

**Supporting the Emotional Wellbeing of Fathers through a
Mindfulness Intervention during their Transitions in
Parenthood: A Pilot Study**

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STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

I hereby certify that the work embodied in the thesis is my own work, conducted under normal supervision. The thesis contains no material which has been accepted, or is being examined for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University's Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

Signed: (Donovan Jones)

Date: 18th July 2018

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis and degree to all dads as they go through the many changes when supporting their pregnant partners and transition into parenthood.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As all things begin, so do they end, and my thesis journey has been nothing short of life-changing. The main goal other than the completion of this thesis was to explore the ability to use mindfulness to help men cope with the significant changes that come with becoming a dad.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY	I
DEDICATION	III
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	V
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	1
TABLE OF TABLES	5
TABLE OF FIGURES.....	6
ABSTRACT	7
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	9
1.1 INTRODUCTION.....	9
1.2 BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY.....	9
1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES.....	22
1.4 RESEARCH QUESTION.....	23
1.5 OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS	23
1.6 OUTLINE OF THE THESIS	24
1.7 SUMMARY	26
CHAPTER TWO: INTEGRATED LITERATURE REVIEW	28
2.1 INTRODUCTION.....	28
2.2 SEARCH STRATEGY	33
2.3 PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION.....	35
2.4 LITERATURE SEARCH	35
2.5 DATA COLLECTION	37
2.6 CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE STUDIES INCLUDED.....	39
2.7 STUDY CHARACTERISTICS	39
2.8 VARIATIONS IN MINDFULNESS-BASED STRESS REDUCTION (MBSR).....	48
2.9 ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS OF MBSR INTERVENTIONS	49
2.10 ENGAGEMENT OF PARTICIPANTS IN MINDFULNESS	51
2.11 VARIATIONS IN MEASURING MINDFULNESS.....	52
2.12 MINDFULNESS STUDY LIMITATIONS.....	60
2.13 DISCUSSION.....	61
2.14 SUMMARY OF INTEGRATED LITERATURE REVIEW	62
2.15 JUSTIFICATION FOR THE STUDY.....	64

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY	65
3.1 INTRODUCTION.....	65
3.2 RATIONALE FOR USING THE CHOSEN RESEARCH APPROACHES.....	65
3.3 PHILOSOPHICAL ASSUMPTIONS UNDERPINNING THE CHOSEN RESEARCH APPROACHES..	67
3.4 QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACHES	70
3.4.1 Characteristics of quantitative descriptive designs.....	73
3.5 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACHES.....	73
3.5.1 Characteristics of qualitative descriptive design.....	74
3.6 MIXED METHODS APPROACH.....	76
3.6.1 Characteristics of Mixed Methods Designs.....	77
3.6.2 Strengths and Limitations of Mixed Methods Design	78
3.7 SUMMARY	80
CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH METHODS	80
4.1 INTRODUCTION.....	80
4.2 PILOT STUDY DESIGN	81
4.2.1 Participants and recruitment.....	82
4.2.2 Study setting.....	83
4.2.3 Sample size	83
4.2.4 Intervention	84
EQUIPMENT AND MATERIALS	88
4.2.5 Outcome Measures	89
4.2.6 Data Collection Procedures.....	89
4.2.7 Data Analysis.....	92
4.2.8 Ensuring the Rigor in a Pilot Study.....	94
CONSTRUCT VALIDITY	95
INTERNAL VALIDITY	96
4.3 QUALITATIVE DESCRIPTIVE DESIGN.....	98
4.3.1 Study Setting.....	98
4.3.2 Participants and Recruitment.....	98
4.3.3 Data collection.....	100
4.3.4 Data Analysis.....	101
Preparing the Data for Analysis.....	101
Working with the data.....	101
4.3.5 Ensuring the Trustworthiness of the Qualitative Descriptive Design	102
Credibility.....	103
4.4 CONVERGENT PARALLEL MIXED METHOD DESIGN.....	105
4.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS.....	108

4.5.1 <i>Beneficence</i>	108
4.5.2 <i>Respect for human dignity</i>	109
4.5.3 <i>Justice</i>	109
4.6 SUMMARY	110
CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS	111
5.1 INTRODUCTION.....	111
5.2 DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PARTICIPANTS.....	111
5.3 OUTCOME MEASURES.....	113
5.3.1 <i>Mean baseline and follow-up scores for participants with complete data</i>	113
5.3.2 <i>Statistical comparisons of the mean differences in participant outcomes from baseline to follow-up</i>	114
5.3.3 <i>Depression</i>	114
5.3.4 <i>Stress</i>	115
5.3.5 <i>Mindfulness and Awareness</i>	116
5.4 SUMMARY OF QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS	121
5.6 FINDINGS FROM THE QUALITATIVE DESCRIPTIVE STUDY	122
5.6.1 <i>Introduction</i>	122
5.7 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS.....	122
5.8 PARTICIPATION IN MINDFULNESS	123
5.8.1 <i>Prior mindfulness practices</i>	124
5.8.2 <i>Experiences of mindfulness practices</i>	124
5.8.3 <i>Participants' perceptions of value gained from engagement in the online MBSR program</i>	126
5.8.4 <i>Perceptions of mindfulness and awareness</i>	128
5.9 IMPROVEMENTS TO AN ONLINE MBSR PROGRAM FOR MEN	132
5.9.1 <i>Perceptions of the online MBSR program</i>	132
5.9.2 <i>Participants perceptions for improvement of the MBSR program</i>	134
6.0 SUMMARY OF QUALITATIVE FINDINGS.....	139
CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION	140
6.1 INTRODUCTION.....	140
6.2 DISCUSSION ON THE DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS	141
6.3 DISCUSSION OF THE QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS	141
6.3.1 <i>Effects of the MBSR program on the outcome variables</i>	142
6.4 DISCUSSION OF THE QUALITATIVE FINDINGS.....	145
6.4.1 <i>Participation in mindfulness</i>	146
6.4.2 <i>Improvements to an online MBSR program for men</i>	155
6.5 LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR RESEARCH	160

6.6 CONCLUSION	163
REFERENCES.....	166
APPENDICES	183
APPENDIX 1: INFORMATION STATEMENT	183
APPENDIX 2: QUALITATIVE DESCRIPTIVE MINDFULNESS QUESTIONS	187
APPENDIX 3 ACCESS REQUEST FORM AUTHORISATION LETTER	188
APPENDIX 4 BC03 SHORT CERTIFICATE	189
APPENDIX 5 MINDFULNESS POSTER.....	190
APPENDIX 6 EDINBURGH POSTNATAL DEPRESSION SCALE (EPDS).....	191
APPENDIX 7 KESSLER – 10 (K-10)	192
APPENDIX 8 MINDFUL ATTENTION AWARENESS SCALE	193
APPENDIX 9 PERINATAL MENTAL HEALTH AND MEN.....	194
APPENDIX 10 MINDFULNESS FOR MEN WITH PREGNANT PARTNERS (PART 1).....	195
APPENDIX 11 MINDFULNESS FOR MEN WITH PREGNANT PARTNERS (PART 2).....	203
APPENDIX 12 PERINATAL MENTAL HEALTH AND MINDFULNESS	212

TABLE OF TABLES

Table 1: Five stages of an integrative review adapted from Souza et al.....	34
Table 2: Inclusion and exclusion criteria	36
Table 3: Search strategy used for CINAHL, MIDIRS, Medline and Embase.	37
Table 4: Included Studies.....	41
Table 5: Theoretical and Research Literature.....	42
Table 6: Overview of the MBSR Program.....	89
Table 7: Participant Characteristics.....	113
Table 8 Mean outcome scores at baseline and follow-up.....	114
Table 9 Mean difference in EPDS for complete data and data utilising multiple imputation methods to estimate missing values.....	116
Table 10 Mean difference in K10 for complete data and data utilising multiple imputation methods to estimate missing values.....	117
Table 11 Mean difference in MAAS for complete data and data utilising multiple imputation methods to estimate missing values.....	118
Table 12 Means scores of outcomes at baseline by study completers vs. non-completers.....	119
Table 13 Mean difference in baseline scores between participants who did not complete the study and those who did	119

TABLE OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Article search database flowchart	38
Figure 2: Flowchart of implemented convergent design	108
Figure 3: Comparison of baseline EPDS scores between participants who completed the study and those who did not complete the study	120
Figure 4: Comparison of baseline K10 scores between participants who completed the study and those who did not complete the study	121
Figure 5: Comparison of baseline MAAS scores between participants who completed the study and those who did not complete the study	122
Figure 6 Summary of qualitative findings.....	124

ABSTRACT

It is well recognised that men play a pivotal in supporting their pregnant partners through the perinatal period and beyond. However, there is also evidence indicating that high levels of stress are as prevalent among men as for women in the perinatal period. Ongoing exposure to stress is likely to complicate the changes experienced by men in the transition to parenthood or in adding another child to the family. There is evidence in the professional literature that engagement in mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) programs can decrease stress, anxiety and depression and increase mindfulness in men. However, to date there have been no evaluations of the effectiveness of online MBSR programs for men with pregnant partners. Although the findings of this pilot study should be interpreted with caution, they have a number of strengths when using established and validated tools. A well-constructed pilot study with clear aims and framework affords methodological rigour that can test procedures for their acceptability, to estimate recruitment and retention rates, and to determine sample sizes required in larger research trials. Additionally, undertaking such a pilot study provides the researcher/research team with the opportunity to develop and enhance the skills necessary before commencing the larger study, obtaining preliminary data, evaluating their data-analysis methods and clarifying the financial and human resources required to inform the design of larger, more complex evaluation studies. The aim of the pilot study reported in this thesis was to investigate whether an online MBSR program delivered to men with pregnant partners could decrease levels of depression, stress and anxiety and increase mindfulness in the study participants. The study was also concerned with evaluating participants' experience of involvement in the online MBSR program. The study employed a mixed methods design comprising quantitative and qualitative components to evaluate the outcomes of exposure to a 6-week purpose designed MBSR intervention for men with pregnant partners. The quantitative component of the study involved a pre-test/post-test design with a study population of men with pregnant partners (n=24). Data collection points were at baseline and 6-weeks. Psychological distress was measured using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K-10); depression was measured using the Edinburgh Depression Scale (EPDS); and mindfulness was measured using the Mindfulness Awareness Attention Scale (MAAS). In the qualitative component of the study semi-structured interviews were conducted with two (n=2) consenting participants who had

also contributed quantitative data to the study. The qualitative interviews were transcribed and the data analysed using a form of qualitative descriptive analysis. The findings of the study indicated a reduction in depression from baseline to six-weeks as measured by the EPDS and a reduction in psychological distress from baseline to six-weeks as measured using the K-10. Over the same baseline to six-week timeframe MAAS scores indicated a significant increase in mindfulness and awareness. Qualitative descriptive analysis of the interview data generated two main thematic areas pertaining to 1) the participants' experience of involvement in the MBSR program and 2) suggestions for how the intervention could be tailored to more specifically address the needs of men and how research evaluating online psychosocial interventions could be better designed to attract and retain male participants. In relation to the first main thematic area the following sub-themes were identified: prior mindfulness practices, experiences of mindfulness practices, participant perception of value from engagement in an online MBSR program, and perceptions of mindfulness and awareness. For the second main thematic area the sub-themes were perceptions of the online MBSR programme and perceptions of improvement to the MBSR program. It is anticipated that the findings of the pilot study will contribute to the design of future research evaluating the effectiveness of online psychosocial interventions addressing the needs of men in and beyond the perinatal period.