Bihari & Mullen, 2014; Gaiswinkler & Unterrainer, 2016; Hilton et al., 2017; Janssen et al., 2018; Nguyen-Feng et al., 2017; Reb & Atkins, 2015; Segal et al., 2002).

The field of positive psychology focuses on the study of flourishing, thriving human nature, and it encourages the use of character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Character strengths, or positive traits, are considered the backbone of positive psychology as they contribute to the well-being of individuals, groups, organizations, and communities (Niemiec, 2014; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Rashid, 2015; Seligman, 2012). They are a central element of our core identity (Hausler et al., 2017). Peterson and Seligman (2004) identified and classified 24 character strengths that are present across cultures into six core virtues: (a) wisdom and knowledge, (b) courage, (c) humanity, (d) justice, (e) temperance, and (f) transcendence. Expression of character strengths is linked with job satisfaction, productivity, and engagement (Gander et al., 2012; Harzer & Ruch, 2013, 2015; Lavy & Littman-Ovadia, 2017; Peterson et al., 2010; van Woerkom et al., 2016). Cultivating character strengths in different environments has become increasingly pertinent in the 21st century (Lavy, 2020).

MBPs and character strengths can be integrated to positively impact one another (Brown et al., 2007). For instance, humor is a character strength that, when fused with mindfulness interventions, was suggested to result in positive outcomes in vocational

settings (Hofmann et al., 2020). Moreover, in the well-studied Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy program, character strengths are incorporated by viewing how one may observe negative thoughts with curiosity, accept oneself (forgiveness) by letting go (perseverance), and being in the present moment by noticing the beauty around them (appreciation of beauty and excellence; Niemiec, 2014). It is postulated that the integration also fosters self-awareness and psychological resiliency when faced with challenges (Klatt et al., 2015). Mindfulness and character strengths combined may increase happiness, minimizing hedonic states, and boosting one's sense of meaning and purpose (Littman-Ovadia & Niemiec, 2016). Overall, a strong correlation exists between mindfulness and well-being when character strengths are infused (Niemiec, 2014; Pang & Ruch, 2019).

Niemiec and colleagues (2012) suggested the integration of mindfulness and character strengths would facilitate flourishing in life purposes, as well as improved psychological well-being and interpersonal relationships. According to Niemiec (2014), integrating MBPs and character strengths promotes awareness of negative thinking and emotions in order to refocus on positive thoughts and helpful feelings. MBPs can aid in finding the golden mean, or the balance between overuse or underuse of character strength (Niemiec, 2014, 2019). Thus, weaving together MBPs and character strengths, Niemiec (2014) developed Mindfulness-Based Strengths Practice (MBSP), an eight-week group program. The program is designed to promote mindful living and the development of character strengths by incorporating mindfulness and strength-based exercises and activities, as well as meditation experiences, through group discussions and lectures (Niemiec & Lissing, 2016). For a detailed list of the session topics, exercises, and program structure as outlined by Niemiec (2014), see Table 1.

Table 1. *Standard structure of MBSP sessions and program (2014)*

Session	Core Topic	Mindfulness Exercise Description (p.111)	Session Description (from table 1.3) objective/goal/highlight
1	Mindfulness and Autopilot	Raisin exercise	The autopilot mind is pervasive; insights and change opportunities start with mindful attention.
2	Your Signature Strengths	You at your best (includes strength-spotting)	Identify what is best in you; this can unlock potential to engage more in work and relationships and reach higher personal potential.
3	Obstacles are Opportunities	Statue meditation	The practice of mindfulness and strengths exploration leads immediately to two things-obstacles/barriers to the practice and a wider appreciation for the little things in life.
4	Strengthening Mindfulness in Everyday Life (Strong Mindfulness)	Mindful walking	Mindfulness helps us attend to and nourish the best, innermost qualities in everyday life in ourselves and others, while reducing negative judgements of self and others; conscious use of strengths can help us deepen and maintain mindfulness practices.
5	Valuing Your Relationships	Loving-kindness/strength-exploration meditation	Mindful attending can nourish two types of relationships: relationships with others and our relationship with ourselves. Our relationship with ourselves contributes to self-growth and can have an immediate impact on our connection with others.
6	Mindfulness of the Golden Mean (Mindful Strengths Use)	Character strengths 360 review and fresh start meditation	Mindfulness helps to focus on problems directly, and character strengths help to reframe and offer different perspectives not immediately apparent.
7	Authenticity and Goodness	Best possible self-exercise	It takes character (e.g., courage) to be a more authentic "you" and it takes character (e.g., hope) to create a strong future that benefits both oneself and others. Set mindfulness and character strengths goals with authenticity and goodness in the forefront of the mind.
8	Your Engagement With Life	Golden nuggets exercise	Stick with those practices that have been working well and watch for the mind's tendency to revert to automatic habits that are deficit-based, unproductive, or that prioritize what's wrong in you and others. Engage in an approach that fosters awareness and celebration of what is strongest in you and others.
MBSP General Internal Session Structure			
1. Opening meditation	2. Dyads or group discussion	3. Introduction to new material	
4. Experiential- mindfulness/character strengths experience	5. Debriefing or Virtue circle	6. Suggested homework exercises for next session	
7. Closing meditation (strengths gatha)			

Source: Adapted with permission from Niemiec (2014)

While the integration of MBPs and character strengths is supported in the literature, and while MBSP is grounded on this integration, a comprehensive review of the literature revealed inconclusive evidence regarding the effectiveness of MBSP as a group intervention. Without a clear understanding of whether MBSP is a supported group intervention, it is unclear whether or not to implement it in practice or research it further. The current study aims to investigate the scope and practice of MBSP as a group intervention by systematically reviewing the empirical literature base.

Method

Using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher et al., 2009), a systematic review was conducted to investigate the scope and practice of MBSP as a group intervention by systematically

reviewing the empirical literature base in peer-reviewed scholarly journals. The PRISMA guidelines, widely considered the best practice procedure (Shamseer et al., 2015), were followed to ensure the transparency and reliability of the review. The following steps were taken to conduct the review: (a) identification of the relevant work (search strategy), (b) identification of inclusion and exclusion criteria for article selection, (c) selection process, and (d) data extraction and quality appraisal of the selected studies (Khan et al., 2003; Strech & Sofaer, 2012). The research team consisted of two members, including a counselor educator (PP) and a doctoral counselor education student (CM). Both members were affiliated with programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Educational Programs (CACREP) and received adequate training on conducting systematic reviews prior to this study. The research team held regular meetings during the course of this systematic review. The last author was not involved in data analysis but joined after the review process to assist in interpretation and writing.

Search Strategy

Ten databases were searched using the following search terms: “Mindfulness-Based Strengths Practice” and “MBSP.” The databases were: (a) ERIC, (b) ProQuest, (c) PsychArticle, (d) Academic Search Complete, (e) Web of Science, (f) Psyn dex (PubPsych), (g) Psychology & Behavioral Sciences Collection, (h) PubMed (Medline), (i) CINAHL, and (j) PsychINFO (OVID - Medline). The reference sections of articles identified through the search were examined for additional relevant literature.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies considered for review included data-driven empirical (i.e., quantitative, or mixed methodology) studies published in English-language journals through May of 2020 that examined the MBSP program as an intervention as outlined by Niemeic (2014) with little to no variation. Studies excluded from this review included those whose topic and scope were not relevant to this review (i.e., studies without any concrete research

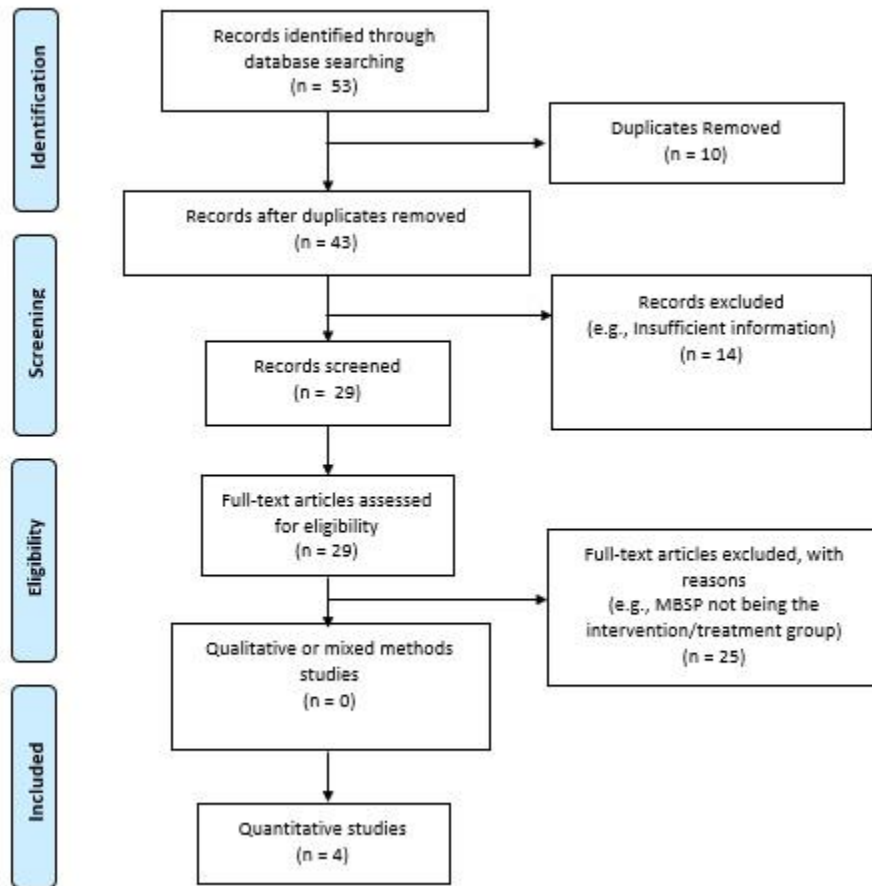
design, conceptual papers referencing MBSP), studies that lacked detail of the MBSP intervention, and studies that examined mindfulness or character strengths as separate constructs but did not study the MBSP program, specifically. Moreover, literature reviews, book chapters, editorials, review articles, case reports, posters, dissertations, and conceptual studies, and meta-analyses were excluded. Fifty-three articles were initially identified.

Selection Process

Researcher CM reviewed titles and abstracts to verify the 53 identified studies discussed any MBSP intervention. A low threshold for inclusion was employed at this stage of screening to minimize the omission of relevant studies. It was anticipated that articles would appear more than once due to the inclusion of multiple databases. Therefore, a visual examination of the searches was performed to eliminate duplicates. Forty-three studies remained after eliminating duplicates. Researcher PP reviewed the articles independently to confirm the final count to be considered for further review.

Next, full-text documents were obtained and reviewed for the aforementioned inclusion and exclusion criteria. Researchers PP and CM reviewed the studies independently and sorted them into the categories of include, exclude, or questionable. Researchers PP and CM then met to discuss their sorting of studies. All questionable studies were revisited, and their status was agreed upon through consensus in discussion. A total of 14 studies were excluded due to a lack of information to determine their relevance to the objectives of this review. Of the remaining 29 studies, 25 studies were excluded because they did not experimentally examine MBSP as an intervention. In all, a total of four studies were selected for data synthesis. All four studies were quantitative; no qualitative or mixed methods studies were selected. Figure 1 depicts the flow chart of the literature search adopted from the PRISMA flow diagram (Moher et al., 2009).

Figure 1. *PRISMA Flow Diagram*



Data Extraction

After relevant studies were selected, data was then extracted. The following general data were determined: (a) number of relevant studies published through May of 2020, (b) year of publication, (c) journals published in, and (d) countries published in. As this review aims to address the scope and practice of the MBSP program as a group treatment modality, other information extracted included sample characteristics, study setting, study aim, variables and measures used, methodological design, interventions employed, and outcomes. The researchers additionally extracted data regarding the effectiveness of MBSP as a group treatment intervention, whether the MBSP program was adapted or changed from the original design and noted limitations of MBSP as

expressed by the authors of the reviewed studies. The data extracted is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of studies that examined the impact of Mindfulness-Based Strengths Practice (MBSP).

Study	Sample Characteristics	Study Aim	Variable & Measured Used	Methodology	Major Outcomes
Ivtzan et al. (2016)	General adult population Avg Age=50 7 M & 12 F N=19(Exp): Recruited via VIA website – Online N=20 (Cont.): Recruited via university in UK -no intervention	To demonstrate that MBSP participants have greater levels of wellbeing and flourishing than no intervention group	Happiness: Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWL scale; Diener et al., 1985) Flourishing: Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2009) Engagement: Positive Psychotherapy Inventory (Rashid, 2008) Strengths: Signature Strengths Inventory (Wood et al., 2011)	Quantitative; 8 Weeks; 2 hours each session Wilcoxon signed-rank test	MBSP has a significant and positive impact on wellbeing and flourishing SWL sig increased for control group also but no change in other 3 variables
Wingert et al. (2020)	Working undergraduates N = 52 Random assignment: MBSP: N=21; Age: avg 19; F=52%; 5%=non-binary & Control (no intervention): N=31 Age: avg 18; F=53; M=6%	To increase overall student wellbeing, workplace-related wellbeing, and undergrad student retention compared with a control group with no intervention	Flourishing: PERMA-Profiler (Butler & Kern, 2016) Workplace wellbeing: Workplace PERMA-Profiler (Watanbe et al., 2018)	Quantitative; 8 weeks each Pre-Post differences within group: Wilcoxon signed-rank test; Between groups pre & post comparison: Mann-Whitney U tests; Retention rate differences between groups: Fisher's exact test	MBSP: Significant difference increase in overall PERMA wellbeing, specifically engagement, health, and meaning. No sig difference in workplace PERMA
Pang and Ruch (2019)	Adults 18+ No meditation experiences Workers with >= 50% employment level N = 63 (MBSP=21; MBSR=21; Wait List=21); Random assignment to one of the 3 groups Age: 22-61 yr. (M=44) F=68.9% Online recruitment Paid participation of members Face to face intervention	1. To test 2 mindfulness interventions (MBSP and MBSR) on psychological wellbeing & work-related outcomes 2. To test whether those intervention effects maintain over a period of time (up to 6 months) 3. To test mediators of the intervention effect at the workplace	Strength application at work: Applicability of Character Strengths Rating Scales (ACS-RS) (Harzer & Ruch, 2013) Subjective quality of life: WHO-Five Well-Being Index (WHO-5) (Johansen, 1998); Stress: Perceived Stress Scale-10 (PSS) (Cohen & Williamson, 1988) Job satisfaction: Job Satisfaction Questionnaire (JSQ) (Andrews & Withey, 1976) Supervisory rating in task performance: Task Performance Questionnaire (TPQ) (Williams & Anderson, 1991)	Quantitative; 8 weeks & 2 hours each Linear mixed-effects models; R-package "lme4" 2 phases: (1). Acute intervention training: Pre & post survey; (2). Follow-up/Engagement: months 1, 2, & 6	MBSR and MBSP both are effective for increasing wellbeing and increasing job satisfaction Difference: MBSP bolsters task performance MBSR-reduces perceived stress Top 4 to 6 signature strength mediated MBSP effect on task performance at workplace
Hofmann et al. (2019)	Includes 3 studies. Relevant to this systematic review-Study 3 Pang and Ruch (2019) study's same sample	To test whether light forms of humor can be increased through mindfulness or MBSP (Aim: Study 3)	Character strength of Humor: VIA Inventory of Strengths Subscale Humor (VIA-IS Humor; German adaptation; Ruch et al., 2010)	Same as Pang and Ruch (2019)	Significant increase in VIA-IS Humor for MBSP and MBSP groups, but stronger in MBSP; effect remained up to 6 months

Results

Analyses indicate the MBSP group protocol proposed by Niemiec (2014) is in its preliminary stages of testing, researching, and implementation. Four of the relevant 29 studies met the eligibility criteria for further review and analysis (i.e., Hofmann et al., 2019; Ivtzan et al., 2016; Pang & Ruch, 2019; and Wingert et al., 2020). All four of the studies were quantitative in nature and were published in four different journals: (a) *Journal of American College Health*, (b) *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, (c) *Applied Research in Quality of Life*, and (d) *International Journal of Wellbeing*. The studies were conducted in the United States of America, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

The four studies reviewed included a combined total of 207 individuals, randomly assigned, with randomized controlled trials investigating the effects of MBSP as an experimental group. Authors of the studies evaluated the effects of the MBSP program as an intervention with different adult populations, mostly consisting of working undergraduate students, healthcare workers, and the general population. All four studies used MBSP as an intervention over a course of eight weeks, and sessions lasted from 90 minutes to 2 hours.

Within the four MBSP studies reviewed, several variables were explored including wellbeing, flourishing levels, perceived stress, job satisfaction, task performance, engagement, meaning, humor, mindfulness, and health. For a detailed list of self-report questionnaires utilized, see Table 2. Indicating the positive effectiveness of MBSP as a treatment intervention, participants in the studies experienced positive wellbeing including higher engagement; lower stress levels, anxiety, and depression; and improved task performance, health improvement, humor, finding meaning, and life satisfaction.

Discussion

Systematic analysis of the peer-reviewed studies indicates that the MBSP program has a promising future with a variety of individuals from diverse backgrounds. While there are numerous studies showing positive effects of mindfulness and character strengths interventions individually, this systematic review indicates that MBSP as outlined by Niemiec (2014) specifically has beneficial outcomes among the general population and in various settings. Those settings consisted of a college campus, workplace, and an online platform. In most cases, participants reported sustained positive change during post-group and one-, two-, and six-month follow-up analyses. Participants experienced significant increases in an overall sense of wellbeing (Ivtzan et al., 2016; Pang & Ruch, 2019; Wingert et al., 2020), particularly, engagement (Ivtzan et al., 2016; Wingert et al., 2020), health, and meaning (Wingert et al., 2020). They also reported a positive association between light humor and mindfulness (Hofmann et al., 2019), and an increase in job satisfaction and performance with an increase in the practice of MBSP (Pang & Ruch, 2019). Most of the study participants perceived the impact of the MBSP program as positive. Overall, the results of all four studies indicate that MBSP program participants experienced positive outcomes compared to the control group.

Recommendation for Future Research

Limitations consistently reported across the four reviewed studies included small sample size, availability of participants, geographical location, and effectiveness differing amongst different populations. Samples among the four studies were small, ranging from 39 to 63 people, and included volunteers from the general adult population above the age of 18 who were college-bound or employed. Utilizing volunteers for the group intervention may influence the sample's reception of the effects of the interventions in a more favorable way. Moreover, Hofmann et al. (2019) noted it is difficult to rule out the impact social gathering throughout the intervention has on study outcomes. Future research might consider randomized controlled trials with larger samples. It is recommended that future researchers consider participants' previous or current experiences with mindfulness practices when designing and interpreting the results of

their studies, as well. Moreover, in order to gain a greater understanding of the effectiveness of MBSP among diverse populations, additional research is warranted across varying settings and with diverse populations, including children, individuals from minority and underrepresented groups, non-college or unemployed adults, and older adults. Given the existing studies were all quantitative in nature, qualitative and mixed methods studies are additionally needed to include the voices of participants and to holistically understand the effectiveness of this intervention.

There are other key factors to consider in future research when examining the effectiveness of MBSP as an effective group intervention. The reviewed studies indicated positive outcomes for people participating in an MBSP program incorporating mindfulness and character strengths practices. However, with this integration, researchers were unable to differentiate if either practice had a more significant impact on outcomes or if it is a combination of the two that resulted in positive outcomes. As suggested by Niemiec et al. (2012), Pang and Ruch (2019), and Wingert et al. (2020), future research should examine whether mindfulness or character strengths have a greater effect on outcomes or whether the two approaches combined have a mutual benefit (e.g., treatment groups for mindfulness-only, character strengths-only, and MBSP). Further exploration is additionally warranted into adaptations of the MBSP program, for example, whether it can be implemented in a shorter period and maintain similar benefits. Only one (Ivtzan et al., 2016) of the four studies provided an online MBSP program. With the increase in many online programs and telehealth services, it is recommended that future research examine the effectiveness of both in-person and online MBSP group interventions and focus on the development of online MBSP programs that may potentially reach a wider audience. Moreover, the studies reviewed incorporated MBSP groups led by trained professionals. It is suggested that future research examining the effectiveness of MBSP also utilize professionals trained in group intervention, mindfulness, character strengths, and MBSP.

Most notably, within the studies that were reviewed, all the authors used their MBSP framework as originally presented in *Mindfulness & Character Strengths: A Practical Guide to Flourishing* (Niemiec, 2014), but they did not include a detailed

description of the group structure, group process, leadership, and membership characteristics, member screening process, and the overall group dynamics.

Understanding the group dynamics of MBSP will result in a more comprehensive understanding of MBSP in clinical practice, as opposed to only recognizing the outcomes of participation. This in turn will allow for refinement of the MBSP program and will facilitate counselors in providing quality programs. For example, an understanding of group procedure and process may clarify any need for specialized MBSP programs for certain treatment populations. It may be beneficial to explore how MBSP programs work differently, for example, among elderly versus children, voluntary versus mandated, veterans, etc. Quantitative and qualitative data would be useful in this area.

Recommendations for Counselors

Counselors serve a crucial role in bridging the gap between research and practice, as they can both consume new knowledge and implement that new knowledge in their work. Given the support for the integration of mindfulness and character strengths through MBSP, it may benefit counselors to incorporate MBSP into their practice. In accordance with standards set forth by the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs (CACREP; 2016), counselor trainees in graduate school learn to follow a set of standards during their group work practice, including theoretical foundations of group counseling and group work, dynamics associated with group process and development, therapeutic factors and how they contribute to group effectiveness, approaches to group formation, types of groups, and other considerations that affect conducting groups in varied settings. We assert that MBSP groups would be most effective when led by professional counselors trained in group work in accordance with the CACREP (2016) standards, but also trained in MBSP-specific concepts. Counselors may seek training on the topics of positive psychology, mindfulness, character strengths, and MBSP protocol. It is also recommended that group leaders who plan to facilitate MBSP groups follow the Association of Specialist in Group Work's (ASGW) Guiding Principles of Group Work (McCarthy, et al., 2021), the American

Counseling Association's (ACA) Advocacy Competencies to group work (Rubel & Pepperell, 2010), and the ACA Code of Ethics (2014), as they provide specific strategies, knowledge, and skills for inclusion of multicultural, social justice, and ethical considerations.

The field would benefit greatly by having counselors knowledgeable and efficient in providing MBSP groups provide training on these topics to other counselors, in order to have a more widespread impact as it relates to the implementation of MBSP. Furthermore, trained counselors can assist in continued research efforts by serving as an MBSP group intervention provider, sharing their perspectives about MBSP intervention in general, and elaborating further on the group processes and dynamics of MBSP. In particular, as the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic prompted a majority of group programs to be adapted for online delivery via telehealth platforms, counselors may tailor the MBSP protocol for telehealth format and delivery. Practice-focused research on studying the efficacy of telehealth modalities of the MBSP program, especially among diverse specialized populations such as children, individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities, couples and families, and foreign-born individuals, will be of great value to the global community.

Conclusion

This systematic review examined four peer-reviewed studies published through May of 2020 that experimentally investigated the effectiveness of MBSP as a group intervention. While the amount of research conducted on MBSP to date is limited, the extant literature indicates MBSP is an effective group intervention with the potential to improve wellbeing, academic retention, engagement, job satisfaction, task performance, and humor. Continued research on the topic of MBSP as a group intervention, especially regarding group processes and dynamics, and implementation of MBSP as a group practice is warranted and recommended.

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