



IREM® From the Front Lines Podcast

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Aveni Center Research on Koru Basic Mindfulness Curriculum

Todd:

Welcome to another edition of From the Front Lines, where we discuss both the day-to-day, and one-of-a-kind issues facing real estate managers. In this episode of From the Front Lines, Dr. Erin Hopkins discusses her research on how Koru Basic Mindfulness curriculum can support property managers. The research was a project funded by an IREM Foundation grant from the J.T. Aveni Center for Research. Dr. Hopkins, thanks for joining us today.

Dr. Hopkins:

Yeah, thank you for having me and thank you for the opportunity. This has been really exciting research to conduct. And thank you to the J.T. Aveni for Research and the IREM Foundation.

Todd:

Now there's been an increase in awareness of mindfulness, particularly in wellness fields. What inspired you to pair mindfulness research with the property management field?

Dr. Hopkins:

Yeah, it really started back in 2015. And to be completely transparent, I was struggling with infertility issues. And so I was dealing with a large amount of stress, and I didn't really know where to go with all of it. And I had heard of meditation before, but I finally decided to give it a try. So I Googled it and found a local group and tried it for the first time back in 2015. And it really seemed to be one of the only things that truly helped me during this really difficult time. And I really saw so many benefits that I realized I'd really like to see if my students could benefit from a mindfulness practice, especially because they're going into the property management field, which is demanding and dynamic at the same time. So in 2019, I signed up to become a Koru-certified teacher and spent three days at the University of Richmond where they were doing a group training. And there I learned how to teach the curriculum, three days there, and then I had to teach it twice to my students and I had to feel myself doing it in order to become certified. So it's a year-long process to become certified and so I taught my first session the beginning of spring 2020, which was right before COVID hit. I literally finished my last session the last week before we knew we weren't coming back for the rest of the semester. And I specifically integrated into the human resources and relationship module within the property management operations course I teach at Virginia Tech. And I stressed there within that module that intrapersonal skills are just as important or maybe even more important than interpersonal skills when we talk about professional development and human resources and relationship management. So this COVID mindfulness curriculum is one way to tap into cultivating those intrapersonal skills. So, started this back in spring 2020. The response to this was overwhelmingly positive. So I continued to do it and I continued to receive positive feedback. Now, of course, it doesn't hit for everyone and it may just be

planting seeds. So for example, the first time I taught this back in spring in 2020, I had one student out of 60 students who didn't really participate much in class that first time I taught it. But then just this past semester, so spring 2024, four years later, I receive a LinkedIn note from him saying thank you for introducing him to this mindfulness practice as he recently started using it. So it's kind of interesting either some students will take to it immediately, some students, you know, might not have a huge interest right then or there. But I just thought that was a really interesting example to share that maybe at the time it's not helpful, but just something, again, another tool to put into your toolkit that might be helpful to help manage stress and increase your well-being. So, you know, with all that said, my students really seem to be benefiting from it and many continue to note the value of it on my teaching evaluations. Like thank you for caring about our mental health and approaching professional development from an intrapersonal perspective as well because I think a lot of times we talk about networking and interviewing, mentoring, and of course all that's important, but I think intrapersonal can get missed sometimes. So, you know, anecdotally, I saw that our property management students were benefiting from this practice. So I wanted to conduct a study to see if this could actually help property management professionals as well, since they, you know, they handled the day-to-day operations of a property doing all kinds of things, right, like human resources, relationship management, finance, accounting, maintenance, risk management, you know, marketing, leasing, that's just naming a few, right? So they're doing a lot on property all day. And you know, this requires communication across a real diverse network of people and tasks, which can cause stress and then also negatively affect their well-being. So long answer, but I think all important to kind of share what brought me to this particular interest to conduct this study. So that's really what inspired me to pair mindfulness research with the property management industry.

Todd:

[How is Koru Basic Mindfulness curriculum different from other mindfulness practices that have been studied?](#)

Dr. Hopkins:

Well, probably the most well-known mindfulness intervention in the scientific literature is MBSR, which stands for Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction. So this program was developed by John Cabot Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical School all the way back in 1979 to actually help patients manage chronic medical conditions by managing their stress and improving their quality of life. And a little bit of background about what MBSR is because I think that will help us to inform what Koru is and get a sense of the similarities and differences. So the MBSR is an 8 week program that consists of two to 2 1/2 hours of group based classes. And that could be, you know, all together online, all together in person. And it's done with the trained teacher. And then there's also a 45 minute of a daily formal home practice along with this. And it also comes with a day-long mindfulness retreat. So it's pretty time intensive, and much of this MBSR program focuses on learning how to mindfully attend to the bodily sensations through the use of body scans, gentle stretching, and yoga mindfulness exercises as examples. But also discussions and practices geared toward applying mindfulness awareness to daily life experiences, including dealing with stress, right? We all deal with stress no matter what industry we're in. So although the MBSR program was initially used to treat chronic pains in patients, right, Jon Kabat-Zinn is an MD, it's now been applied to many other populations of adult patients and community members. So it's really being used across various contexts, which has been interesting. So, you know, over the decades, MBSR has kind of been the gold standard and it's stimulated the development of many other mindfulness programs, one of them being the Koru Mindfulness Program, which is the intervention used for this study. So a little bit about the Koru Mindfulness Program. It's shorter than the traditional

MBSR program that I just walked us through, but the Koru curriculum is somewhat modeled on MBSR, but again, shorter so that participants can feel that they can commit to it. So a little bit of background, it was developed at Duke University back in the 2000s by Holly Rogers and Margaret Maytan, and it was actually developed out of their counseling center at Duke to help students with stress and their well-being. So a little bit of the structure so we can kind of get the, you know, similarities and differences between MBSR and Koru. The Koru curriculum has three available courses, Koru Basic, which is the one that was used for this study, Koru 2.0, and then Koru Retreat. And the Koru Basic Curriculum structure consists of four weekly 75 minute classes with each class introducing a short opening meditation, a check-in to kind of see how their practice is going, a mind body skill and mindfulness meditation practice. And so some of the skills here include dynamic breathing, belly breathing, walking meditation, guided imagery, and then eating meditation. And then the guided meditations include a body scan, a Gotha, which is kind of like a poem you repeat to yourself internally, labeling thoughts and labeling feelings. And then during the four weeks, participants are asked to fill out a daily log with 10 minutes of formal practice, a quick reflection on the practice, and then something they're grateful for that day. So that's Koru basic, which is the what was used for this study. There's also Koru 2.0, and it's similar to Koru Basic, but the daily meditation practice is extended. And then there are some other practices in there like a seated yoga, a loving kindness meditation, and a silent retreat experience. And then the Koru retreat is a half-day experience that offers an immersive mindfulness experience, including exposure to various meditations as well as like a Dharma talk. So I mentioned that Koru was first developed in 2005 and then the Center for Koru Mindfulness was actually created in 2014. And just to give a sense of how big this has become, there's now approximately 1500 trained teachers, including myself. There's actually multiple people at Virginia Tech that are trained Koru instructors across over 300 academic institutions across the world and across context, including agencies as well as older adults. So although it's been started in a higher education context, this particular program as well has been extended across various other contexts.

Todd:

The effects of mindfulness have been previously studied in relation to stress reduction, anxiety, depression, employee satisfaction, and life satisfaction to name a few. Where has mindfulness practice had the greatest impact on these measures of well-being?

Dr. Hopkins:

Yeah, that's a great question. And there have been a variety of mindfulness-based interventions across various contexts, kind of as I alluded to earlier. So when we look at the mindfulness-based interventions in the workplace, there have been studies conducted across industries. So this is from doctors to waiters to teachers, to analyze the impact of various mindfulness-based interventions in the workplace. And I think it's interesting to note that some researchers have conducted reviews of, because there's quite a few existing studies in the literature for this. So some researchers have conducted reviews of existing studies that have focused on stress and well-being within the workplace. And I just want to go through a few of them just to give you a flavor for first of all, how much literature is out there and what's been found right once we analyze it all, right? Because there's a lot and a lot of studies looking at this. So for example, there was one review done that reviewed 153 papers which consisted of 12,471 participants on the topic of mindfulness and its effects of well-being in the workplace. And the researchers find that mindfulness was associated with 31 different measures of positive well-being and that the majority of the studies illustrated beneficial outcomes related to mindfulness-based interventions. Right. We shared two of them. MBS aren't covered, but there's plenty of other ones as well. Another review looked at 75 primary studies and found that employees that participate in mindfulness-based interventions in the

workplace tend to handle stressful events more skillfully and improve their well-being. However, the researchers in this study also found that employees find it important to feel safe and engaging with the mindfulness-based intervention in the workplace setting, as well as understanding the link between the mindfulness-based intervention to existing goals and practices. So I think that's interesting to note as well. There was one other study I want to note that reviewed 24 studies related to mindfulness-based interventions and the impact of employee well-being specifically on doctors. And I know we're not talking about doctors right now, but we're talking about the property management profession. But the reason I want to bring this up is that one of the challenges, they found benefits, right? They found mostly positive effects of mindfulness-based interventions in the psychological and occupational domains of well-being. But what's interesting is one of the things that they found is that the challenges to time and feasibility within the sector can deter the application of daily mindfulness practice, right? So the idea of like things are so busy, where do you find the time? I think that definitely would apply to the property management industry as well. Again, really no studies have done this yet, but when I read that study, I thought I wonder what would happen if you did that within the, that could be an issue in the property management industry as well. So that's mindfulness-based interventions in general. But when we look specifically at the Koru Mindfulness Program, which is the intervention we used for this study, 21 measures have been reviewed within seven existing studies and six out of the seven studies use the perceived stress scale. And that's what one measurement to measure perceived stress. And so when they use this scale to evaluate the impact of the Koru Mindfulness Program on perceived stress, they've all been positively impacted by the Koru Mindfulness Program to reduce perceived stress. However, Koru hasn't been tested in the workplace yet, let alone the property management industry workplace, nor could I find any literature on any other mindfulness-based intervention in the property management industry. So there's really no data up to the study to speak about specifically, but that's one reason why the study was undertaken.

Todd:

How did your research complement or contrast with these previous research findings?

Dr. Hopkins: Yeah, the perceived stress scale that I just mentioned about that was one of the measures I used in this study as well. And that's been used both in employee well-being studies evaluating the impact of mindfulness-based interventions as well as with the vast majority of existing Koru mindfulness intervention studies. And the results of this current study are in line with previous studies that examined other mindfulness-based interventions as well as specifically the existing studies on the impact of Koru mindfulness on perceived stress. So this preliminary study shows that the perceived stress scale score improved significantly from baseline to follow up in the four week period where the group participated in the Koru Basic Mindfulness intervention. So this suggests that the Koru Basic Mindfulness curriculum may have positive effects on lowering stress in this participant group which with the vast majority were on site property management professionals within an affordable housing organization. So this is in line with previous Koru Mindfulness program research studies showing a decrease in perceived stress as well as the majority of studies using this particular stress measure with other mindfulness-based interventions. What's interesting is the changes in scores. Another scale that was used for this study was the employee well-being scale, which has three dimensions. It looks at life well-being, workplace well-being, and psychological well-being. That scale was used from baseline to follow-up just like this perceived stress scales, perceived stress scale, which I just mentioned. And what's interesting with this one is that the results were not significant and this varies from the majority of the research. So specifically, the life well-being dimension scores increased but not significantly, while workplace and psychological well-being dimension scores were actually lower after the

intervention, but not significantly lower. So all three domains were insignificant statistically. So again I mentioned that this result's somewhat surprising as most of the existing literature does show no significant improvement in employee well-being. But I do want to note that there have been a few mindfulness-based intervention studies that have used other well-being scales and have found non-significant and even a decrease in well-being post mindfulness-based intervention. So for example, specific to the previous Koru Mindfulness Program research, there was a study done in 2022 where the researchers didn't see effects on sleep quality, depression and then three well-being components on the psychological well-being scale, including personal growth, positive relationships and purpose in life within their college student example. And then in the mindfulness-based intervention study focus that was just published this year in 2024, researchers found little to no change in perceived stress, symptoms of depression, anxiety, resilience, well-being and sleep. And then in 2019, there was another study done that their low dose mindfulness group actually saw decreases in well-being. So again, the majority of research shows significant increase in well-being statistically, but there are some studies that didn't show, and this study lines up with those few studies that again did not show a significant interaction between mindfulness, this particular mindfulness-based intervention and the employee well-being scale. But I do want to mention, you know, so when you see when you see a study and there's no significance statistically, you try to think about why that might be and you look at existing literature to kind of, you know, back up why this might be a reason. So there could be a variety of reasons. First thing to think about is maybe the mode of delivery can impact the results as this study was conducted online synchronously, meaning that we are all virtual, but we all joined at the same time. But this has been shown sometimes to make it difficult for participants to engage with the material versus an in-person mode of delivery. So for this study, the participants were joining from multiple locations and states. So it wouldn't have been possible for us to meet in person. But again, a future study you might want to you know do it in person to see what if the results will vary. And also too I mentioned the different mindfulness-based interventions. This is a four-week program. The MBSR is an 8-week program. So perhaps the dose of this mindfulness-based intervention might not have been enough to significantly impact participants as a relationship has been shown between the number of meditations completed and the amount of benefit. So again, people may have come and joined in for the hour when we did it as a group, but they may not have completed many or any of the meditations on their own time. You don't know, right. So that might have been one reason that the employee well-being measure did not come out significant. Or you know, we talked about previous literature saying that it was important for employees to feel supported in a supportive environment for the mindfulness-based intervention. Again, they may not have felt that way. So again, that would have been a critical piece to experience the benefits of a mindfulness program.

Todd:

So what are the key takeaways from your research?

Dr. Hopkins:

Yeah, the findings of the study confirmed previous peer-reviewed academic studies on the effectiveness of mindfulness-based interventions related to perceived stress. So we know stress in the workplace hurts the health and well-being of the property management professionals. It can also be detrimental to the property management organization. So based on these findings, mindfulness-based interventions may have a beneficial impact on perceived stress and decision-makers in the property management industry are recommended to explore mindfulness-based interventions as part of their human resources strategy. It's also important to note though, that more research is needed in the property management industry that considers other mindfulness-based interventions. There's plenty to choose from across various validated scales, right? This

study took into account the perceived stress scale, which is a validated scale, and the employee well-being scale, which is a validated scale. But there's plenty others, right? So doing studies that look at other scales, whether that be at the anxiety and depression scale, mindfulness scale, there's plenty to choose from: worry, rumination, different components of well-being and stress. And then, you know, also doing this across property management organizations, as this was, you know, within one property management organization. But this was a preliminary study that does show potential benefits of a mindfulness-based intervention for property management professionals. But more research is needed, right? This was the first exploratory study looking at this.

Todd:

Did anything surprise you in conducting the research or in the conclusions of your research?

Dr. Hopkins:

Yeah, gathering a large enough cohort to make the study meaningful was difficult. So I think it's hard sometimes to sell the time commitment of this, especially if you're not familiar with the practices and you know, once the participants did agree to the time commitment, gathering the data was difficult. It could be a big-time commitment already for property management professionals, not only just do the practices, but to keep a log and to complete that pre-test and post-test to get data because they have a lot on their plate. So that was that was difficult. But I do think the conclusions of the research remind us that there are potential benefits to these types of practices, but they're not a panacea for employee stress and well-being, right? There are certainly other wellness practices that may resonate more with employees as well as focusing on their day-to-day activities by altering, you know, existing processes, structures, and schedules that may lower employee stress and improve their well-being. So mindfulness practices are just one tool within the toolkit to think about when considering human resource strategies.

Todd:

What would you like to see in future research using the Koru Basic Mindfulness curriculum or other mindfulness curricula?

Dr. Hopkins:

Yeah, a few things come to mind here. First, the vast majority of the study participants in this study were composed of on-site personnel. So that's going to make it difficult to generalize the results to the property management industry as a whole. So it would be interesting for a future study to examine maybe the impact of a mindfulness-based intervention across employee roles, so you could compare and contrast results to that of on-site property management employees. And I also think I mentioned this earlier, but the mode of delivery would be interesting to experiment with. So conducting a future study that investigates the impacts of an in-person workplace mindfulness-based intervention could also be, you know, for perceived stress and employee well-being of property management professionals. But overall, I believe this is a great first step for an exploratory study on mindfulness-based interventions in the property management industry. But more research is needed in the industry that considers other mindfulness interventions across various validated scales and property management organizations.

Todd:

Thanks for joining us, Dr. Hopkins.

Dr. Hopkins:

Yeah, thank you for this opportunity.

Todd:

Our listeners can read Doctor Hopkins research report on Koru Basic Mindfulness curriculum on the IREM Foundation website at iremfoundation.org/causes/research. Visit irem.org for more knowledge to take on real estate management's most dynamic challenges. That's [www dot I R E M dot ORG](http://www.irem.org).