

Mind the gap

Preventing stress-related ill health among future nurses A brief protocol of the intervention

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1 Preface

This is a brief protocol of the intervention *Mind the gap* at trial in "A randomized controlled pilot trial of Acceptance and Commitment Training (ACT) for preventing stress-related ill health among future nurses" (Frögéli, Djordjevic, Rudman, Livheim & Gustavsson, 2015).

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2 Mind the gap: brief intervention protocol

The session-by-session content of the intervention is summarized and described briefly in Tables 1–6 below. The left column of the tables presents the focus topics of the sessions, and the topic content is elaborated upon in the right-hand column. Psychoeducation, group discussions, exercises, mindfulness practice, metaphors, role-playing, worksheets, and homework assignments were used extensively throughout the intervention.

2.1 Session one

In session 1, participants are presented with information about the workings of the human stress reaction. In addition, it is concluded using group discussions, metaphors, and exercises that experiential avoidance is a dead-end street. In order to individualize the intervention, each participant is encouraged to identify personal struggles to target with the material presented in the following sessions. Acceptance is presented as an alternative to experiential avoidance, and mindful awareness is introduced by means of exercises.

Table 1. Mind the gap, session 1.

Introduction	Presentation of group leaders and participants. Practical issues of the group intervention are discussed.
The human stress reaction	Education about the physical, emotional, and cognitive effects of the fight-or-flight response and how human cognition can keep the stress system constantly activated and how this can lead to negative consequences in the long run.
Creative hopelessness	The hopelessness of attempting to eliminate internal events by ordinary problem solving is demonstrated interactively. The consequences of experiential avoidance are discussed. Participants are encouraged to identify for themselves the nature and contexts of their own struggles.
Acceptance as an alternative to struggle	Dropping the struggle is introduced as a more functional alternative to struggling against private events. Acceptance is explained and illustrated using a metaphor.
Mindfulness	Mindful awareness is introduced through an exercise, and participants are encouraged to keep practicing at home throughout the whole course using guidance through available digital recordings if needed.
Homework	Mindfulness practice.

2.2 Session two

In session 2, mindful awareness is further presented together with the core ACT processes of defusion and acceptance. The truth criterion of ACT, i.e. workability, is presented and discussed. Finally, the concept of the human autopilot is discussed, and participants are encouraged to challenge a habit of theirs during the following week.

Table 2. Mind the gap, session 2.

Mindfulness	Illustration of mindfulness and education about the effects, benefits, and empirical evidence of mindfulness practice.
Defusion	Defusion is presented as a way of detaching from cognitions, and different defusion techniques are practiced in the group.
Workability	Discussion about which cognitions to defuse from on the basis of whether they are helpful or not over a short or long time span.
Acceptance	Education about emotions and their role in affecting behavior. Rationale for acceptance is provided and exercises are carried out.
The autopilot	Exercise to show that it is possible to “turn off the autopilot” by choosing to behave differently than our cognitions and impulses tell us. Typical autopilot behaviors of nursing students are discussed together with suggestions for alternative behaviors.
Homework	Mindfulness practice, defusion and acceptance practice, and challenging a habit to turn off the autopilot.

2.3 Session three

In session 3, the importance of sleep and exercise for physical and psychological well-being is presented. The core processes of self-as-context and values-based living are in focus. Using exercises, metaphors, and written materials, participants are aided in reflecting on personal values.

Table 3. Mind the gap, session 3.

Mindfulness practice	Weekly mindfulness exercise.
Exercise and sleep	Education about the impact of exercise and sleep on stress tolerance and general health. Discussion about practical issues and obstacles typical of student nurses.
Observing self	Through experiential exercises and illustrations, the perspective of the observing self is introduced as a stable foundation from which one can explore thoughts and feelings for what they are without involving the brain’s problem-solving mode.

Conceptualized self	The risk of creating self-fulfilling prophecies by holding on too tightly to conceptualizations of one's self is illustrated as well as the way old behaviors and self-concepts can amplify each other. The possibility to let go of hindering self-concepts by trying new behaviors is emphasized.
Values-based living	The benefit of clarifying one's values is explained as well as the difference between values and goals. Exercises to explore one's values are carried out, and participants are encouraged to continue to reflect on their personal values until the next session.
Homework	Mindfulness practice, defusion and acceptance practice, and reflecting on personal values.

2.4 Session four

In session 4, participants build on the values work that was started in the previous session and complete their personal life compass and make a behavior change plan to start taking steps towards increased values-based living. Difficulties in changing habits are highlighted, and the importance of planning SMART (specific, meaningful, adaptive, realistic, and time framed) goals and behaviors is discussed. Using ACT strategies to handle potential obstacles when changing behaviors is further discussed.

Table 4. Mind the gap, session 4.

Mindfulness practice	Weekly mindfulness exercise.
Life compass	The life compass is introduced as a tool to get an overview of personal values. Regular check-ins with the compass are encouraged as a way of supporting values-based living. The importance of keeping a balance between different areas of life to prevent stress-related ill health is discussed.
SMART goals	Formulation of SMART goals and target behaviors are presented, and through the use of working materials participants plan to try a new behavior using their life compass as inspiration.
Handling obstacles encountered when changing behaviors	The habitual nature of humans is discussed as a preparation for the obstacles that will be encountered during the upcoming week in terms of troublesome thoughts and the feelings that are expected when trying out new behaviors. Participants are encouraged to make use of acceptance and defusion strategies.
Homework	Mindfulness practice, defusion and acceptance practice, check-ins with the life compass, and follow-through on the SMART planned behavior for increased values-based living.

2.5 Session five

In session 5, the participants look back on the past weeks' experiences, and the difficulties encountered are discussed along with brainstorming about possible means of overcoming obstacles in order to take steps toward values-based living. Building on this, participants formulate an extended willingness and action plan for the upcoming week. In addition, basic communication skills are modeled and practiced because problems in interpersonal relations are a common source of stress in the everyday life of a student nurse and can be an obstacle to values-based living. Assertiveness skills are practiced because being able to set boundaries is an important stress-management skill.

Table 5. Mind the gap, session 5.

Mindfulness practice	Weekly mindfulness exercise.
Extension of techniques for handling obstacles that are encountered	Based on the participants' experiences from the preceding assignment, the hindering thoughts and feelings encountered when trying new behaviors – as well as strategies to handle them – are discussed in the group. An important distinction is emphasized between accepting the initial natural discomfort that is necessary to experience in order to take valued steps on the one hand and putting up with unpleasant feelings that are experienced in situations that do not serve the purpose of values-based living on the other. Mindful awareness is highlighted as a means of being consciously present at every step and thus being able to recognize deviations from the path of personal values and to adjust course as necessary.
Willingness and action plan	Building on previous knowledge of SMART goals and target behaviors, participants use working materials to formulate an extended action plan including personally chosen ACT techniques for handling natural discomfort.
Communication skills	Communication skills that are effective for conflict management are modeled, role-played, and practiced in pairs using examples from the everyday experiences of a student nurse.
Assertiveness skills	Assertiveness skills are modeled, role-played, and practiced in pairs using examples from the everyday experiences of a student nurse.
Homework	Mindfulness practice, defusion and acceptance practice, check-in with the life compass, follow-through on the planned behavior for increased values-based living using chosen ACT techniques.

2.6 Session six

In the sixth and final session, self-acceptance and compassion are highlighted together with discussions on relapse prevention. As a concluding exercise, participants are encouraged to plan for long-term values-based actions and break them down into short-term steps to help guide their way.

Table 6. Mind the gap session 6.

Mindfulness practice	Weekly mindfulness exercise.
Self-acceptance and self-compassion	The importance of accepting personal flaws, imperfections, and mistakes as well as being compassionate about one's self and accepting the occasional uncomfortable feeling as a part of life are addressed and discussed in relation to the life of a student and that of a nurse. A self-compassion exercise is performed as a group.
Relapse prevention	It is emphasized that learning new behaviors takes time and that setbacks are to be expected. The difference between setbacks and relapse is discussed as well as the natural cycle of ups and downs in life. How to carry on with practice and techniques after the group intervention is completed is discussed.
Future plans	Participants are encouraged to use their action planning skills to set a valued goal further away in time and to break this goal down into smaller goals along the way using the working material. Literature for further reading is presented.

3 Important sources

The content of the intervention Mind the gap was inspired by the following sources:

FORUM & Livheim, F. (2010). To cope with stress and promote health (course material).

Harris, R. (2008). The happiness trap - how to stop struggling and start living. First edition. Boston, Massachusetts, Trumpeter books.

Hayes, S. C., et al. (2011). Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: The process and practice of mindful change. Second edition. New York, Guilford Press.

Hayes, S.C., Bond, F.W., Barnes-Holmes, D., & Austin, J. (2006). Acceptance and mindfulness at work. Applying Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Relational Frame Theory to Organizational Behavior Management. New York: The Haworth Press, Inc.

4 References

Frögéli, E., Djordjevic, A., Rudman, A., Livheim, F., & Gustavsson, P. (2015). A randomized controlled pilot trial of acceptance and commitment training (ACT) for preventing stress-related ill health among future nurses, *Anxiety, Stress, & Coping: An International Journal*, DOI: 10.1080/10615806.2015.1025765.



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