Mindfulness Training for Student Athletes
Facilitator Resource Manual

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The following guide is designed to provide direction, instruction, and resources for facilitating each session of the program. This should not be considered an exhaustive list and indeed customizing the program to fit the idiosyncrasies of the audience and student population will make for a more effective experience overall.

Session 1: Introduction to Mindfulness

• The point of mindfulness training is to be with your immediate experience, which has been found to be effective for managing anxiety, distress, worry, etc. The management of emotion has become increasingly important for college student athletes to effectively and optimally manage their emotional lives around full schedules and independence from their families while adjusting to college. Psychological arousal is also an important skill in the management of intense competitive pressures.

• Theme: to increase buy-in throughout each session, toggle back and forth between the application to mental health/normal life emotional distress and to performance, which is why it is helpful to reference that both Olympic and professional athletes use mindfulness for performance enhancement. Some slides address the emotional distress that comes from life (coping) and some address the distress that comes from performance (performance anxiety).

• In the “Stories We Tell” slide, help the athlete become more aware of their thoughts and assumptions which become so ingrained, so a part of who we, are that we are not aware/paying attention to them.

• Increasingly, student athletes are developing more chronic anxiety conditions partly due to chronic performance concerns and an over emphasis on achievement (achievement based identity).

• Consequently, the “Stories We Tell” graphic depiction incorporates “expectations,” which are a huge source of stress for student athletes.

• Feedback from the study suggests that student athletes like doing the mindfulness exercises in the training sessions, thus the more practice-oriented activities the better (ie. Meditation, relaxation, breathing.)

• The Hand Sensation Exercise, STOP Technique, and Walking Meditation are to be done during the training session.

• Homework is recommended after every session in the form of meditation practice using the stop, breath, think mobile application introduced during the training. We also added chapters from The Mindful Athlete (2016) by George Mumford that address material covered in the session.

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Mindfulness Training

Session 1: Introduction to Mindfulness

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Introduction to Mindfulness

Why are we here?
Today is the first of 5 sessions, designed to introduce the practice of mindfulness.

What is Mindfulness?
Point of mindfulness is to BE with your immediate experience.

Real Point: Has been found to be effective for managing anxiety, distress, worry, etc.

Definition
Having the intention to pay attention to your immediate experience nonjudgmentally.

• What? Teach awareness & understanding of thoughts & emotions in the present moment, with a non-judgmental approach to one’s experiences (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).
• Why? Manage both better (in all aspects of our lives).
Now...How do you do it?

**Hand Sensation Exercise**
- Sit back in your chair, feet flat on the ground, hands resting palms up on your knees.
- Close your eyes and take a few breaths.
- Place your awareness in your palms...
  - What do you feel?
  - What sensations do you notice?
  - What came into your mind?

Mindfulness & Coping

For those:
- Frustrating moments
- Dark nights
- Disappointments
- Betrayals
- Overwhelming days

*Mindfulness improves our understanding of, tolerance of, and ability to cope with emotions!*

Mindfulness & Flow

Raise your hand if you have ever been in “The Zone?”
- This is what Flow is:
  - The ability to direct and channel strengths & skills fully in the present moment.
  - Removing distractions (like thoughts about past or future)
  - Taking away the “things” that stop your body from doing what it does best.
- Learning to practice mindfulness often makes it easier to enter The Zone and reach optimal performance.
The Stories We Tell

What stories do you tell about yourself...as an athlete? As a person?

1st: We've all been given/told stories growing up (from coaches, parents, friends):
Positive or Negative...but we seldom question them or realize they exist.
Part of our work in mindfulness is to question these stories.

2nd: We can do something about them...once we are aware:
Do they hinder us?
What Stories have you created about the season? About your career?
"I'm the captain, best on the team" or "I choke", "I am injured"
What Stories have others created for us?
The negative aspects of these stories tend to cycle, get worse, & become more critical.
e.g. "We lost against UCLA last year, so..."
e.g. "If we let ourselves be really sad, it'll never go away."

The Stories we Tell

Expectations from Parents

Last Season

Last Performance

Expectations for next performance

Desired Improvements

Hopes for Professional Career

STOP Technique

Each of our 5 sessions will have TRAINING & EXPERIENTIAL components!

S.T.O.P. Technique:
Stop what you are doing
Take a few deep breaths
Observe...Your body, thoughts, emotions
Proceed...with your day

Now Get out your phone!
Download the Stop, Breath, Think App
https://www.stopbreathethink.com/
Take a minute and complete the "Check-in" Function.
This "Check-in" takes you through the keys of STOP, we want you to do it Daily!

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Walking Meditation

Now for your first meditation!

• Raise your hand if you’ve ever meditated before... what was it like?
• Our first is called “Walking Meditation” and you can find it on the APP.
• We will do it together now!
Session 2: Facilitating Automaticity & Increasing Emotional Tolerance through Mindfulness of the Body

• Again, buy-in is the biggest challenge (in large part because of time and other demands). Continue to address how these skills work for mental health and performance. The upside is that you are teaching practice of mindfulness in both domains so that they can use them as needed.

• Maintaining focus on helpful parts of our experience induces flow in competition or gets us through tough moments in life.

• The “Mindfulness of the Body” slide: Everything is experienced in the body; we just don’t pay attention to it. The point of paying attention is to increase awareness so we can learn to address or manage our stress by relaxing our bodies. There are body scan meditations on several apps that can help bring this idea to life.

• Judging an emotional experience as (good or) bad leads to judging ourselves as bad, which is unhelpful in managing any emotional experience. We are not our mistakes.

• Give examples of every day kinds of emotional distress, namely time pressures, romantic break ups, doing poorly on a test, conflict with a teammate, etc.

• Raisin Exercise: Shows just how much automaticity is in our lives and how much more full the experience can be by acknowledging the full process. By slowing down and paying attention to your experience, you are better able to bring yourself into the present moment, focus on the pleasant stuff, and change the nature of your experience.
The **Mindfulness Skills** we use to manage the **Ups & Downs/Stressors of our lives** are the **SAME Mindfulness Skills** we use to achieve **Peak Performance**!

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**Automaticity in Sport = Flow**

- We want our technique/strategy/physical performance to be automatic, managed by our awareness, talent, & muscle memory. (which is why we train!)
- The mental process of HOW we get into our ideal performance state (Flow, The Zone) is developed through mindfulness practice.
- Includes decision making & responses to our emotions.
Mindfulness of the Body

• Everything is experienced in the body!
• Our brains are part of our body.
• Emotions, thoughts, experiences as well as bodily sensations all manifest in the body.
• How does your body feel a thought?
  e.g. Remember a time you were embarrassed.
  So, how do things go wrong?

Body Scan Meditation

Your second meditation!

• Our second is called “Body Scan” and you can find it on the APP.

  We will do it together now!

Judgement:

Good/Bad = I’m Good/Bad

• Anxiety, fear, uncertainty are all natural reactions to a variety of situations.
• Having these reactions is NOT in & of itself “good” or “bad”
• You are NOT a bad person because you feel anxiety, fear, uncertainty.
• Judging ourselves for having a feeling makes it worse!
Cultivating Emotional Tolerance

Understanding how we experience emotions & thoughts in our body builds emotional tolerance:
1) Identify feelings/thoughts faster in life/competition
2) Allows us to make better choices for managing feelings/thoughts
3) By redirecting our attention:
   – out of our head
   – preventing judgement (which makes things worse)
   – into another more neutral part of our body experience

Raisin Exercise
1. Take one raisin & keep it in your hand.
2. Feel the weight of it, touch it, feel the texture, temp, smooth, rigid, soft, firm?
3. Hold to ear. Lightly squish it. Hold to nose. Notice if anything happening to your mouth or stomach.
4. Notice thoughts, likes or dislikes, w/o pushing them away.
5. Slowly bring raisin to your lips, saliva?
6. Gently place raisin in your mouth. Don’t chew, explore sensations, explore w/ tongue.
7. Notice which side your tongue pushes raisin.
8. Prepare to chew: Very consciously, take one/two bites into the raisin, notice what happens, experience the waves of taste as you chew.
9. Don’t swallow, notice juice, texture & how these change over time.
10. Acknowledge intention to swallow as it comes up so that you experience this sensation consciously before you actually swallow raisin.
12. Sense how body as a whole feels after exercise. Notice your thoughts.
Session 3: Managing Emotion

• Clear distinction made between thoughts and feelings. Feelings are the one word experiences we have not the thoughts we use to describe them.

• This session focused on managing emotion. Use every day kinds of examples throughout.

• Really emphasize responding versus reacting to emotion and that we have a choice as to how we respond to different emotions. The choice increases the faster we learn to identify our emotion and the more time we give ourselves to choose how to respond. Choosing how to respond is often a novel concept for student-athletes.

• Help student-athletes consider their own emotional style. Point: Experiencing an emotion itself is not BAD or SHAMEFUL even though we may have learned this message from people or experiences in the past.

• The “Life Span of Emotions” slide: Emotions are temporary, but tend to stick around longer if not acknowledged; the sooner we acknowledge them, the sooner they dissipate.

• “Loving Kindness” Exercise: We must learn to give ourselves support, self-compassion, kindness, and love. Often the most difficult thing for an athlete to do because their desire to improve usually results in positive (or sometimes negative) self-criticism. This exercise allows the student-athlete to put away that self-critical, judgmental evaluation they initially give themselves so they can identify what they really need.
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Session 3: Managing Emotion

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Getting to Know Emotions

- Come from our experience (past/present)
- Forces of nature we don’t have control over experiencing
- Does NOT mean that we do not have control over how we REACT to emotions.
- Sooner we label our emotions, the more options we have to react.
- Cannot have freedom from your emotions, but can have freedom with your emotions.

Responding Vs. Reacting to Emotions

We want to increase the time... so you can better decide what to do!
Emotions

- How do you know when you are:
  1) Sad (crying, feel down, heavy, closed off, vulnerable)
  2) Glad (smiling, laughing, feel light, energetic)
  3) Mad (frowning, fight/flight kicks in, physically agitated, hot)
  4) Afraid (heart racing, sweating, feel protective)
  5) Ashamed (disconnected, wanted one thing & got another)

Emotional Style

- Do you try to change/avoid emotions?
- Tendency learned from family, coaches, friends, experiences
  - “I shouldn’t feel sad.”
  - “It’s okay to feel angry.”
  - “I should only feel happy.”
- What happens if you ignore a difficult emotion?
  (substance use, short tempered, unpredictably reactive)
- Although emotions are only temporary, if we ignore/avoid them, they get stronger & last longer.
- If we acknowledge them, they dissipate & pass away.

The Life Span of Emotions

- Unacknowledged and Ruminating Emotions
- Typical Emotion
- Acknowledged/Experienced Emotions

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Loving Kindness Exercise

• Think about a time in your life that was very difficult, misunderstood, disappointed, hurt.
• Imagine this scene in a picture frame.
• Think about what you needed in that moment.
• Imagine yourself stepping through the picture frame & giving yourself what you needed.
• Now step out of the frame & notice how you feel.
Session 4: Managing Thoughts

- Recommend checking in with the athletes each week to see who has practiced and what their experiences are. Your goal is to get them going on regular practice, preferably as a team once they see how easy and short mindfulness meditations can be.

- Again, a clear distinction should be made between thoughts and feelings. Thoughts tend to be many words. Helping teach how to identify thoughts and feelings when they occur.

- Our memories tend to be heard as an auditory experience, but may also be seen and experienced visually.

- “Judgement” slide: We may experience confusing thoughts and mostly we let them go. Remember the Stories we talked about in the first session? Our thoughts are often related to our stories. Again, the problem is when we judge them (stories or thoughts) and then hang on to them and that judgment of them.

- Give examples of different kinds of thoughts throughout session.

- “Two Parts to Every Thought” slide:
  - Content of the thought and the story the thought is related to.
  - Your experience of the story

- These stories are just stories: 1) Have nothing to do with the future. 2) Not necessarily true. Athletes can let go of the story and pay more attention to the process of their thoughts. Ruminating on a story is unhelpful, and you don’t tend to feel good after we do it. If you practice beating yourself up, you will get better at beating yourself up.

- “Exercises to Manage Thoughts” slide: There are two parts to every thought: the sensory experience and the story content.

- Like emotions: first the athlete has to acknowledge they are having a thought in order to manage it. Remember the content, or the story, has no bearing on anything. So focusing on the content is of no use.

- Reference the Lifespan of an Emotion chart: the top of the curve is when they avoid or revel in our emotion or thought. If they attend to them, they dissipate.

- With these exercises, student-athletes can experience their thoughts differently than they have in the past. These exercises can help them get through some tough moments, like when they are alone at night and overwhelmed.

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• Home in the Body Exercise for an immediate focus point: You can choose what part of the body you are going to focus on, which can change depending on what you are doing. For example: if they have had a tough day, or someone said something to upsetting, they can focus on their feet as you walk home, or their face as the wind blows through it as they ride home, or the strength of their thighs as they walk up stairs, or your breathe as you are in class, etc.

• It is important to set up the next meeting with the team. They will be required to brainstorm ways they can practice mindfulness themselves and as a team.
How do you know you are having a thought?

- We experience our thoughts through the sensory part of our brain.
- Typically HEAR or SEE them
- We trigger thoughts from immediate circumstances & from our memories.
- Pleasant memory = happy thoughts
- Unpleasant memory = self-critical/painful thoughts

Judgment

- Comes from family experiences & messages we heard growing up, models, friends, religion, culture that leave us with ideas of what we “should be thinking.”
- Once we judge a thought, then we judge ourselves & become self-critical.
- Need to: 1. acknowledge their presence  
  2. understand they are in the moment  
  3. decide what we will do with them.
Two Parts to Every Thought

1. Content
2. Process

Exercises to Manage Thoughts

1. On a continuum. Count or time them.
2. Label or Noting, Acknowledging when thoughts occur
3. Count spaces between thoughts/words
4. Visualization:
   – Imaging thoughts as waves
   – Imagine thoughts as cars on freeway
Point: Allow thoughts to be in the background.
      Don’t avoid them, but don’t revel in them.

HOME IN THE BODY exercise

- Mindful walking is an example of finding a Home in the Body. Look for a physical feel/focus you like.
- By connecting with a part of your body, you are better able to separate your attention from your focus on your thoughts to focus on an aspect of your body experience.
- Split focus: sometime on HIB, sometimes on play, teammates, coach, etc.
- Use HIB during transitions in competition & life.
The purpose of Session 5 is to hopefully get a team commitment to practicing mindfulness as part of their daily practice routine. It is important to have it generated from those who have become most interested in mindfulness on the team. If anyone doesn’t like and/or appreciate it, don’t get in a power struggle over it and don’t let teammates do so either. If the team commits to regular practice, those who do not want to participate, can stretch, pray, or sit quietly. Help the team get specific about their commitment and solve/resolve logistical problems in setting up a daily or weekly routine of mindfulness practice.

Apps can be downloaded on cell phones and placed in the middle of the locker room to guide the entire team through a meditation.

When setting a time, consistency may help to establish a routine. However, if they are traveling remind them not to be rigid and instead make plan to fit it in somewhere else in the day.

Discuss examples of mindfulness in the moment.

Go through review slides.

Finalize plan. Offer to advocate with coach as needed.
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*Session 5: Building a Mindfulness Practice*

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**Formal Practice Vs Practice In the Moment**

What do you imagine “Formal Practice” looks like?

- Mindfulness does not have to be a formalized practice...it can be whatever you find most helpful!
- But remember... it is a PRACTICE and just like any other skill you have developed for your sport, your mindfulness ability will improve over time ONLY IF you PRACTICE.

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**Meditations Covered**

1. STOP technique
2. Walking Meditation
3. Body Scan
4. Mindful Eating (Raisin Exercise)
5. Loving Kindness
6. Home in the Body
7. Counting Thoughts
8. Labeling Thoughts (Noting)
9. Visualization (Boat on a Wave)
10. Team meditations
Formal Mindfulness Practice

- Formal practice: set a time each day for a mindfulness exercise
- Is where you push your tolerance: more actively allow discomfort and build your emotional tolerance & your ability to focus
- This is where you can change the messages from your stories
- Choose one of the activities from the list above

Application to Life

- Managing any challenging emotion
- Overwhelm
- Busyness
- Test Anxiety
- Disappointment
- Relationships: Break Ups, Conflict, Cherishing a Moment
- Family Illness, etc.

Application to Sport

- Pre-Competition Routine
- Finding Flow/Getting into The Zone
- Managing a Tough Moment
- Caught Off Guard
  (Have a mindfulness contingency plan.)
Finding a Home In the Body

• Find a physical sensation related to your body.
• E.G.: Sensations in your feet
  The natural breaths of your body
  The feel of the bat/ball in your hands
  The stretch of a muscle in a certain stance
• Focus on one/more of these to stay present & separate from the anxiety of the moment.
• Toggle focus back & forth throughout competition as needed.

USC TROJANS FIGHT ON!

Managing A Tough Moment

Remember…
• Control what is Controllable
• Recognize when thought/emotion present
• Don’t judge them
• Remind self: they are temporary & will pass

Instead…
• Stay in THIS MOMENT by:
  Repeating Mantras
  Finding a Home in the Body
  Focusing on Breathing
• Trust: your work, talent, & training.

USC TROJANS FIGHT ON!

Moving On: Changing the Story

Re-Set through Routine Mindfulness Practice:
• Think about your past experiences where you did not win.
• How do you characterize them?
  E.g., mistakes, failures, part of the process of growth?
• What about previous successes?
  E.g., do they create confidence, or expectations?
• Think about the stories you carry about you as a person/as an athlete.
• They come from your:
  past performances, family, friends, coaches, media, & culture.
• Whether the stories are True or Not! Recognize your ability to re-write the story going forward by managing your focus during routine mindfulness practice.

USC TROJANS FIGHT ON!