Breaking Down Barriers to Mental Health Supports for LGBTQ+ Youth through Group Work

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Learning Objectives

Learning Objective 1:

Describe highlights of collaborative community-based group work research that promotes LGBTQ+ youth mental health and enhances coping skills

Learning Objective 2:

Develop a deeper understanding of, and strategies to deliver, culturally-adapted mindfulness group interventions for LGBTQ+ youth
Study Purpose

- This grounded theory exploratory study examined the potential utility of an adapted group mindfulness-based intervention (MBI) for LGBTQ+ youth, 16-29 years.

Study Aims:

1) Practice core mindfulness skills with youth to experience mindfulness — from evidence-based mindfulness-based interventions (e.g., MBSR-Teens; Mindful Self-Compassion).

2) Investigate useful approaches and collaboratively develop an adapted affirmative group MBI with engaged LGBTQ+ youth.
Context: Intersecting Vulnerabilities among LGBTQ+ Youth

- Particularly vulnerable group — tend to exhibit poorer psychological outcomes compared to non-LGBTQ+ youth

- Report significantly higher rates of mental health issues (e.g., co-occurring depression, anxiety, suicidality, substance use) compared to non-LGBTQ+ peers

- Vulnerabilities often rooted in discriminatory, unfriendly and hostile climates in their home, schools and communities

- Despite high rates of challenges, few evidence-informed interventions target the effects of these climates

Early interdisciplinary interventions are greatly needed to prevent the loss of psychological health in LGBTQ+ youth and address risk factors

Benibgui, 2011; Craig & Austin, 2016; Hatzenbuehler, McLaughlin, & Xuan, 2012; Marshal et al., 2008; Scourfield et al.
Context: Need for Community-Based Group Interventions

- Lack of evidence-informed interventions for LGBTQ+ youth that are initiated by/engaged with community

- May be better served by school or community-based programs *created specifically* to minimize their distress

- Community-based interventions may capture LGBTQ+ youth not in other systems of care

- Group approaches widely used and important for LGBTQ+ populations — can help with reducing isolation and fostering a sense of connection to others

Austin & Craig, 2015; Garofalo et al., 1998; Goodenow et al., 2006; Detrie & Lease, 2008; Iacono, 2019; King et al., 2008; Weersing & Weisz, 2002; Weisz et al., 2009
Systematic Intervention Development: Adapt & Evaluate Framework

- Aims to enhance interventions by developing greater cultural congruence for minority groups
- Intervention development from the “ground up”, with the voices and needs of community stakeholders (LGBTQ+ youth)

**First steps (Completed):**
1) Conduct individual interviews/focus groups with LGBTQ+ youth to inform intervention development (sample intervention)

2) Develop a manual (infusion of mindfulness and LGBTQ+ affirmative content) *(draft completed)*

**Next steps:**
3) Open pilot feasibility study
4) “Living” manual refinement
5) RCT/Quasi-experimental design
So, Mindfulness...It’s Popular!
“Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way; On purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.”

Openhearted approach, bringing kindness, self-compassion, friendliness to your experience

-Jon Kabat-Zinn
Founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)
How does it work?

- Cultivate attention to internal and external experiences — cultivating curiosity and openness

- Heightens body awareness — helps detect physiological aspects of stressful states (e.g. body tension, rapid heartbeat, short shallow breath)

- Triggers emotion regulation process — responding to stimulus differently (e.g., noticing it as opposed to reacting to it; internal barometer)

- Increased dopamine release (and other feel-good chemicals)

- Breaks harmful thinking patterns which lead to depression and other mental health challenges
Regular Practice Cultivates 3 Core Skills

- **Concentration**: The ability to focus and stabilize one’s attention

- **Sensory Clarity**: The ability to keep track of the components of sensory experience as they arise, moment-by-moment

- **Equanimity**: The ability to ‘be with’ experience with an attitude of gentleness and balance
Informal vs Formal

- Informal “everyday” mindfulness — focusing your mind to *any activity you are doing* during your day. (e.g. brushing your teeth, cooking, cleaning, etc.)

- Formal mindfulness (meditation) — taking time out of your day to complete a meditation practice (e.g. body scan, mindfulness of the breath, mindful yoga, etc.)
Why Mindfulness for LGBTQ+ Mental Health

- Growing body of literature strongly suggests that empirically supported group MBIs for youth — including marginalized youth — provide solid mental health coping skills, and enhances self-compassion and resiliency

- Shown to reduce reports of co-occurring symptoms commonly reported in LGBTQ+ youth literature (e.g. depression and anxiety)

- Some research with LGBTQ+ communities — mindfulness and self-compassion beneficial in resolving psychological distress, supporting coming out process, addressing psychosocial stressors

(Chandler, 2013; Crews, 2012; Fritzges, 2015; Gayner et al., 2012; Kashdan, 2010; Pachankis, 2014; Tan, 2008; Semple, Lee, Rosa, & Miller, 2010; Semple & Burke, 2012; Tan & Yarhouse, 2010; Yadavaia & Hayes, 2012)
While not prescriptive, LGBTQ-affirmative practice provides general principles:
• affirm LGBTQ identity
• explore oppression and discrimination
• increase stigma-related coping
• a flexible approach that can incorporate mindfulness-based skills training

Recent promising studies have shown affirmative group interventions for LGBTQ+ youth associated with significant increases in self-efficacy, self-esteem, proactive coping; improved depression, well-being
• however, further systematic investigation is needed as research in this area is relatively new

Austin & Craig, 2015; Craig & Austin, 2016
Research Questions

1) What are the overall experiences of LGBTQ+ youth while participating in a sample affirmative mindfulness-based group intervention?

2) What mindfulness skills and affirmative content might LGBTQ+ youth want to utilize in an affirmative mindfulness-based group intervention?
4 focus groups

6 semi-structured individual interviews

Purposive sampling: 30 LGBTQ+ youth (ages 16-29)

Each focus group session 2 hours in length — same youth participated in a series of 2 group sessions — Sherbourne Health, Toronto

LGBTQ+ youth participated in a simulated affirmative MBI (group and individual formats)
Participants

- Sample (N=30) — 57% = 16-19yrs.; 43% = 20-29 yrs.

- All youth from Greater Toronto Area (urban and suburban)

Gender Identity:
- Woman (24%); Non-binary (24%); Man (16%); Transgender (12%); Two-Spirit (12%); Gender fluid (8%); Gender queer (4%)

Sexual Identity:
- Gay (30%); Queer (25%); Bisexual (20%); Pansexual (15%); Lesbian (10%)

Ethnicity/Racial Identity:
- Black (18%); White (41%); Indigenous (14%); Latin American (9%); South East Asian (4.5%); South Asian (4.5%); Middle-Eastern (4.5%); Mixed ethnic/racial identity (4.5%)

Categories are non-mutually exclusive
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Data Collection

- **Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) —** 26-item measure of one’s level of mindfulness and self-compassion,
  - suitable for ages 14 and up

- The SCS administered at beginning (n = 30) and end (n = 19) of the sample affirmative MBI to available SGMY. Some SGMY not available (e.g., had to leave a bit early; declined completing the measure; incomplete measure)

- Utilizing SCS allowed for complementing the qualitative data
Mindfulness-Based Practices Utilized

Some exercises based on MBSR-T

- Mindfulness and the five senses
- Bringing mindfulness to routine tasks
- Paying attention to your breath

Exercises based on other programs
(Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy; Mindful Self-Compassion; Making Friends With Yourself)

- Gratitude activity
- 3-Minute Breathing Space
- Soothing Touch (heart, hand, face, etc.)
- Self-Compassion Break
Data Analysis

- Grounded theory analytic techniques used to determine patterns and themes in the data (Charmaz, 2014)

- Independently manually coded qualitative data (multiple coders) using open and focused coding, and constant comparison within and across data

- SCS data were analyzed to determine differences in mindfulness and self-compassion (i.e., mean scores for pre and post testing) using a paired sample t-test
Results

Self-Compassion Scale (Score of 1-5)

*Almost Never = 1; Occasionally = 2; About Half Of The Time = 3; Fairly Often = 4; Almost Always = 5*

*(N=30) Low to Moderate levels of:*

- Overall Self-Compassion = 2.6/5
- Mindfulness = 2.8/5
- Self-Kindness = 2.9/5
- Common Humanity = 2.7/5

*Potential opportunity to increase mindfulness and self-compassion among LGBTQ+ youth!*
LGBTQ+ youth participants (n = 19) reported significantly increased mindfulness (2.5 to 3.1) and self-compassion (2.3 to 2.9) at post testing.

Adapted exercises for LGBTQ+ youth shown to be beneficial for increasing mindfulness and self-compassion.
Results

Overall *positive and beneficial* experience with mindfulness:

- “But mindfulness can really yank you back and give you an objective view of what's going on”

- “It really brings you out of it…when getting lost in your own feelings”

- “It was definitely the first time that I, um, actually got something out of mindfulness”
Three major themes emerged:

(1) The importance of psychological safety when practicing mindfulness

(2) The importance of cultivating *awareness* and *acceptance* to increase resilience and coping among LGBTQ+ youth

(3) Explicit focus on self-compassion essential for an LGBTQ+ youth affirmative mindfulness program
Theme 1

The importance of psychological safety when practicing mindfulness

- Trauma-informed approach: perception of this lacking in traditional MBIs

  - “I think that the fact that you took this approach it can be intersectional to other groups who carry trauma like for instance for me being Indigenous”

  - “I’ve done mindfulness groups before but never takes into account my specific experiences of being trans”
The importance of psychological safety when practicing mindfulness: *practicing mindfulness in an LGBTQ+-affirming group context for LGBTQ+ youth*

**Possibilities:**
- Providing various objects to focus on (e.g., feet, stone, breath, sounds)
- Shorter practices (1-3 minutes; 3-5 minutes)
- Option to keep eyes open
- Establishing guidelines for safety
- Consistent stressing of option to opt out
- Explicit naming gender/sexual minority stress
Theme 2

The importance of cultivating awareness and acceptance to increase resilience and coping

- “Something I do a lot when I have a particular thought or bad feeling, that you can’t get over, you kind of let it wash over you, accept it, allow it to pass (referring to LGBTQ+ stigma)”

- “But when I accept and allow things to be, and think something over, it’s not as unpleasant anymore, I can move forward” (referring to transphobia)
Explicit focus on self-compassion essential for an LGBTQ+ youth affirmative mindfulness program

Sub-themes:

1) exploration of how to foster self-compassion despite anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination, internalized and intersectional marginalization (e.g., racism, sexism)

2) mindfulness allowing for direct embodied experience with self-compassion
Explicit focus on self-compassion essential for an LGBTQ+ youth affirmative mindfulness program

- "As queer people, we need to talk about self-love and how to give ourselves compassion in these groups”

- “I feel like I bring soothing touch, kindness and awareness to pain with breathing and touching my face and my chest”
Results

Which LGBTQ+ and affirmative topics would you like to see covered?

- coming out
- intersectionality
- explore actions that empower LGBTQ+ youth (e.g., advocacy, education)
- social support networks
- sexual health
- affirming activities and goals
Conclusions

- **Early intervention:** May support LGBTQ+ youth with shifting negative perceptions, facilitating healthier behaviors, increasing a sense of self-compassion when experiencing stress.

- Overwhelmingly positive response regarding mindfulness exercises within an affirmative therapeutic group context.

- Importance of taking a trauma-informed approach.

- Integrating mindfulness, self-compassion and affirmative practices may provide one effective approach for working with vulnerable LGBTQ+ youth.

- Clinical and conceptual guidance for use in various clinical community practice contexts
- Adaptable approach to orient LGBTQ+ youth to the present and enhance self-compassion and well-being
Much gratitude to:

Amazing LGBTQ+ youth participants

Amneet Bhogal (Youth Peer Engagement Coordinator)

A special thank you to International Association for Social Work with Groups for funding this research project through the SPARC Program:

IASWG International Association for Social Work with Groups, Inc.
THANK YOU!

Questions?
Ideas?

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http://socialwork.utoronto.ca/programs/phd-programs/phd-students/gio-iacono/

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