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# ***Consultant Insight***

## **Keeping a Clear Head: Enhancing Graduate Student Wellness through Meditation and Journaling in the Writing Center**

Janine Morris, Veronica Diaz, and Noemi Nunez

Graduate school can be incredibly stressful, especially in our first or second years when we are often still learning our role within the institution, managing courses, and balancing our time. As we move through our degrees and overcome these early obstacles, we are then left facing challenges related to dissertation writing and finding jobs post-completion. Those of us working as writing center consultants may face additional stressors due to the emotionally supportive and validating roles we play for clients, along with the pressures of being seen as writing authorities (Grouling and Buck; Praxis Blog). To help alleviate some of that stress in the writing center, we argue for implementing self-care strategies between sessions.

Situated at Nova Southeastern University (NSU), a private, non-for-profit research university in south Florida, our Writing and Communication Center (WCC) expanded in 2018 from a college-wide one for first-year composition students to one that accommodates all NSU undergraduate and graduate students. Along with a staff of approximately 36 undergraduate writing consultants, we have 7 graduate student coordinators, 17 graduate writing consultants, and 7 professional consultants. Sessions begin at the top of every hour and last 45 minutes. The final 15 minutes of the hour are meant for professional development and reflection, allowing consultants time to regroup and prepare for their next sessions. We focus our mindfulness practices during these 15 minutes because this is the time when consultants can recharge—avoiding bringing stress or emotions from one session to the next. From personal experience, we believe that when used between sessions,

journaling and mindfulness meditation can help alleviate consultant stress and promote well-being.

### ***Graduate Student Writers & the Emotional Impact of Stress***

Coming to graduate school is an adjustment all its own, especially when balancing faculty expectations and initiation into new discourse communities (Micciche and Carr). The lack of support for graduate student writers does little to help (Hedengren; Whitcomb). Because graduate students might not find appropriate writing support within their own disciplines, if available, some turn to the support offered by writing centers, which can help them navigate the “gap between preparation and expected performance” (Mannon). While graduate student consultants often require the same kinds of support as students outside writing centers, they bear the responsibility of assisting other students. As we’ve witnessed ourselves, the emotional impact of balancing multiple roles can feel overwhelming, and that stress affects productivity and has negative physical and emotional consequences (Krypel and Henderson-King; Mercer et al.; Radcliffe et al.). The emotional impact of stress can also be shared between people, particularly because emotions act as “performative[s] that produces effects” (Micciche 1). The emotions that we experience dwell, potentially affecting those around us. For example, oftentimes when we have writing sessions with clients in the thick of writing their dissertations, their stress and frustration are difficult to ignore. As consultants, we tend to internalize these negative feelings, contributing to our own ever-growing stress. Because writing center consultants are in the business of “listening compassionately to writers’ concerns” (Praxis Blog), we may be susceptible to the emotional impact of our peers’ stress.

Recently, scholars have pushed for increased attention to mindfulness and self-awareness as mechanisms for coping with stress, exploring things like self-kindness (Krypel & Henderson-King; Neely et al.), mindfulness training (Leland), exercising (APA), and listening to relaxing music (Sandstrom and Russo). In what follows, we offer specific journaling and meditation activities that can easily be implemented during the 15-minute windows between sessions.

## ***Journaling***

Journaling is a way to “record personal thoughts, daily experiences, and evolving insights . . . often evok[ing] conversations with the self” (Hiemstra 19). There is much scholarship on journaling as an effective coping mechanism for students dealing with anxiety and stress, and the effects of different modes of journaling have been studied extensively (Greiman and Covington; Hiemstra; Mercer et al.; Ullrich and Lutgendorf).

Whether or not journaling effectively alleviates stress depends heavily on the level of critical reflection one puts into the practice. Magin LaSov Gregg elaborates on this notion by emphasizing the importance of “contemplation” and “discernment” in writing (3), both privately and in writing center interactions, noting that “while contemplation cultivates a writer’s openness and receptivity, discernment fosters a filtering of emotions in order to reach a decision” (3). Other scholars point to the importance of reflection and “expressive writing” when dealing with lingering stress from personal trauma (Lepore et al.; Radcliffe et al.; Ullrich and Lutgendorf). Not only does journaling hone skills such as “problem solving” and “critical thinking[/]reflection,” it has also been shown to foster “stress reduction and [other] health benefits” (Hiemstra 24). When practiced consistently and thoughtfully, journaling can help writers work through a variety of challenging situations.

No matter how busy our days in the center get, we must continuously remind ourselves to build in moments of solace. At NSU’s WCC, the 15 minutes between sessions allow us a chance to decompress. Journaling invites us to reflect on sessions, and work through whatever lingering feelings we may have. Because the 15-minute window can also be spent with our fellow consultants, we sometimes engage in group free writes, as well as find inspiration in our peers’ journaling methods. In those 15-minute breaks (or less!), stressed out consultants could:

- Expressively/reflectively write down or illustrate what is weighing on their mind, alone or with a group of peers.
- Jot down or strike through a handful of tasks. Bullet journals, like those in Rachel Wilkerson Miller’s *Dot Journaling – A Practical*

*Guide*, allow writers to create personalized planners, to-do lists, and diaries.<sup>1</sup>

- Browse through and have a go at some creative prompts—be they written or visual—as seen in Chronicle Books’ *642 Things to Write About* and its visual counterpart, *642 Things to Draw*.<sup>2</sup>
- Color in a pattern from a book, or one found online for free.<sup>3</sup>

What it comes down to is finding what works best individually, as trying to fit into a mold that worked for one person may aggravate students even further. With access to several options that can be done in just minutes, though, one is bound to stick. The various forms of journaling offer consultants the ability to partake in the habit along a spectrum of engagement, allowing each of them to alleviate stressors at their own pace. When journaling, one can release tension through creative expression, while resituating their between-session experiences in writing centers.

### ***Meditation***

Mindfulness, as defined by Jeanette Cohen and Lisa Miller, “is understood as sets of skills that can be developed with practice . . . as a way of being or relating to present-moment experience” (2760). Of the many ways that a person can use mindful practices to de-stress, meditation is one that focuses on removing negative thoughts and self-doubt, and brings one’s mind to a grounded point of view. Researchers have found that meditation can improve sleep and help lower stress levels and blood pressure (Grossman et al.). Implementing mindfulness meditation into their day can help minimize the mental stress that comes with balancing consultants’ many responsibilities. In Sarah Johnson’s “Mindful Tutors, Embodied Writers,” she argues that our working memory is already limited, and in a consultant’s best efforts to have a

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<sup>1</sup> When people make plans to complete tasks, it mitigates the anxiety that manifests when said tasks are left incomplete (LaSov Gregg; cf. Masicampo and Baumeister).

<sup>2</sup> For example, “A person is standing on a soapbox in the park, yelling at passersby. What’s going on?” (Chronicle Books).

<sup>3</sup> Building on the “tactile, interactive nature” of recently popularized adult coloring books, coloring is an activity akin to prompted drawing (Blackburn and Chamley 1).

productive session, they increase their cognitive load. It is easy, then, for a consultant to feel overwhelmed and clutter their minds with frantic thoughts. The goal of mindfulness meditation is to be in the moment, redirect thoughts, and reflect on them in productive ways. With a better understanding of meditation, graduate student writing consultants can practice releasing unnecessary stress by becoming more aware of their present moment, thus decreasing their cognitive load. When asking consultants to adopt a mindfulness practice in their writing center, Elizabeth Mack and Katie Hupp found that it helped them increase patience and diminish overreactions, stay focused, and listen more attentively.

Being willing to reflect on one's thoughts without judgment is an important component of mindfulness meditation. Because mindfulness fosters self-awareness, graduate consultants can benefit from mindfulness meditation because it allows them to be in the moment and maintain an open attitude, especially between sessions. Mindfulness meditation can take place as quickly as a few deep breaths, or as long as time allows.

The following strategies can be done in just a few minutes, and can make a difference for consultants between sessions:

- Practice deep breathing using the 4-7-8 breathing technique. With this method, the individual inhales through their nose for 4 seconds, holds their breath for 7 seconds, and then slowly exhales through their nose for 8 seconds. This can be done for however long needed, and can reduce stress and anxiety (Gotter and Legg).
- Notice five things with their five senses to gain a greater awareness of the surrounding environment. For example, for one minute, a person uses their sense of sight to focus on a particular object and its appearance. For another minute, their focus then shifts to their sense of hearing, noticing the sounds around them and assessing how they are affecting them. This type of activity can allow an individual to take their mind off their current thoughts, while focusing on something in the moment (Waters).
- Conduct a body scan. This exercise is meant for an individual to be in tune not only with their mental state, but with the way their mental stress affects their physical state as well. By taking deep

breaths, acknowledging any tension from head to toes, and removing any negative thoughts, the body scan works toward taming anxiety and reducing stress. (Mack and Hupp).<sup>4</sup>

Mindfulness meditation can help students filter and reorganize multiple thoughts, which can be a strategy for noticing their feelings and responding efficiently to stressful or difficult situations.

### ***Conclusion***

As current and former graduate students, we are often bombarded with stress from both academic obligations and our personal lives. The effects of these stressors can “stick” and affect our writing center work. Stress not only compromises our quality of work, but negatively impacts our health, both in the short- and long-term (Blackburn and Chamley; Krypel and Henderson-King; Mercer et al.; Radcliffe et al.; Ullrich & Lutgendorf). It is important, then, for writing center consultants to take both their mental and physical health into consideration and find coping methods that best suit their needs. Among other habits, journaling and meditation gives consultants the opportunity to squeeze stress-management into their hectic schedules. The activities delineated above can each be done in 15 minutes or less, so students can rest easy knowing that doing them won’t upset the delicate balance they’ve established.

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<sup>4</sup> Some notable apps like Headspace, Calm, and The Mindfulness App are accessible options for individuals to use to check in with themselves and assess their emotions.

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