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## Mindfulness: Solution for Stumbling Students

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Utah State University

“Mindfulness: Solution for Stumbling Students”

Students who come to the Writing Center are often stressed, anxious, and very concerned about their essay’s health, even those who procrastinate. Learning to understand procrastination as a sign of stress rather than laziness betters us as tutors; this is done through developing mindfulness. Mindfulness can be applied to those struggling with procrastination by accepting the student’s stress and setting small goals. Mindfulness is defined as being aware of emotions without judgment. Procrastination is defined as submitting work inconsistently, ignoring homework, and denying feelings of stress.

Key Words: Tutoring, Writing Center, Mindfulness, Procrastination, and Emotional Intelligence

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ENGL 4910: Writing Center Tutors

Susan Andersen

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While preparing for an appointment, I saw on the appointment form, “I need this meeting for credit.” I rolled my eyes and forced myself to read their paper. Within the first five minutes of the appointment, the student said, “I was supposed to turn in this paper days ago.” That automatically made me label them as an uncaring and unmotivated student. I had woken up early after a late night of homework to meet with this student, and quite frankly, was trying to stay motivated myself. I faked enthusiasm as I asked the student if they felt comfortable moving on to the next topic. The student replied by asking how much time was left in the session. “We’ve only been here for 10 minutes, so we have about 20 left.” I guessed time was moving slowly for the both of us. Then I heard a sigh. That sigh was one I recognized well; it’s the sigh I make when I look at the timer on a test to realize I have plenty of time to finish. I looked at the student, and realized I’d been ignoring something before that was now obvious: this student’s essay was causing them a lot of stress. I quickly shifted my attitude to be more motivating and validating. After recognizing the student’s stressed behavior and garbaging my preconceived notions, we were able to have a very productive meeting. I took the student’s procrastination as laziness rather than a call for help. I almost lost the chance to help a student because I assumed the student thought the appointment was a waste of time so I was treating it like it was.

Students who come to the Writing Center are often stressed, anxious, and concerned about their essay’s health, even those who procrastinate. Contrary to the “stubborn” widespread belief that procrastination is a commonality among lazy students, “procrastination might actually be a way that some individuals cope with negative emotions” (Kervin & Heather). Many people who are stressed habitually practice procrastination as an unhealthy way to “...cope with thoughts and feelings that might otherwise be overwhelming” (Weis et al.). Although academically

successful, tutors may see procrastination as a coping mechanism to be somewhat ironic. However, I personally have experienced this. Reading an entire textbook on top of my other homework is often a breaking point. I'll intentionally not read it to avoid the stress it causes. Procrastination is also a practice of control for students that are stressed and drowning in a sea of homework. These students are often lacking a sense of "academic control," which is essential to "online learning" (Hong et al.). I have fallen into this trap often not going to sleep at a reasonable time. After late nights of homework, classes, and other commitments I'll often stay up even longer to have time for myself. Even if I'm tired, I still want to feel control over my life. Forty percent of students say that "stress negatively impacts their school performance," mostly due to an unhealthy coping mechanism (Weis et al.). Therefore, procrastination isn't always a sign of apathetic students but of stressed-out students. Students who regularly procrastinate their essays and hurriedly make an appointment at the Writing Center likely need the Writing Center as a pillar of support. It is more important than ever for tutors to help procrastinating students rather than label them.

Dealing with procrastination as a sign of stress rather than laziness is a byproduct of practicing and developing mindfulness. Mindfulness is the "non-judgemental acceptance of emotions and thoughts" (Teper et al. pg. 451). It's being aware of the students' emotions through listening and adapting to their needs. Being mindful of the student's emotions in my session earlier allowed me to help that student. "Emotion is information" that informs the tutor how to best adapt to the situation (Teper et al. pg. 45). To gain this information, tutors can practice mindfulness as a "purposeful awareness of what one feels, thinks and does" (Concannon et al.). Mindfulness is also "paying attention to the present moment without judgement," meaning that tutors will need to listen without prejudice (Kabat-Zinn qtd. Kervin & Barrett). It's important to

be mindful of your own thoughts. In my situation, I made assumptions about my student due to my bias regarding procrastination. Through mindfulness, the Writing Center can learn how to recognize students' emotions to allow tutors to adapt to students' needs.

Mindfulness can be applied to those struggling with procrastination by helping students accept their stress, set small goals, and adapt to students' needs. The first part of practicing mindfulness is often using “additional questions that encourage” the students to share their thoughts and feelings (Kervin & Barret). As tutors listen patiently and ask leading questions, it can help students recognize their stress about their assignments. For example, in my session I asked what major concern was preventing the student from turning in their essay to find their stressor for procrastination. Secondly, applying mindfulness in a session can be setting “small and realistic goals that can be accomplished on a daily and weekly level” (Concannon et al.)—suggesting “subtle changes” allows students to gain “control” over their situation while “energizing” them as they accomplish each goal (Teper et al. pg. 45).

The trap that I fell into often as a new tutor involved asking too much of my students. My only intention was to help them fix their essay. However, most students I met with didn't have the same English knowledge or confidence in their writing as I did. A lot of my suggestions were causing stress rather than being helpful. “We listen, aware of what we're asking others to do, and understanding of the different ways that stress manifests and affects us all” (Concannon et al.). I learned that my suggestions and plans needed to be adaptable to each student. To be an adaptable tutor, make a plan of small stepping stones to help the student gain control over their procrastination. Add a way to quantify each stepping stone for students to be able to recognize their progress. Another way to practice mindfulness is to set and accomplish goals during the session. This is a regular practice for me, after a suggestion from my supervisor. Working

through sentences together, I saw the student's confidence grew as I validated their decisions. By the time the short session ended, it seemed that their essay was close to finished. The assignment changed from a mountain of stress to a climbable hill. Overall, being "flexible and resilient" is the best way to practice mindfulness with students, especially those who procrastinate—setting small achievable goals works best. Mindfulness is crucial in this time of online learning where most students are dealing with stress alone.

In another appointment, I met with an apathetic student who openly admitted to procrastinating. When I met with this student, I tried to give them more supportive comments and encouraging smiles, the same method I used with the first student. I could tell that a lot of what I was saying was going in one ear and out the other. After really listening to them, I realized that they were not anxious about their procrastination. They wanted specific examples of fault and critical comments rather than compliments. By actively practicing mindfulness judgement, I was able to meet the student's needs. Something I learned is that no one situation meets all. Some students need examples, others need goals, some just need validation. Tutors find what the student needs through maintaining a mindfulness attitude. It's our job as tutors to be flexible and adaptable to each student in our tutoring sessions.

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