

Introducing Mindfulness Practices After Incarceration

Considerations from community members with lived experiences



Cultivating Justice CoLaboratory
at the Center for Healthy Minds

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I remember coming out, and not having services with mental health when I had had it when I was inside ... But once I got out, I didn't have that support ... I came out as what is it called? The words that they like to use, "Low-risk," right? **And I became high-risk in six months, because I wasn't taking care of myself, because I didn't have support, because I didn't have my mental health medication.**

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Background & Significance

Significant histories of trauma and mental health challenges both contribute to¹ and are exacerbated by² criminal legal system involvement. Yet mental health support during reentry is often...

- hard to prioritize when meeting other basic needs³
- difficult to access and difficult to afford⁴
- delivered by providers with limited trust, credibility, and deep understanding of peoples' lived experiences⁵
- deficit-focused and pathologizing⁶

Practices to cultivate **mindfulness** – the “*awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally*”⁷ – have been shown to promote mental health in many populations, including currently incarcerated individuals.

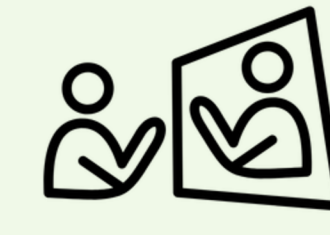
We sought to engage those with lived experience in peer-facilitated conversations to inform the development of a mindfulness-based offering for the reentry period that is both responsive to formerly incarcerated individuals' stated needs and that addresses barriers and facilitators specific to the reentry period.

Approach & Methods

- Two formerly incarcerated team members (Deb & Aaron) invited their peers to join a community advisory board (CAB) to discuss how mindfulness practices could support individuals returning to the community following incarceration.
- The CAB included 7 members (3 women, 4 men; 4 Black, 1 white non-Hispanic, 1 Hispanic, 1 Native American) and 2 formerly incarcerated co-facilitators (1 white woman, 1 black man).
- We met 8 times between Oct 2023-August 2024 for dinner, 1-2 mindfulness practices, and 75-minute facilitated conversations.
- CAB members and their invited guests provided open-ended feedback on a “mini-mindfulness retreat” held in February 2024
- Meetings were recorded and transcribed; these transcripts and written participant feedback were coded using NVivo 14.
- Two primary research questions drove data analysis:
 - **What are the perceived benefits of a regular mindfulness practice after incarceration?**
 - **How can a mindfulness offering maximize benefits and address barriers to engagement?**
- Initial coding scheme for a deductive content analysis drew from the literature on mental health and incarceration, prior interviews/focus groups on people's reentry experiences, and Dan's deep familiarity with the data from participating in all CAB meetings.
- Codes were edited, revised, and removed using an inductive approach as coding progressed, and resulting codes were categorized based on our two research questions.

Research Question 1: What are the perceived benefits of a regular mindfulness practice after incarceration?

Check in with yourself



“

[When] we get in our cars, or we're going somewhere and we're wondering how the weather is outside we turn on the news. **Well, in the morning I find out how the weather is inside, inside of me.** That's what I'm interested in because I'm going to be with me all day.

”

When I think about mindfulness, you know, the first thing that pops in my mind. **Count time** ... I don't care what you're doing. You could have been working out, you could have been writing a letter, you could have been in an argument ... but when it's count time, that means, stop. Stop everything you're doing ... whatever you were doing, that means it's gonna come to a halt and just kind of give yourself time to recalibrate.

“

Calm in the midst of chaos



“

I be all over the place, literally, in my head and outside of my head ... But **this right here helps me to like create that balance** ... It was the first time I was able to exhale.

”

“

When I come here, this is like the only time that I really get a chance to settle down. Like, to just breathe, because I'm always running around.

”

“

In the worst moments, this could be one of those **huge tools to regulate, and put my feet solid on the ground**, of being in the moment to feel.

”

Respond instead of react



“

I was one of them guys, the first thing wrong that you said to me, I was ready to put my foot in your ass. That's me, you know. **But mindfulness brought my anger down. It kind of put some calmness to me. It allowed me to sort through all that stuff in my head.** You know?

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“

I call it **six seconds** before you react to something ... who wouldn't want to get six seconds back from something in their past?

”

Cultivating community



“

You create the community that you want, right? The more we come together and do things like this, that's exactly what we're doing. **We're creating the community that we really want.**

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“

I would say addiction ... it's really about disconnection and not being connected to other human beings, not feeling a part of. This can **connect us to our body, keep us regulated to stay in community.**

”

Research Question 2: How can a mindfulness offering maximize benefits and address barriers to engagement?

STRUCTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

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I was just thinking ... about the moment I walked out of the place ... I didn't have a car and I didn't have a job. And then, **and then life just started hitting.** And I needed to provide housing and food, and this and that for a daughter that I haven't been there for eight years, who was angry at me ... So those little things that you want to do for you to care for yourself, are out the window, because you can't, you have to provide right now and be responsible. **So I don't see myself making commitments that are eight weeks long, you know, eight weeks to take care of myself, if I can't even go to like a doctor appointment.**

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Potential implementation strategies to avoid adding yet another obligation during the reentry period:

PRE-RELEASE

Introduce mindfulness practices during incarceration; connect to an outside community of practice

POST-RELEASE

Partner with systems to allow mindfulness groups to count toward conditions of release

Introduce mindfulness practices in the context of existing community-based reentry groups or programming

DOWN THE ROAD

Offer practices to formerly incarcerated people further along in their reentry journey

CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. A safe, trusting space grounded in relationships



“We can't trust anybody outside of that circle at first. It's, it's almost killed us, literally. So it's like life or death.”

“

There's something so profound ... once those relationships happen, then people say, “Okay, I'll risk coming.” And then once I get there, recognizing that you are genuine ... there's **something so powerful about somebody beyond our own people who can see our value.**

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2. The power of peer facilitation

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You may get it from your perspective. But you know, it's just like telling someone, **unless you've been in there, you're really not going to understand.** You can hear all the stories you want, I'm gonna identify with that person ... this is the expert. You just someone who studied the shit.

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“

When I first got to [prison], you know, late teens, early 20s ... if somebody were to introduce mindfulness to me ... I wouldn't even thought about it ... Now, **if somebody that I respected ... introduced it to me it would have more credibility.** I would have given some thought, you know what I'm saying? Put it like this ... the odds would have been better that I would have embraced it.

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REFERENCES

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