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Engaging Teens and Adults in Mindfulness: The University of California 4-H Mindfulness Retreat

Kendra M. Lewis
University of New Hampshire

Anne M. Iaccopucci
University of California, Davis

Katherine E. Soule
University of California, Davis



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Engaging Teens and Adults in Mindfulness: The University of California 4-H Mindfulness Retreat

Abstract

The University of California (UC) 4-H Mindfulness Retreat was developed on the basis of current research of positive youth outcomes associated with mindfulness. Curricula, resources, and programming were developed to introduce participants to mindfulness to improve overall health. The UC 4-H Mindfulness Retreat provides training and opportunities to teens and adults in the areas of mindfulness, nutrition, physical activity, stress management, relationship building, community connection, and advocacy. We present outcomes, successes, and lessons learned related to developing and executing a statewide mindfulness retreat for youths and adults.

Keywords: [mindfulness](#), [positive youth development](#), [youth–adult partnerships](#), [camp](#), [retreat](#)

Kendra M. Lewis

Youth and Family
Resiliency State
Specialist
University of New
Hampshire
Durham, New
Hampshire
kendra.lewis@unh.edu
[@kendral617](#)

Anne M. Iaccopucci

4-H Healthy Living
Academic Coordinator
University of
California, Agriculture
and Natural Resources
Davis, California
amiaccopucci@ucanr.edu
[du](#)

Katherine E. Soule

Director of
Cooperative
Extension, San Luis
Obispo and Santa
Barbara Counties;
Youth, Families, and
Communities Advisor
University of
California, Agriculture
and Natural Resources
Davis, California
kesoule@ucanr.edu
[@ke_soule](#)

Background

Mindfulness is defined as intentional awareness, being in the present moment, and experiencing life nonjudgmentally (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Mindfulness practices provide youths with stress management tools (Garey, 2017; Taren et al., 2015), community connection (Broderick & Frank, 2014; Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010), and improved focus and concentration (Kuo & Taylor, 2004; Zenner, Herrnleben-Kurz, & Walach, 2014). The University of California (UC) 4-H Healthy Living Initiative is focused on providing learning opportunities that address health in the holistic sense—physical, social, and emotional health. Mindfulness practices support each of these domains. We intentionally designed the UC 4-H Mindfulness Retreat for both youths and adults to be equal participants alongside each other, exemplifying youth–adult partnerships (Jones & Perkins, 2004; Wong, Zimmerman, & Parker, 2010). Through this partnership, both youths and adults build skills in mindfulness, stress management, relationship building, and community connection. We use a retreat setting in accordance with prior research on the effectiveness of this structure for both Extension clientele (e.g., Lesmeister, Green, Derby, & Bothum, 2012; Maginnis & Boeckner, 1996) and staff (e.g., Worker, Hill,

Miller, Go, & Boyes, 2014).

Retreat Structure

We have offered the UC 4-H Mindfulness Retreat for 4 consecutive years. Youths aged 13–19 years and adults spend 3 days in a camp setting promoting their health and well-being. The retreat is focused on developing and maintaining personal skills for leading a healthful lifestyle, which include understanding of mindfulness, stress management, community connection, nutrition, relationship building, breathing exercises, and guided relaxation.

We begin with a welcome activity, establishment of group agreements, and an introduction to mindfulness. We provide sessions in yoga, stress management, and art and opportunities to explore nature. Through reflection time, socialization, and emotional-regulation techniques, participants learn how to apply mindfulness-based practices in their daily lives. Sessions are led by experts with extensive knowledge in the various methods. "Hangout time" sessions are electronics free; we encourage participants to spend time getting to know one another or practicing self-reflection. We provide games to facilitate the hangouts. Each year, participants are given a "welcome" gift, such as a journal, a book about managing stress or anxiety, or a sleep kit (e.g., eye masks, lavender oil). Many activities are being developed for use in youth and teen mindfulness curricula (see Appendix A). A sample agenda is presented in Appendix B.

Assessing the Retreat

An evaluation is administered to attendees each year. The evaluation consists of questions about satisfaction, what participants gained, intentions to use what they learned, beliefs on topics discussed, and confidence to use new skills. All items are rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). In addition, we ask four open-ended questions about the retreat; specifically, we ask respondents to give an example of how their new skills and knowledge in mindfulness can be applied in their daily lives, how the skills and knowledge can be applied in 4-H, what they liked best, and what they would change. Over the 4 years, we have collected data from 110 youths and 48 adults. Table 1 shows the mean ages and years in 4-H for attendees.

Table 1.
Ages and Years in 4-H of Retreat Participants

Variable	Youths	Adults
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Age	14.92 (1.79)	44.66 (10.79)
Years in 4-H	6.75 (2.85)	8.63 (7.06)

We used descriptive statistics to analyze each item from the evaluation. The evaluation varied over the years, though there were several questions that overlapped across all years. Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations, and sample sizes for youths and adults. The number in parentheses after each question indicates the number of years the question was asked. Overall, both youths and adults had positive outcomes from the retreat.

Table 2.
Descriptive Statistics for Youth and Adult Responses to the Retreat Evaluation

Item	Youths			Adults		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	No.	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	No.
Satisfaction with the retreat						
I am satisfied with the 4-H Mindfulness Retreat (4)	4.49	0.65	109	4.51	0.66	47
I want to attend the 4-H Mindfulness Retreat again (2)	4.38	0.74	34	4.55	0.51	20
I will recommend the Mindfulness Retreat to other 4-H members (2)	4.50	0.62	34	4.65	0.49	20
Gains from the retreat						
I feel comfortable talking about social and emotional health issues with others (2)	3.91	0.63	33	4.50	0.76	20
I have a better understanding of how sleep impacts my health (2)	4.26	0.67	34	3.80	0.83	20
I obtained new resources and/or materials about mindfulness to aid in my personal growth (4)	4.34	0.66	108	4.50	0.56	48
I was able to seek out new opportunities, such as new challenges, knowledge, and experiences (4)	4.18	0.61	109	4.26	0.64	47
I learned something new (2)	4.43	0.64	75	4.52	0.58	27
I feel more connected to 4-H teens from across the state (4)	4.19	0.81	110	4.15	0.80	48
I feel more connected to 4-H adults from across the state (2)	3.94	0.65	34	4.32	0.58	19
Future intentions						
I will initiate my plan to make a positive change in myself, county, or club (4)	4.17	0.62	109	4.46	0.58	48
I feel empowered to create positive change in myself (2)	4.12	0.72	74	4.61	0.50	28
I feel empowered to create positive change in my community (4)	3.95	0.76	109	4.31	0.66	48
I will use mindfulness techniques in my daily life (2)	4.07	0.74	75	4.64	0.49	28
I will seek ways to spend more time outdoors (2)	4.33	0.73	73	4.75	0.44	28
I will prioritize getting enough sleep (2)	4.12	0.82	75	4.64	0.49	28
Beliefs						
I think learning to manage my stress is important (2)	4.57	0.62	75	4.89	0.31	28
I think learning to improve my focus and attention is important (2)	4.53	0.60	76	4.81	0.40	27
I think spending time outdoors improves my mood (2)	4.50	0.68	76	4.93	0.26	28
I think getting enough sleep is important (2)	4.54	0.76	76	4.89	0.32	27

Confidence

I am more confident in my ability to <i>identify</i> the techniques I learned at the mindfulness retreat to help me be more mindful in my daily life (2)	4.25	0.66	75	4.57	0.57	28
I am more confident in my ability to <i>use</i> mindfulness techniques to help me manage my stress (e.g., meditation, journaling, art) (2)	4.25	0.64	76	4.50	0.58	28
I am more confident in my ability to <i>help others</i> manage their stress (e.g., meditation, journaling, art) (2)	3.83	0.76	76	4.11	0.63	28
I am more confident in my ability to <i>identify</i> mindfulness techniques to help me manage my stress (e.g., meditation, journaling, art) (2)	4.25	0.64	76	4.44	0.58	27
I am more confident in my ability to <i>use</i> the techniques I learned at the mindfulness retreat to help me be more mindful in my daily life (2)	4.17	0.74	75	4.50	0.58	28
I am more confident in my ability to <i>help others</i> be more mindful (2)	3.85	0.71	75	4.21	0.63	28

Note. The number in parentheses after each question indicates the number of years the question was asked at the retreat. No. = number of respondents for question.

Responses to the open-ended questions suggested that the location of the retreat (UC coast) and the various activities were highlights for both youths and adults, as was connecting with others. One of the most common responses to what participants would change was the length of the retreat; many wanted it to be a longer event. Table 3 shows some open-ended responses.

Table 3.
Youth and Adult Responses to Open-Ended Questions

Question	Youths	Adults
Give an example of one way you can use new skills and knowledge about mindfulness in your life	<p>"Taking breaks and doing a guided meditation, making sure to get good sleep and not pushing myself."</p> <p>"Giving skills back to my 4-H club, or when I am stressed, going back to what I learned."</p> <p>"I can share the information with friends and family so they can be mindful."</p>	<p>"More present for my family. I will be more mindful in my daily life! Take at least 6 deep breaths in my daily life or day to day."</p> <p>"Listen to others more. Be connected to my teaching as I engage with others."</p> <p>"More meditation before & after work. There was one quote that has stayed with me on this retreat "you are enough"."</p>
Give an example of one way you	"Encouraging and helping	"Host a one-day Mindfulness

can use new skills and knowledge about mindfulness in 4-H

other members to be mindful."

day in the county."

"Help other members practice it [mindfulness], incorporate in my general [4-H] meeting."

"Promote mindfulness retreat at our [4-H] club."

"Include it [mindfulness] as a health connection to nature in my outdoor adventures."

"I can pass my new knowledge down to the youth in my county or across the state."

If I could change one thing about the 4-H Mindfulness Retreat, I would change...

"The length, I think it [the retreat] would be better if it was longer."

"I would make it longer."

"I would like more group games, so we can get know each other more."

"Make it longer so that we are able to create bonds & lasting friendships."

"The amount of time. I felt like I needed 2 full days instead of 1."

"Maybe a session focused on how to begin a mindfulness project in each county."

The best part of the 4-H Mindfulness Retreat was....

"I love collaging and meditation on the beach. It really relieved a lot of my stress."

"The location and my son being exposed to mindfulness with his peer group."

"Learning how to stay calm, and having fun."

"Learning and enforcing new techniques. Alone time to journal, watch the ocean. Location and food was very good."

"Going to the beach, breathing (mindful breathing), stars, meeting new people."

"Meeting members from across the state. Watching the kids actively engage in the activities."

Lessons Learned

Table 4 presents lessons learned and considerations for future retreats based on the evaluation results and our experience in planning and implementing the retreats.

Table 4.
Lessons Learned

Aspect of the retreat	Suggestion
Activities	<p>Frame activities so that youths understand the purpose and meaning behind the experiences. For example, we offered several art sessions with the intention that participants would have an opportunity to focus and experience "flow."</p> <p>Be flexible. Participants found some activities less enjoyable than others. For example, both youths and adults struggled with the "silent eating" activity in the retreat's first year. In subsequent years, we adapted this to be a communal mindful eating activity with discussion.</p> <p>Offer alternatives to physical activities. Many participants appreciated tai chi as an alternative to yoga.</p>
Building connections	<p>Facilitate establishment of new relationships. Adults and youths as coparticipants can be challenging when the duo is a child–parent dynamic. When parents are coattendees with their children, we suggest encouraging separate activity selection. This strategy also could foster youths' connections to other caring adults besides their parents or guardians.</p> <p>Consider group size. A smaller group size allows for better integration and community among participants. In the third year, the number of retreat attendees increased to 75. This presented some programmatic challenges in terms of creating an intimate space for participants.</p>
Structure	<p>Vary presenters rather than having one or two people lead the sessions. Having multiple facilitators allows for a more relaxed environment; if there are too few instructors, those instructors may be rushing around and feel overwhelmed going from one activity to the next. Having multiple instructors enables the instructors themselves to model mindfulness as they concentrate their time and efforts on</p>

fewer sessions.

Choose the right location. The location should be conducive to outdoor activities (if used) and provide some sense of seclusion.

Choose the right facility. Self-running facilities can be useful and reduce the amount of work for staff running the retreat. We used a facility that provided all meals, lodging, and grounds keeping. This allowed retreat staff to focus on retreat activities and participants.

Discussion

Participants were satisfied with their experiences at the retreat, wanted to participate again, and reported that they would recommend the experience to others. While activities at the retreat varied across the years, participants reported that they had new experiences, felt more connected to others, and received new resources to aid their personal growth. However, adult participants indicated stronger agreement with statements such as "I feel comfortable talking about social and emotional health issues with others," "I feel empowered to create positive change in myself," and "I am more confident in my ability to *help others* be more mindful." These results suggest that youths may have less perceived ability to incorporate mindfulness practices in their lives. Additionally, these findings suggest that youths need specific training in leading mindfulness lessons with others, not just experiencing mindfulness practices, to feel confident in leading 4-H mindfulness projects in their communities.

Implications

Our reporting on lessons learned from and tools used in planning and implementing the retreat provides others in Extension with guidance in best practices for planning and leading mindfulness retreats. These lessons can be applied to other types of retreats and events as well. When working with youth leaders, Extension professionals should focus on supporting youths in building skills and applying what they have learned in their daily lives as well as in building their confidence to lead lessons and activities. Organizing events where youths and adults are equal participants reinforces the practice of youth–adult partnerships and can help support members in developing positive working relationships.

Additional Mindfulness Programming

The UC 4-H Mindfulness Retreat is one component of the UC 4-H Mindfulness Program. In addition to the retreat, the program consists of (a) a curriculum series (see Appendix A), (b) volunteer/staff training on supporting teens to practice mindfulness, (c) opportunities for teens to lead activities in mindfulness, and (d) an annotated bibliography of children's literature. These components create a comprehensive program for promoting mindfulness in youths, teens, and adults.

Author Note

Kendra M. Lewis was at the University of California, Agriculture and Natural Resources for the first 3 years in

which the project took place and has continued work on the project since moving to the University of New Hampshire.

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Appendix A

UC 4-H Mindfulness Curricula and Resources

1. *Mindful Me* (ages 5 to 8 years old): <https://shop4-h.org/products/mindful-me-a-4-h-primary-mindfulness-curriculum>
2. *Mindful Mechanics* (ages 13 years or older): Contact our second author.
3. *The Annotated Bibliography of Children's Literature*: <https://anrcatalog.ucanr.edu/pdf/8588.pdf>

Appendix B

Sample Mindfulness Retreat Schedule

Friday

- 5:30 – 6:30 pm Check-in and welcome
- 6:30 – 7:00 pm Welcome activity and group agreements
- 7:00 – 7:45 pm Introduction to mindfulness and distractions
- 7:45 – 8:00 pm Snack – mindful eating
- 8:00 – 8:45 pm Activity – intentions for the weekend
- 9:00 – 9:45 pm Hangout time
- 9:45 – 10:30 pm Sleep preparation
- 10:30 pm Lights out

Saturday

- 8:00 – 8:50 am Yoga
- 9:00 – 9:50 am Breakfast – mindful eating
- 10:00 – 11:00 am Stress management
- 11:15 am – 12:15 pm Art sessions
- 12:30 – 1:30 pm Lunch – mindful eating
- 1:45 – 4:30 pm Group activity at the beach
- 4:30 – 5:00 pm Solo reflection
- 5:00 – 6:00 pm Hangout time
- 6:00 – 7:00 pm Dinner – mindful eating
- 7:00 – 8:00 pm Mindful breathing and guided meditation apps for your phone
- 8:00 – 9:45 pm Star gazing
- 9:45 – 10:30 pm Sleep preparation
- 10:30 pm Lights out

Sunday

- 8:00 – 8:50 am Yoga

9:00 – 9:50 am Breakfast – mindful eating

10:00 – 11:00 am Application- what are you taking with you

11:00 –11:30 am Evaluation

11:30 am Depart

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