

(EDUCATION)³: AN EXPLORATION OF EMOTION, EMBODIMENT, AND
EMPATHY

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Abstract

After working as a high school teacher in Ontario for a decade, I began to notice that my students' capacity for empathy was becoming steadily more complicated. I decided to return to school myself with a focus on the relationship between empathy and embodied perception to explore how education systems could better support this type of emotional learning in the future. This research explores the role of the body in empathy with the goal of developing a pedagogical tool using storytelling. The study engaged participants in a series of mindfulness training sessions to explore whether empathy, viewed as a mode of responsiveness – a state of being – rather than a mode of cognitive access, can be enacted through non-judgmental observation of internal and external bodily sensation while engaging with narrative, a practice which I am calling *willfully embodied perception*. Findings indicated that a modest majority of participants did experience an increase in empathy and in empathy-motivated helping behaviour after completing the mindfulness sessions. Characterizing empathy as a mode of responsiveness allows it to function as a basis for ethical action, with potential benefits for individual students and the community as a whole. If education systems can begin to view an empathic mode of engagement as an equally valuable alternative to an analytical mode of engagement, especially in the study of literature, I believe students will gain a more meaningful, holistic, and supported learning experience. These types of learning environments will be of particular importance as we begin to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic in order to support today's youth, who have had so much of their lives disrupted over the past two years.

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

a. Emotional Safety

An examination of trends in data taken from American adolescents and young adults has shown that loneliness, depressive symptoms, major depressive episodes, anxiety, self-injury, and suicide rates are all climbing (Twenge, 2017, p. 302) and have been linked to social media and electronic device use (p. 292). The social conditions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated these already worrying trends, since so much of our lives have been relegated to the screens of electronic devices. Cost et al. (2021) found that “across all six domains [of mental health]¹, greater stress from social isolation, including both the cancellation of important events (e.g., graduation ceremonies, school trips, vacations) and the loss of in-person social interactions [as a result of COVID-19 restrictions], was strongly associated with deterioration in mental health across all domains” (n.p.). This demonstrates the extreme importance of school, milestone celebrations, recreational activities and social interaction for youth, which should be taken as a warning that this group may need more support than others as pandemic restrictions begin to finally ease.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, young people today seem much more concerned with personal safety compared to previous generations, in particular their emotional safety (Twenge, 2017, p. 149), which compounds the ethical stakes of empathizing with the emotional lives of others (p. 174). The idea of emotional safety, which involves preventing bad experiences, sidestepping uncomfortable situations and

¹ According to Cost et al., 2021, the six domains of mental health are: depression, anxiety, irritability, attention, hyperactivity, and obsessions/compulsions (n.p.)

avoiding people with different ideas, is a relatively new concern for young people (p. 153). The problem with avoiding difficult situations is that opportunities to develop emotion regulation, defined by Guendelman et al. (2017) as “all the conscious and non-conscious strategies we use to increase, maintain or decrease one or more components of an emotional response, including implicit, nonconscious, and automatic processes, as well as explicit, voluntary and conscious mental processes” (p. 5), are lost. Studies have shown that emotion ‘dysregulation’ can lead to depression and self-injury (Daly et al., 2015, p. 1), and has been recognized as a core psychopathological factor in many other psychological disorders such as anxiety and eating disorders (Guendelman et al., 2017, p. 2). In all these mental illnesses, there is “a sense of being cut off - and often a craving to be cut off - from one’s feelings, and from embodied existence, a loss of depth of emotion and capacity for empathy” (McGilchrist, 2019, p. 406).

There are many emotion regulation strategies; some have a positive influence on mental health and some have a negative influence. Strategies such as avoidance, rumination and suppression have been associated with anxiety, depression and eating disorders (Guendelman et al., 2017, p. 2). Contemporary trends among youth that involve avoiding situations that are uncomfortable, ruminating about perceived persecution or problems on social media platforms, and attempting to suppress those with different perspectives through cancel-culture suggest a correlation between these behaviours and the current mental health crisis, since the behaviours reflect maladaptive strategies of emotion regulation.

It is important to note that these maladaptive strategies focus solely on disembodied mechanisms; they ignore the role of the physical body in emotion

generation, experience, and regulation. Mindful emotion regulation strategies, on the other hand, such as meditation, incorporate sensory-perception and interoceptive-proprioception (Guendelman et al., 2017, p. 14) thereby situating emotion regulation as an embodied process (p. 16) rather than a purely disembodied one. Disembodied emotion regulation strategies aim to change the content of emotional states; mindfulness-focused strategies focus on changing the *relationship* to emotional states rather than the content itself. By changing the perspective from which emotions are experienced, mindful emotion regulation encourages acceptance and curiosity about the experience rather than avoidance, rumination or suppression (p. 16).

Khoury et al. (2017) suggest that the notion of embodiment is a common denominator among varying conceptualizations of mindfulness (p. 1160). Embodiment theory postulates that the body functions as a constituent of the mind rather than a perceiver or actor serving the mind, and thus, is directly involved in cognition (p. 1166). Studies have shown that the increased body awareness facilitated by embodied mindfulness is related to subjective well-being, empathic responses, resilience, stress-reduction, and enhancement of self-care (p. 1165). Since embodied mindfulness techniques can help increase the ability to empathize in individuals with occupations that tend to demand high levels of empathy, such as those working in healthcare (p. 1165), perhaps they can have a similar effect on youth (children and adolescents).

b. A Note on Empathy and Compassion

When trying to pin down a definition for empathy for the purposes of this research, I came to the realization that it is a slippery term. Emotion researchers “generally define empathy as the ability to sense other people’s emotions, coupled with the ability to

imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling” (Greater Good Magazine, Berkley), while psychologist Paul Ekman differentiates three different forms of empathy. According to him, these types are: cognitive empathy or perspective-taking (knowing how the other person feels and what they might be thinking); emotional empathy (physically feeling someone else’s feelings, as though the feelings are contagious); and compassionate empathy, which Ekman describes as a skill related to the acquired knowledge that we are all connected (Goleman, 2008).

There is as much debate about how empathy is generated; there are many constrasting accounts. For example, both simulation theory and phenomenological theory argue that empathy is a “primary, embodied, non-inferential way of knowing another’s mental state;” however, simulation theory argues for embodied simulation as underlying the phenomenon of empathy, a “non-inferential, non-theoretical form of one’s understanding of the other as a minded being.” Phenomenological theory, conversely, views empathy as “‘direct experiential access’ which needs neither any form of simulation nor any theorizing” (Gangopadhyay, 2014, p. 117).

Although there are clearly many fascinating arguments among academics regarding what empathy is, how it is generated, how (or if) it is perceived, and the cognitive mechanism through which it occurs, that research is beyond the scope of this project. My research explores whether empathy – defined for the purposes of this project as the feeling experienced when the observed or imagined emotion of another causes the observer to develop a similar emotional state – viewed as a mode of responsiveness² rather than simply a mode of cognitive access, can be engaged with through the practice

² As described by Gangopadhyay, (2014), p. 126.

of *willfully embodied perception*. The embodied simulation view of empathy put forward by Gangopadhyay (2014) posits that “neural mechanisms responsible for one’s own action control and mapping of emotions and sensations are also responsible for understanding the others’ actions, emotions and sensations” (p. 120), which suggests that empathy can be practiced, in a sense, by increasing familiarity with one’s own action control, emotions and sensations - one of the main goals of mindfulness techniques.

Social neuroscientist Singer and her team (2017) conceive of an alternate definition of empathy that was important to consider when designing this project and deciding on a working definition of empathy; they differentiate between empathic resonance, empathic distress, and compassion. According to their understanding, empathic resonance is an innate human capacity that can lead to two outcomes: empathic distress or compassion. Singer argues that while we all have the capacity for empathic resonance, if it becomes too strong a feeling, it can lead to empathic distress, resulting in non-social behaviour (p. 240). However, Singer argues that a compassion response to empathic resonance (rather than a distress response) can be learned through the practice of compassion and loving-kindness meditations³. In brains that are untrained in these techniques, feelings of empathy can activate parts of the pain matrix in the brain, suggesting empathic distress; however, when trained brains, such as Tibetan monk, scientist, and study participant Ricard’s, engage with the pain of others with loving-kindness and compassion, a brain network associated with positive emotion, warmth and

³ These meditations ask the practitioner to first visualize a person with whom they feel a reciprocal sense of love, gratitude, and compassion, and then observe how these qualities feel in their bodies. They are then asked to extend that feeling outwards, to an acquaintance, and then to someone they do not know, and then by increments to the world as a whole. They are sometimes asked to repeat a phrase (in their minds) to each individual/group such as “May you live with ease, happiness, and good health.”

affiliation is activated (Singer, 2017, pp. 239–40). Singer’s findings raise the possibility that contemporary individuals might even develop a habit of avoiding empathic responses altogether if they experience empathic distress instead of compassion. Compassion training can thus change the way we engage with the suffering of others and lead to more positive outcomes. She argues, “If you know how to turn empathic resonance into compassion, then you are safer. You know how to develop positive emotions of concern toward the other, and you develop prosocial motivation, a strong motivation to help” (p. 240). The individual tendency to move from empathy to either distress or empathic concern and helping is “probably affected by individual differences very early on in childhood that determine how you react” (p. 250). However, further studies have also suggested that compassion is a teachable skill and even an emotion regulation strategy (p. 243). I have observed this differentiation between empathic distress and compassion as a result of empathic resonance in myself and others, thus I am including this differentiation in my understanding of empathy. With this differentiation in mind, I was careful to include a meditation on compassion and loving-kindness at the end of each of my mindfulness training sessions (see Appendix B: Lesson Plans) so that my participants would have the tools to protect themselves from empathic distress if they did begin to feel increased empathic responses because of the training sessions.

c. The *Somatic Marker Hypothesis* and Emotion Regulation

In designing this project, I wanted to try to pin down a specific aspect common across many mindfulness practices, and increased body awareness stood out. According to embodied simulation theory, increased body awareness may have an effect on the experience of empathy; with this in mind, when I came across Damasio’s somatic marker

hypothesis, I realized I might be able to use the theory as a lens through which to describe the effect that mindfulness techniques involving bodily contemplation were having on practitioners. In his book *Descartes Error* ([1994] 2005), Damasio discusses the fundamental and vital connection between two processes that are often considered to be in opposition: emotion and rationality. Damasio suggests that ‘normal’ human cognitive process utilizes both in his *somatic marker hypothesis* (p. 173), which is deeply related to embodiment theory. For example, the reasoning involved in a complex decision such as ending a relationship includes “deriving logical consequences from assumed premises” (p. 167) in addition to a somatosensory response to the thought of those consequences, learned from the memory of an embodied experience of a similar situation (p. 174). The feeling (defined as sensation in the visceral and sensory body, including proprioception, for the purposes of this research) of the emotional memory in the body is what Damasio refers to as a *somatic marker*. The somatic marker hypothesis, then, assumes that “those emotions and feelings have been connected, by learning, to predicted future outcomes of certain scenarios. When a negative somatic marker is juxtaposed to a particular future outcome the combination functions as an alarm bell. When a positive somatic marker is juxtaposed instead, it becomes a beacon of incentive” (p. 174). Somatic markers can increase the accuracy and efficiency⁴ of the decision process because they “allow you to choose from among fewer alternatives” (p. 173) by providing a visceral response as an additional means of discernment among choices.

⁴ Damasio ([1994] 2005) characterizes an accurate and efficient decision as one that is advantageous to “basic personal and social outcomes such as survival of the individual and its kin, the securing of shelter, the maintenance of physical and mental health, employment and financial solvency, and good standing in the social group” (p. 170).

Damasio's ([1994] 2005) somatic marker hypothesis posits that the brain creates and stores sensory "maps" of body states that elicit a felt emotional response in the body more quickly than would be possible if it was reacting to perception in real time, thus functioning more effectively as a homeostatic regulatory mechanism (p. 110). This is because perception and cognition are not only interrelated, but also reciprocal and in constant communication to produce the regulatory effect needed for the survival and well-being of the organism. With ready-to-go sensory maps plotted from previous experiences, the body-brain-body continuous loop is able to skip a step – detailed novel perception – by automatically reacting with a learned emotional response, experienced in the body as feelings.⁵ Since energy preservation is also an element of survival, it makes sense that cognition would evolve to take advantage of such a bypass. The felt responses in the body as produced by these maps elicited by certain stimuli are what Damasio refers to as *somatic markers*. Somatic markers are affected by previous experiences that elicit similar feelings; they are "acquired by experience, under control of an internal preference system and under the influence of an external set of circumstances which include not only entities and events with which the organism must interact, but also social conventions and ethical rules" (p. 179).

Damasio ([1994] 2005) cautions, though, that somatic markers can lead us astray; if either brain or culture is "defective" in some way, the somatic markers of the individual are unlikely to be adaptive (p. 177). Damasio suggests that most somatic markers we use

⁵ Damasio (2012) conceives of emotions as the automatic, physical responses to stimuli—such as increase in heart rate and increase in circulation to the legs in a fear response that favours running (rather than freezing)—and considers feelings as the *perceived sensation* of fear, such as the heart racing and the legs tingling as blood rushes to them (pp. 116–21).

for rational decision-making were probably created during the process of education and socialization (p. 177), so it is the cultures of these two environments that can be defective. An example of psychoanalysis engaging with a similar idea may help to demonstrate how faulty somatic markers can lead to decisions which are not conducive to wellbeing. In her lectures, Anna Freud (1960) recounts a patient who was forbidden sweets as a child with such vehemence that as an adolescent and young adult, he was unable to eat a piece of candy without blushing furiously (p. 97). The recalled feeling of shame caused a physical response - elicited by what Damasio would consider somatic markers - that *was* adaptive in childhood, since it allowed him to avoid punishment from his parents, but which became maladaptive in adulthood, because the shame response made others think he had done something wrong, such as stolen the candy (p. 97).

It is my perspective that what Damasio terms somatic markers can be, in a sense, *recalibrated* to function more adaptively; I argue that consciously bringing our awareness towards a more embodied mode on a regular basis would allow us to become conscious of faulty or unbalanced somatic markers, and even give us insight on how to recalibrate them. It is possible that somatic markers for individuals in Western society may even be calibrated for what Singer (2017) would call an empathic distress response when faced with a situation that elicits empathy. If individuals associate empathy with distress due to the current calibration of their somatic markers, it is possible that they may avoid situations that elicit an empathic response. Her findings suggest a new response – toward compassion, rather than distress – can be learned (p. 243), potentially lending support to the idea that somatic markers can be recalibrated. Perhaps if we collectively begin to

recalibrate our old cognitive maps, our society could finally move past the outdated, destructive, prejudicial behavior that mars it.

Contemporary Western society has at best forgotten, at worst vilified the importance of emotion - perceived in the body as feeling - in cognitive processes related not only to rational decision making, but in many aspects of our lives. Damasio, McGilchrist (2019), Loy (2003) and others have argued that this is due to the overvaluation of the notion that logic alone will result in the best available solution for any problem, and that emotion – and the bodily feelings it causes – must be ignored in the process. The connection between emotion suppression and decreased mental health is well understood, and I further believe that it affects our ability to empathize with others; perhaps the concept of Western society being out of practice with respect to empathy can even begin to explain the difficulty of eradicating institutionalized prejudice; increasing empathy between disparate groups seems like a vital part of any solution addressing inequality. It may follow, then, that a method of practicing empathy would be helpful if we are going to move past the divisiveness within our society and begin the process of collective healing.

One process that may be involved in empathy is emotion regulation; some emotion regulation strategies favour conceptual focus on acceptance and attention while others favour awareness of bodily states. Strategies which exclude felt awareness of bodily states such as avoidance, rumination and suppression⁶ have been associated with anxiety, depression and eating disorders. Furthermore, Khoury et al. (2017) argue that

⁶ Avoidance ignores bodily sensation entirely; rumination ignores bodily sensation *in the present moment*, instead making the body feel as if it were literally in the situation being ruminated over; and suppression labels the bodily feelings caused by emotions as negative and therefore undesirable.

these disembodied maladaptive strategies may complicate our ability to empathize with others (p. 1165), which could be contributing to the declining empathy within our society⁷. While there are many possible reasons for this decrease, I feel that rumination deserves special attention.

Rumination – the process of continually thinking through the same thoughts, especially stress-inducing ones – can be an obstacle to empathy if the somatic marker hypothesis is correct because emotional states elicited by the ruminations cause the body to feel as if it is literally *in* the situation being ruminated over, therefore demanding immediate attention and taking attention away from any possible empathic response. For example, if I am visiting a friend while also ruminating over a car accident I was in a week before, my body responds by eliciting the *feeling* of being back in that accident. The thought, and the emotion it elicits, takes my attention out of the present moment, and complicates my ability to engage with my current environment. In the words of Damasio (2012), “the brain can *simulate*, within somatosensing regions, certain body states, *as if* they were occurring; and because our perception of any body state is rooted in the body maps of somatosensing regions, we perceive the body state as actually occurring even if it is not” (p.109). So, if a thought that causes a fear response – heart racing, body tingling – is ruminated over, the body re-creates the *feeling* of the fear response, even if the trigger of the response is not in the present environment. Rumination therefore can severely complicate our ability to empathize with others because it takes our attention, including our felt body state, out of the here-and-now. Meditations that encourage the

⁷ In an analysis of data collected from American 12th graders and entering college students between 1967 and 2016, Twenge (2018) found that, with the exception of a few peaks in the early 2000s, empathy for others has seen a steady decrease over time (p. 174).

practitioner to bring awareness back to their bodies in the present moment may thus function as a circuit breaker for rumination, since the act of shifting attention alone may move the body out of the simulated feeling elicited by the rumination.

A further key to understanding – and even to practicing – empathy could be hidden in the somatic marker hypothesis. Damasio (2010) argues that “the connection we have established between our own body states and the significance they have acquired for us,” – for example, the understanding that being afraid feels unpleasant – “can be transferred to the simulated body states, at which point we can attribute a comparable significance to the simulation” (pp. 111-112). According to this understanding, an individual feels empathy for a person experiencing fear because the brain simulates the feeling of fear in the observers’s body, which reminds them of the unpleasantness of fear, and might even motivate the observer to help the person experiencing fear.

This understanding of the brain and its connection to felt body states is also important when it comes to the idea of practicing a day-to-day empathic mode of engagement with the world. Damasio (2010) argues, “a state that has already occurred in the organism should be easier to simulate since it has already been mapped by precisely the same somatosensing structures that are now responsible for simulating it” (p. 110); in other words, the more we practice observing how an empathic state *feels* in the body, the easier it will be to elicit that felt state which may, over time, facilitate an empathic mode of engagement with the world. I therefore argue that the practice of mindful, non-judgemental contemplation of internal and external body sensation offers a practical method of practicing an empathic mode of engagement.

d. Thesis Organization

This thesis is organized into five chapters. Chapter one explores the relationship between concerns with emotional safety among contemporary youth and embodiment theory, situates my conception of empathy, and then outlines two core theories that I engage with throughout the project, Gangopadhyay's (2014) embodied simulation view of empathy, and Antonio Damasio's ([1994] 2005) somatic marker hypothesis. Chapter two introduces the term *willfully embodied perception* and situates it within the spheres of cognitive science and conceptions of Buddhist mindfulness. Chapter three outlines my methodology, including justifications for certain mindfulness practices. Chapter four includes my findings and discussion, which support my assertion that greater awareness of embodied experience while engaging with literature is positively related to the ability to both experience empathy and be motivated by it to help others. Finally, chapter five discusses implications for future practice and research within education, specifically within the study of literature. It is my hope that this study can contribute to the exploration of an alternative, embodied way of engaging with literature that facilitates empathy and compassion.

CHAPTER TWO: Situating Willfully Embodied Perception

I put forward the notion of practicing *willfully embodied perception* - bringing our attention to sensory, visceral, and proprioceptive awareness in the present moment in a non-judgmental way - as an integral element of moving toward a more embodied and empathic mode of consciousness. In the same way that one must be willful about physical exercise at first, one must also be willful about practicing embodied perception, perhaps because both are somewhat uncomfortable to start. However, in my own experience, exercise eventually becomes pleasurable and the benefits become evident even when one is not in the process of exercising, if the practice is continued. I believe the same is true for willfully embodied perception but, like exercise, felt benefits take time; for this reason, I want to emphasize that willfully embodied perception is a *practice* just as physical exercise and mindfulness are *practices*.

Embodiment theory considers the body and its sensations as fundamental to the cognition process; willfully embodied perception is becoming aware of and focusing on the connection between body and mind by bringing our attention to bodily sensation in the present moment without judgment. For example, when taking the first bite of a favourite meal, we are unknowingly more conscious of the mind-body connection because the experience has elicited heightened bodily sensation; however, we do not usually eat our favourite food with the goal of observing feelings in our bodies. If we *did* focus on how other parts of our body feel besides our taste buds, and on how the thoughts and images flashing through our consciousness make the body feel during the experience, that would be practicing what I am defining as willfully embodied perception. We can

also practice willfully embodied perception when the body is *not* in a heightened sensory or emotional state, such as in deep body scan guided meditations.

It may be useful to compare methods that elicit a more unconscious sense of embodiment to methods of what I am defining as willfully embodied perception. Activities such as playing sports or taking nature walks may facilitate (unconscious) embodiment because they elicit an intense visceral, sensory, and/or proprioceptive response due to the demanding nature of the activity. These activities involve focus on an interaction with the external environment, and the focus of the participant is thus too occupied with the external environment to be overly conscious of their embodied experience - unless they enter the experience with the intention of focusing on bodily feelings. On the other hand, methods of willfully embodied perception such as yoga, breath work, and meditation are *intended* to have the participants' attention turn inward, bringing attention and awareness to what it feels like to inhabit their bodies⁸. I additionally consider role play to be a method of willfully embodied perception because the participant is focusing on embodying the role of someone else; by imagining what it would feel like to be the character, participants are also becoming more aware of their own bodily sensation. However, because it also involves interacting with the environment and others, it falls more towards an activity that facilitates (unconscious) embodiment than the others in this category.

⁸ It should be noted that while many methods of practicing willfully embodied perception exist, my research focuses on breath work, meditation, and role play due to their relative safety and accessibility.

a. Cognitive Science

From a cognitive science perspective, willfully embodied perception can be conceived of as shifting consciousness to the current state of one's neurobiological self by attuning to bodily sensations. The neurobiological self, as defined by Damasio ([1994] 2005), can be described as "a perpetually re-created neurobiological state" (p. 100). He suggests that "neural circuits represent the organism continuously, as it is perturbed by stimuli from the physical and sociocultural environments, and as it acts on those environments" (p. 226). These circuits can be imagined as a modern self-driving car, with instruments that constantly monitor the level of function of various parts, how well those parts are working together as a system, and how the environment is changing, in order to make adjustments conducive to the wellbeing of both vehicle and driver. Human neural circuits are obviously vastly more complex than even the most advanced self-driving car; however, we do not need computers to constantly monitor our bodies because we have evolved with a built-in sensory system. We do not usually notice this monitoring because most of the time, we are in a state of what Damasio ([1994] 2005) calls "Background feelings" (p. 150). A background feeling is the body state prevailing between emotions; when we feel an emotion, a new feeling temporarily supersedes the background feeling, making us become temporarily conscious of our bodily sensations. Background feeling can be thought of as an attenuated version of our perceived body state when we experience emotion – aspects of background feelings are amplified momentarily when specific emotions are experienced.

Feelings play an important role in the monitoring process because they "offer us a glimpse of what goes on in our flesh, as a momentary [perceptual] image of that flesh is

juxtaposed to the [perceptual] images of other objects and situations; in so doing, feelings modify our comprehensive notion of those other objects and situations” (p. 159). In other words feelings, defined by Damasio as the felt “experience of what your body is doing *while* thoughts about specific contents roll by” (p. 145), modify our perception of the world and of our ever-changing sense of self; Gangopadhyay’s embodied simulation conception of empathy makes sense when framed by Damasio’s theories. Mindfulness techniques that practice willfully embodied perception allow participants to become aware of both background feeling and emotional feeling as thoughts roll by, which could have an effect on their ability to empathize with others because they are becoming more aware of how others might *literally* feel through the medium of experience.

b. Buddhist Conceptions of Mindfulness

My conception of mindfulness is rooted in Nagarjuna’s Buddhist philosophy of emptiness, which practices an awareness of interconnectedness and emptiness of essence as one moves through all activities in daily life. It is important to note that the term “emptiness” used this way does not denote a lack of anything; it is simply an understanding of phenomena as impermanent, dependent upon conditions, and having an identity that is dependent upon convention (Garfield 1995, p. 315). For example, a wooden table can only be identified as a table by convention; humans have agreed on a name for this piece of furniture with the function of holding things on its surface. If we believe the table has essence, we believe that it has always existed and will always exist in its current state, independent of everything around it, and that organisms other than humans understand its designated essential identity and function. However, when we consider more deeply, we find that regarding the table as having essence is flawed; for

example, the wood used to build the table was not always a table, and has been transformed considerably in order to become a table; at one point, we would have conventionally identified the wood used as a tree, and then subsequently as lumber. Similarly, once the table is no longer functional or desired, it will be relabeled again, perhaps as scrap wood. The conventional identity of the table, in other words, is not stable; it is impermanent because it changes over time, just as the table itself and the materials it is constructed from change over time, dependent upon conditions. This understanding of the table's impermanence, dependence on conditions, and identity dependent on convention is an understanding of its emptiness of essence. According to Buddhist understanding, it is the mistaken belief that things like the table *have* essence – that they are permanent, independent, and possess an identity unaffected by convention – that can lead to suffering. Unfortunately, contemporary Western capitalist society tends to view the conventionally real as inherently real; this reification is what Nagarjuna identifies as the root 'delusion' that leads to suffering (Garfield, 1995, p. 314) and, I argue, a misconception that is contributing to declining empathy our society⁹.

The idea of emptiness of essence is particularly related to empathy when considering the Buddhist notion that the "self" is also a conventionally designated entity without essence. Regarding the self as empty of essence allows for no separation between the subjective-self inside and the objective world outside, as both are empty of essence; if, on the other hand, we see ourselves as inherently existing separately from others, it may complicate our ability to empathize. Although we may think we have an inherent

⁹ For a more in-depth analysis of emptiness and empathy, please see my (2022) paper in *Religions* "Paying Attention: An Examination of Attention and Empathy as they relate to Buddhist Philosophy."

sense of self that is unchanging and separate from others, when we consider that our physical bodies, behaviour, emotions, thought patterns, environments, relationships etc. are constantly changing, it is more accurate to consider the self as a *process* than as a fixed essence. If we can begin to view others as processes interacting with our processes, it may facilitate our ability to empathize. Garfield (1995) summarizes Nagarjuna's words, "Once we see the world from the standpoint of emptiness of inherent existence, the history of any conventionally designated entity is but an arbitrary stage carved out of a vast continuum of interdependent phenomena" (p. 199). Since, according to this understanding, all entities are without their own essences and are interconnected, there is no possibility of an 'otherness-essence,' and thus no inherent distinction between the self and the other (p. 112). Viewing the self in this way allows for the understanding that an empathic emotion like compassion "not only increases the happiness of others who receive it, it also increases our own [happiness]" (Loy 2003, p. 82), thus making compassion equally beneficial for all parties involved in the process.

Another, perhaps more accessible understanding of this conception of emptiness of self is provided by Thich Nhat Hanh through his term *interbeing*. He writes,

...the one can be seen in the all, and the all can be seen in the one. One cause is never enough to bring about an effect. A cause must, at the same time, be an effect, and every effect must also be the cause of something else. Cause and effect inter-are. (Nhat Hanh, 1999, p. 222)

Within the concept of interbeing, humans are not separate from each other or the environment; instead, human elements and non-human elements of the environment are a single, inseparable entity. Interbeing also understands the Earth herself as an entity of

which we are a part; animals, air, water, forests, etc., are as cells within the body of the planet (Lim 2019, p. 127). Unlike Nagarjuna's 'emptiness', 'interbeing' as a term does not have a nihilistic connotation, in that it encapsulates everything and emphasizes the connection all humans have to each other and the planet. I believe that when this connection is both understood (conceptually) and *experienced* (in the body), it can allow a more empathic mode of engagement with the world; this idea also reflects Ekman's understanding of what he terms compassionate empathy, which is described as a skill related to the acquired knowledge that we are all connected (Goleman, 2008).

Western philosophers such as Descartes may have helped to perpetuate the delusion of a self separate from others from a Buddhist perspective by breaking down our internal sense of self into two more (conventionally) separate parts: mind and body. I argue that this misconception further removes us from the understanding of ourselves and others as processes interbeing, and thus further complicates our ability to empathize with others as part of our processes. The issue with the idea of a dualistic conception of mind and body as separate and very different entities which are frequently diametrically opposed is that the argument requires that both mind and body are reified – that is, they are viewed as concrete, separate, and having essence. From a Buddhist perspective, this creates another layer of essence which may have deepened the misconception of an inherent self and makes the task of understanding the Buddhist conception of no-self even more difficult.

Examining the ways in which humans interact with their environments should immediately make clear how important the body is to cognition, and how harmful it can be to dismiss bodily sensations. Nagataki and Hirose (2007) argue that “human

intelligence [...] has evolved by way of getting optimally adapted to the world, and the interaction with it takes place through the body” (p. 225). The body dictates the ways in which we can engage with the environment, and this “restriction by having a body essentially defines the nature of human beings” (p. 225). It is important to note that I am considering ‘the body’ as a process of interaction with an environment and only conventionally as a physical object. As in all organisms, we maintain ourselves through an ongoing exchange of energy and matter with the environment, a process called homeostasis. Therefore, although the body may look like a static object, it is better understood as a process in constant flux, like the flame of a candle. Guendelman et al. (2017) write, “the experience of emotional states is built up from the continuous reciprocal interactions of regulatory mechanisms [...] which offers an integrative view of cognitive and emotion processes within homeostatic regulatory mechanisms” (p. 18). This suggests that mind and body are in fact, not separate at all, and are more accurately thought of as aspects of the processes that we conventionally designate as ‘self,’ and that our experience of emotional states is intricately connected to homeostasis. Additionally, interpreting Nagarjuna’s words from a phenomenological point of view, Garfield (1995) writes, “the domain of perceptibles and the structure of perceptual experience and knowledge depends on our ability to represent and individuate objects, and that sensory contact is sensory contact in the first place only in virtue of its role in experience, which is in turn dependent upon the entire perceptual process” (p. 337); the perceptual process, of course, involves both body and brain *together*. Separating body and brain in a fixed conception of self could thus be having a detrimental effect on our ability to engage with the world in an empathic mode according to the embodied simulation view of empathy

(Gangopadhyay, 2014) outlined above, because it encourages the devaluation of one's own emotion and sensation. It also suggests that empathy may be facilitated through enhancing one's awareness of one's own action control, emotions and sensations; embodied awareness, as mentioned above, is a common aspect in many Buddhist mindfulness techniques.

In his book *Money, Sex, War, Karma* (2008), Loy lists three ways in which our collective awareness is conditioned that were not experienced by previous Buddhist cultures and practitioners (p. 96): the fragmentation of attention, the commodification of attention, and the control of attention. He argues that our attention is fragmented because we are bombarded by information and connectivity constantly through our ever-present technology (p. 97); our attention is commodified in our consumer culture by the constant onslaught of advertising (p. 98); and our attention is controlled through sophisticated propaganda (p. 100). Through the lens of Gangopadhyay's (2014) embodied simulation view of empathy, it is no wonder that we, as a global society, have difficulty empathizing with each other and the planet. If, as Loy suggests, our awareness is so frequently captured by attention traps, we might actively ignore our bodily sensations and emotions because there is not enough attention left over for them, thus potentially complicating our ability to empathize with others. According to Loy (2008), the de-conditioning of awareness can be facilitated by "the liberation of collective attention" (p. 102); this involves bringing our awareness back to the here-and-now, to our lived, embodied experience. This is a form of meditation that is an improvable skill, available to all; awareness can be considered one of the main processes of the mind, but one which "has been temporarily obscured by habitual patterns of delusion but can be developed, just like

every other natural potential that human beings have” (Francesconi 2012, p. 280). In this conception, the mind is not separate from the body; instead, they can be conceived of as interrelated and ever-changing processes engaging with the processes that constitute the world. To better engage with our own emotions and ability to experience empathy, it may be useful to practice paying attention to what our bodies are *feeling* while we emote and empathize.

The Satipatthana Sutta (n.d.) outlines non-judgmental contemplation of the internal and external body as one of the foundations of Buddhist mindfulness, but it is often a practice that is forgotten in contemporary life. The text suggests that the mindfulness practitioner should contemplate the body while “abid[ing] independent, not clinging to anything in the world” (section 2). It is important to note that in order for mindful contemplation to occur, the practitioner must let go of – not cling to – judgement, analysis, or any emotion related to the observation; the practice is simply to observe. Mindfully bringing attention to how bodily processes (including emotion) that constitute what we experience as the subjective ‘self’ in the present moment feel, with the understanding that this ‘self’ is in fact both interdependent and constantly changing, may allow individuals to break free of attention traps. The practice provides an ever-accessible, real-time example of impermanence and interconnectedness, which may facilitate an empathic mode of engagement with the world. It is possible that part of the reason Western society tends to reify the ‘self’ is due to the overvaluing of certain senses (which are processes in themselves) in comparison to others; for example, most people pay more attention to visual and auditory stimuli than olfactory or gustatory, and more attention to those latter two than to internal and external sensation or proprioception. Attention traps

like advertisements almost always engage with sight and/or sound exclusively; if we pay most of our attention to attention traps, we pay most of our attention to those two senses. However, the processes that we conventionally define as lived experience are filtered through *all* of our senses; it is possible that mindfully engaging with more of those senses more often may facilitate understanding of the self as a process, and by demonstration, of our state of interbeing with our environments.

Garfield (1995) points out that the understanding of emptiness of essence should be “internalized through meditation, so that it becomes not merely a philosophical theory that we can reason our way into, but the basic way in which we take up the world” (p. 340). Guendelman et al. (2017) differentiate *mindfulness as practice* “the concrete practice of mindfulness meditation, the deployment (and training) of a non-elaborative (non-conceptual) present centred, exploratory and non-judgemental (non-valorative) awareness” from *mindfulness as a state*, “the actual proper first-person experience of the non-elaborative, present-centred, non-judgemental awareness” (p. 3), with mindfulness as practice leading to mindfulness as a state in which we take up the world. Khoury et al. (2017) point out the effectiveness of mindfulness practices involving attention to bodily sensation when they note that the “repeated practice of bringing *attention* to an internal sensory stimulus trains the practitioner’s ability to regulate attention and distinguish between thinking about physical sensations [...] versus experiencing them directly” (p. 1167). This skill of shifting attention from conceptual notions of bodily sensations to viscerally experiencing bodily sensations is, I believe, vital to adopting a mindful mode of engagement with the world. Awareness of the conventional self as a misconception coupled with mindful observation of our embodied physical experience as a web of

interacting processes can allow for the possibility of experiencing others, even the planet itself, as processes interbeing with our processes (and as therefore *part* of our processes), thus increasing our empathy for others and the planet. Perhaps if enough individuals can experience this state of interconnectedness more often, it will allow for a more empathic engagement with the world because it facilitates an understanding of the world as interbeing with the individual, and of the individual as interbeing with the world.

CHAPTER THREE: Methodology

The following research was designed to address the research question: Can engaging with narrative through the mechanism of willfully embodied perception contribute to narrative functioning as a tool for facilitating emotion education and empathy?

a. Research Method

Participants were drawn from the general public and represent a wide range of ages, genders, and experience with meditation. My data collection included two questionnaires (see Appendix C), and observations during group discussions. Participants were asked to complete Survey 1 before the first session. Drawing from Buddhist wisdom and yoga traditions, I delivered a mindfulness training program including 5 two-hour lessons (see Appendix B) over a 5-week period. Each lesson began with a Guided Deep Body Scan (see Appendix A), focusing on bringing awareness to each part of the body, as well as to the nature of thoughts and emotions being experienced in the present moment and their effect on the body. After an opportunity to journal, I engaged participants in various methods of practicing willfully embodied perception including breath work and simple yoga poses, and then had them participate in the reading of one of a set of a unique series of 5 short stories, entitled *Snapshots* (included in Appendix B: Lesson Plans), which are part read aloud and part performed, and are based on true events. The idea was to allow the participants to both embody (through role play) and empathize with the emotions of the characters as they moved through realistic, relational situations, with heightened awareness of their own embodied experience. Some sessions included a lesson and discussion on Buddhist philosophy, followed by an opportunity to discuss and

compare participant responses to the situations they read about, or ideas we explored in the session. Participants were also invited to journal about and discuss their own experiences in their everyday lives with attention to willfully embodied perception and empathy. After the final session, I asked participants to respond to a series of questions in the Final Survey regarding the impact (if any) that the program has had on their everyday lives, and whether it has been the impetus for a shift in perception of the world (see Appendix C).

b. The Guided Deep Body Scan

I hypothesised that practicing a Guided Deep Body Scan (GDBS)¹⁰ before and/or during engagement with narrative literature could facilitate an embodied experience. A GDBS helps the practitioner to intentionally shift their sensory and proprioceptive awareness to different parts of the body, at the surface and internally, and to explore how each part of their body is *feeling* in the present moment, and in response to their present thoughts and emotions. If individuals practice a GDBS while reading narrative regularly, it may allow them to experience the story in their bodies, and thus gain more access to the full benefits of literature as a tool in emotional learning. It may also increase their empathic responsiveness.

The practice of interoception – paying attention to internal sensations of the body – has recently gained attention across disciplines. Interoceptive awareness facilitates “awareness and identification of one’s emotional state,” and “sustained, non-evaluative attention to interoceptive sensations was suggested to disengage individuals from dysfunctional cognitive patterns (e.g. negative rumination) [...] that perpetuate negative

¹⁰ See Appendix A: Guided Deep Body Scan

moods” (Khoury 2017, p. 1167). Simply bringing our attention to an embodied awareness, as long as it is accepting (non-evaluative), can thus have an enormous impact on emotion, and can offer a means of breaking the cycle of maladaptive emotion regulation strategies, which may facilitate an empathic mode of responsiveness.

c. The Short Story Series *Snapshots*

Engagement with literature within the education system has become extremely narrowly focused on disembodied methods of analysis, to the point where studying it too extensively can actually change the way literature is perceived from an embodied experience to a disembodied one, even outside the classroom. For example, after completing an English literature degree, I found that I could not ‘fall into the story’ while reading literature in the way that I had been able to in the past; it was as if I could only see the words on the paper, but the imagined and felt *experience* of the story was not available to me. As a result, I stopped reading for pleasure for almost two years, because it was no longer enjoyable. For this reason, I worry that many of us may have forgotten that reading literature - especially narrative literature - can be *experienced* in the body.

By contrast, practicing *willfully embodied perception* - bringing attention to sensory, visceral and proprioceptive awareness in the present moment in a non-judgemental way - while engaging with literature, may invite readers to experience the narrative rather than solely read and analyze it. Engaging with literature in a way that allows readers to experience the narrative within their bodies may engender an empathic mode of responsiveness, which could lead to the adoption of the same mode of responsiveness in the real world with continued practice.

As mentioned above, the form of the series around which the program is centered, *Snapshots*, is unique in that it is partially written in prose, and partially as drama. Having a section in a story that is performed gives participants the opportunity to willfully embody the narrative through roleplay. However, the form of the series is unique in another way; it mimics the way we perceive imagined scenarios within our own consciousness. Damasio (1994) explains, “to our consciousness, the scenarios are made up of multiple imaginary scenes, not really a smooth film, but rather pictorial flashes of key images in those scenes, jump cut from one frame to another, in quick juxtaposition” (p. 170). *Snapshots* follows a central character through an intense period of change in her life and the narrative is relayed through short, potent, descriptive accounts of realistic situations; by mimicking the way we perceive imagined scenarios intrinsically through the medium of language, the form of the series aims to facilitate understanding on both conscious and unconscious cognitive levels.

Paradigmatic situations that elicit strong emotional responses are spotlighted in each *Snapshot*. When writing these pieces, I focused on situations that suggest binary oppositions, such as abundance/deprivation; this is done both to illustrate how a shift in perception is possible, and also how dualistic thinking is fundamentally flawed. Other examples include: excitement/disappointment, trust/betrayal, love/loss, and despair/hope.

CHAPTER FOUR: Results, Discussion and Limitations

a. General Empathy Results and Discussion

The Initial Survey (I) opened with a question asking participants for their personal definitions of empathy. Their results in **Table 1** show a wide variety of responses, which hints at the difficulty of assigning the term a specific definition:

Participant	Definition of Empathy
1	Feel what others feel
2	Empathy in my opinion is having a connection of sorts to a given person. Not a conventional connection, but more of a rooted connection, holistic
3	Empathy is the ability to step outside one's comfort zone to aid/assist someone
4	Having the ability to feel; feel the feelings of others and yourself

Table 1: Participant Definitions of Empathy. This question was asked on the Initial Survey only.

Participants 1 and 4 explicitly state that they view empathy as feeling what others feel, while the responses from participants 1, 2 and 4 all emphasize the relational/social aspect of empathy. Only Participant 4 mentions empathy for the self, while Participant 3 bases their definition on the idea that empathy leading to assisting others must be uncomfortable. It is interesting that Participant 2 differentiates between a non-empathic “conventional” connection and an empathic “rooted” or “holistic” connection; it is almost as if they are beginning to describe what Nagarjuna would call conventional and ultimate reality. It is clear from the wide range of responses that definitions of empathy vary in ways as nuanced for my participants as they do with academics. However there is one common thread among their definitions; they all consider a *connection* of some sort to be involved in the process.

Participants were asked to rate their empathy levels at the beginning and end of the study. Results depicted in **Figure 1** show that the self-reported empathy levels of 75% of participants increased and 25% stayed the same after completing the mindfulness sessions. This supports my assertion that greater awareness of embodied experience while engaging with literature is positively related to the ability to experience empathy.

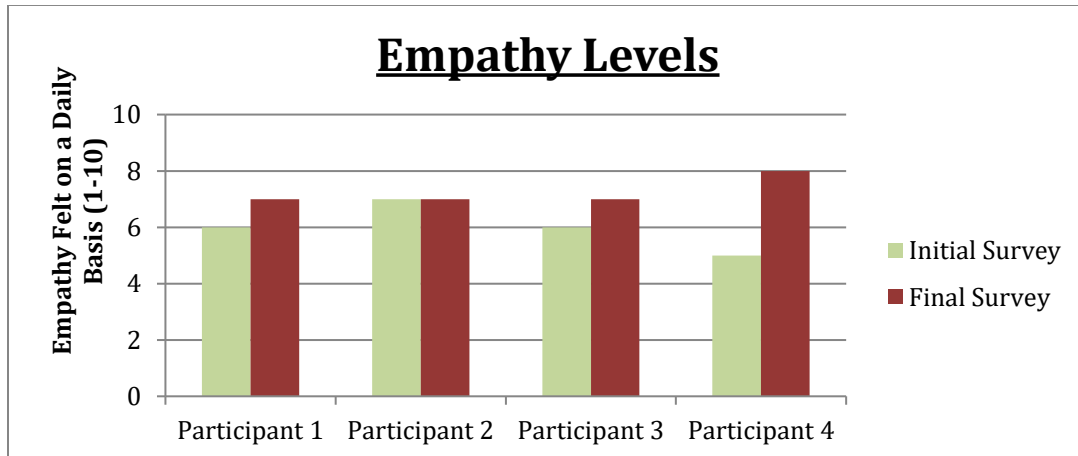


Figure 1. Participants were asked the same question on both surveys: On average, on a scale of 1 to 10 (with one representing not at all and 10 representing extremely), how empathic are you on a daily basis?

Participants were given a set of situations and asked to indicate which situation they felt would induce the most empathic response. Their results are expressed in **Figure 2**:

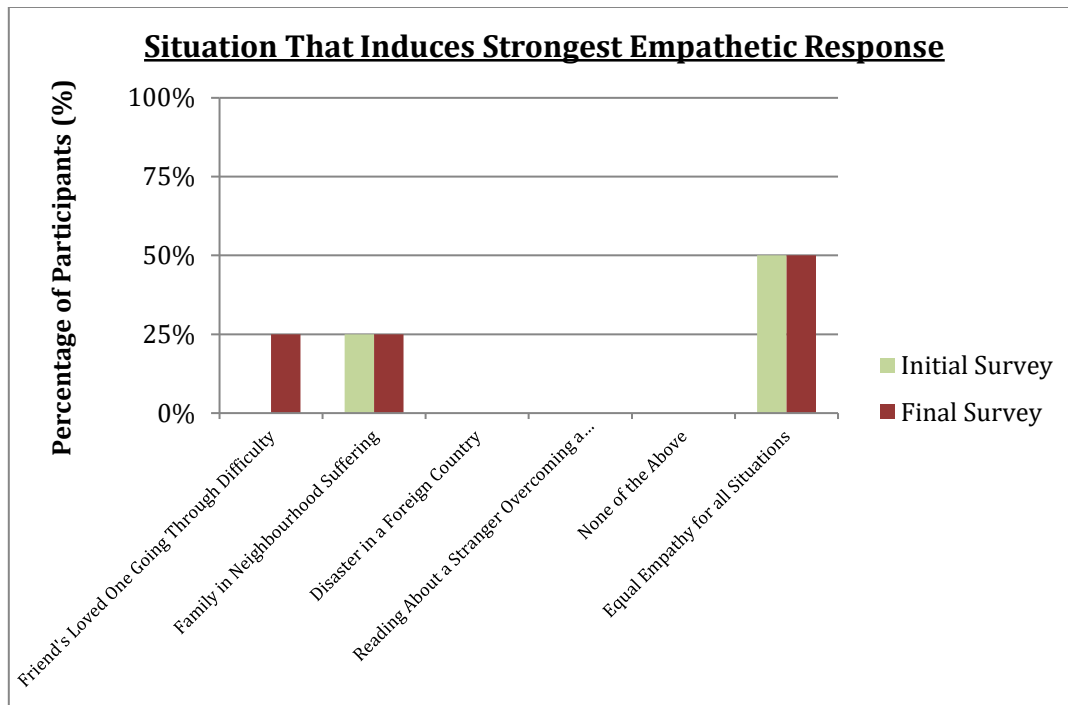


Figure 2. Participants were given the same question with slight variations on available answers between Initial and Final survey (see Appendix C): Which of the following situations do you think would make you feel the **strongest** sense of empathy?

One participant did not respond to this question on the Initial Survey. Only one participant changed their answer between the initial and Final Survey. These results suggest that the types of situations in which individuals experience an empathic response may not be affected by embodied engagement with literature. I included this question to test the idea that empathy levels are reliant on distance (geographic, relational, temporal); I thought this might be important to consider for future research when choosing/creating literature with subject matter that lends itself to empathic responses from readers. 50% of participants indicated they would feel empathy for all situations equally, while 25% indicated that a friend's loved one going through a difficulty would engender the strongest empathic response, and the remaining 25% indicated a family suffering in their neighbourhood would induce the most empathy. No participants selected "disaster in a

foreign country” or “reading about a stranger overcoming a difficulty.” The contrast between results selected and omitted may support the notion that relational and geographic distance can influence the intensity of an empathic response, which may impact my choice of literature if I further investigate this idea in the future.

The majority of participants reported increases in the frequency of their empathic responses leading to helping behaviour after completing the mindfulness sessions (see **Fig. 3**). This suggests that mindful embodied awareness while engaging with literature may facilitate a prosocial response in an empathic experience.

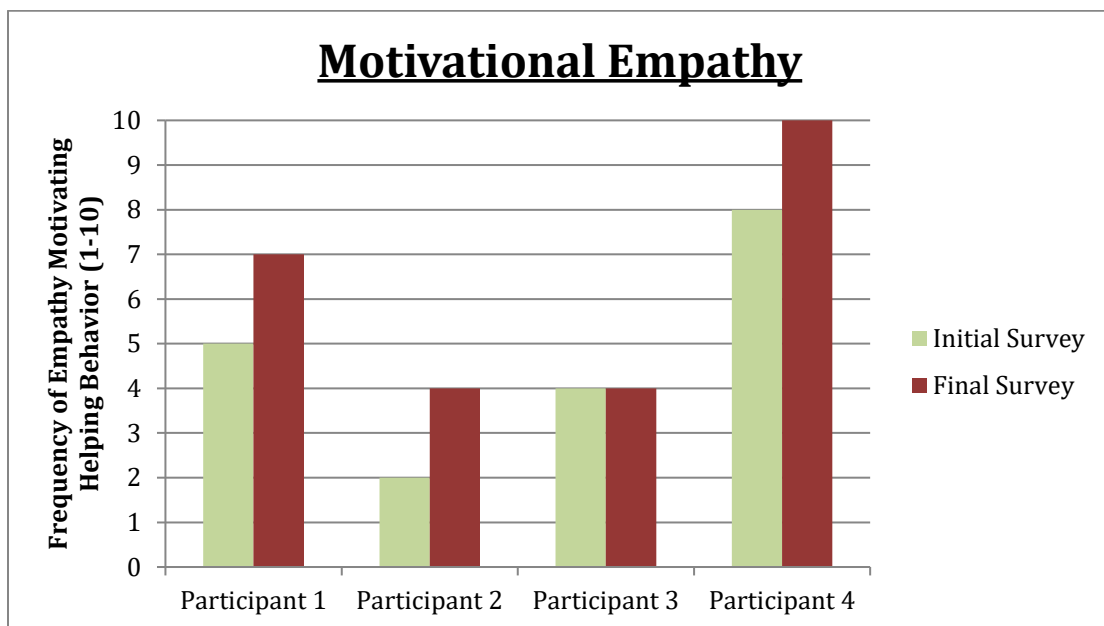


Figure 3. Participants were asked the same question on both surveys: On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 representing almost never and 10 representing almost always), how often do feelings of empathy become actions to help the person/group you are feeling empathy for?

Participants were additionally asked to provide an example of a situation in which they were motivated by a sense of empathy to help someone; **Table 2** shows their responses.

Participant	Survey: Initial (I), Final (F)	Situation in which empathy motivated you to help:
1	(I)	Donated to the Gaza fund when it was bombed last summer
1	(F)	Cousins in another country lost their mother due to covid, sent all family members there I knew messages/phone calls of support
2	(I)	There was an old man who had fallen at the doctor's office. I had offered to help him up. However, he insisted he was fine
2	(F)	I once helped a friend who needed help with his air vent. I helped him clean it out
3	(I)	I'm allergic to dog hair and helped a friend who is going through a personal crisis by keeping her pet dog at my home for 4 days
3	(F)	I broke [...] rules and protocols and left my kid with family to help my friend who was struggling after a very difficult childbirth
4	(I)	I saw an old homeless man outside [a store] in the winter, so I bought him a jar of peanut butter and a loaf of bread
4	(F)	At the grocery store, when they ask to donate money to a children's foundation. This usually gets me, because it brings more awareness to my own ability to buy groceries and others might not have that luxury

Table 2: Participant Helping Activities. Participants were asked this question on both surveys.

There are a variety of similarities and differences between the types of behavior listed and the receivers of the help. Participant 1 was more motivated to help others (both family and strangers) in foreign countries, while Participant 2 was more motivated to help others in their immediate vicinity (both a friend and a stranger). The responses from Participant 3 suggest they are more motivated by friends in immediate need, while Participant 4 seems most motivated when confronted with knowledge that others are in need in juxtaposition to their own privilege. Both participants 1 and 4 mention donating/spending money on someone in need as a behavior motivated by empathy, while all four mention immediate physical help as a common behavior motivated by an

empathic response. Interestingly, Participant 3's response seems to reflect their belief that empathic assistance is uncomfortable (see **Table 1**); their empathic behavior requires a (non-monetary) sacrifice on behalf of the person doing the helping; they take their friend's dog despite a dog allergy and put their job at risk to help a friend.

Significantly, while the type of helping behavior varied between participants, 75% of participants reported an increase in frequency of empathy-motivated helping behavior after completing the mindfulness sessions in tandem with the short story series. The remaining 25% reported no change. These results support the idea that a prosocial response to empathy can be practiced, encouraged, and learned through embodied mindfulness programs engaging with literature. It is also important in light of Singer et al.'s (2017) findings supporting the differentiation in responses to empathic resonance, ranging from empathic distress to compassion. They found that practicing non-referential compassion and loving-kindness meditations, such as those practiced at the end of every mindfulness session for this study, allowed the empathizer to have more control over which empathic response they experienced; they could respond with "positive emotions of concern toward the other," and "develop prosocial motivation, a strong motivation to help" (p.240). This motivation, while having obvious benefits for the community, also has significant immediate and future benefit for the individual; while empathic distress causes activity in parts of the pain matrix in the brain, loving-kindness and compassion induce activity in parts of the brain associated with "positive emotion, warmth and affiliation" (pp. 239-40). Although the study did not explore this, I wonder if following through with the motivation to help would affect an even stronger activation in the positive emotion, warmth, and affiliation systems of the brain? Allowing an empathic

response to motivate actual helping behavior further benefits the individual by strengthening their social connections; thus, all parties involved may experience benefits. My results support the idea that this compassion response to empathic resonance is a teachable skill that can be built into mindfulness lessons exploring empathy. If such a simple, accessible practice can have such positive results for all parties involved, it seems vital that our education systems take notice. My results support the notion that a simple shift in the ways teachers engage with literature can have a profound positive impact on relationships between students, schools, and communities.

b. Embodiment Results and Discussion

Participants were asked to indicate how frequently they ignored sensation in their bodies; their results are expressed in **Figure 4**.

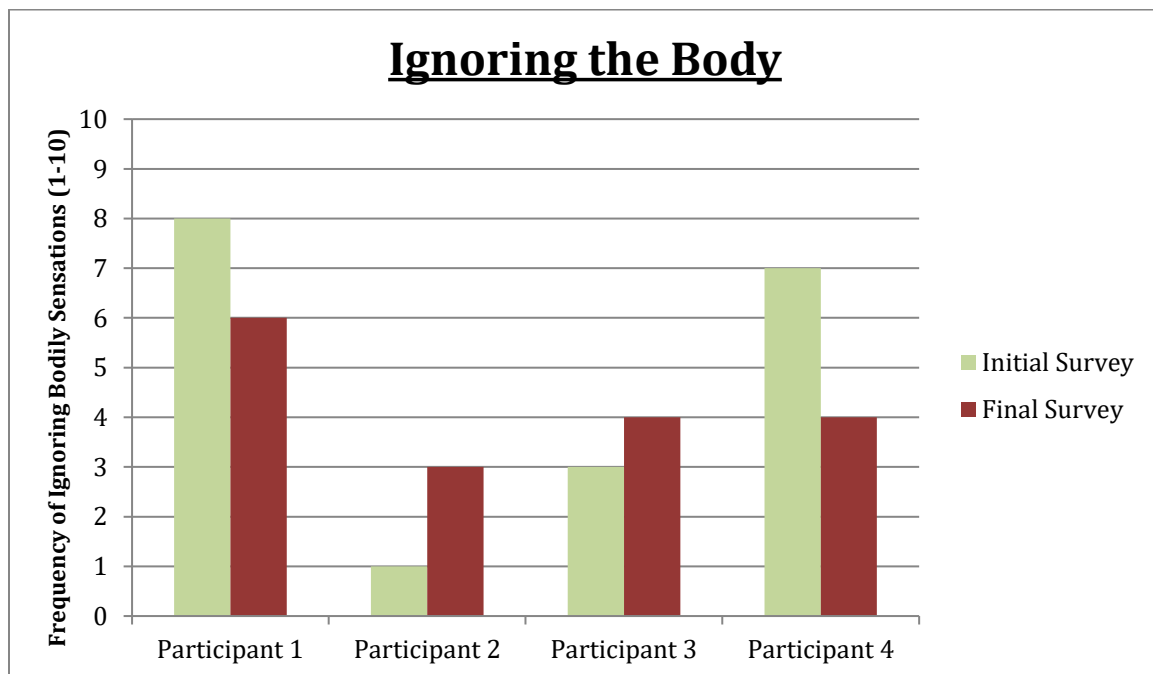


Figure 4. Participants were asked the same question on both surveys: On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 representing almost never and 10 representing almost always), how often do you ignore feelings and sensation in your body?

It is possible that this question may have been misunderstood, and in hindsight, I wish I had clarified it more. I wanted to know how often participants ignored bodily sensations like a stomach ache, or a head ache, or the need to go to the bathroom, in their daily lives. Two participants indicated they ignored bodily sensation less frequently in the Final Survey while two indicated they ignored it more; however, in discussions, all expressed that they ignored their bodily sensations less – or, stated positively, they paid as much or more attention – by the end of the sessions. However, the results as they stand – with half of participants reporting a decrease in frequency of ignoring bodily sensations and half reporting an increase – suggest that the practice of willfully embodied perception while engaging with literature may not affect the number of instances in which individuals ignore bodily sensation on a daily basis.

Participants were asked to indicate reasons they ignored bodily sensations from a selection of six options. Their results in **Figure 5** give insight on what aspects of our lives encourage us to ignore bodily sensation.

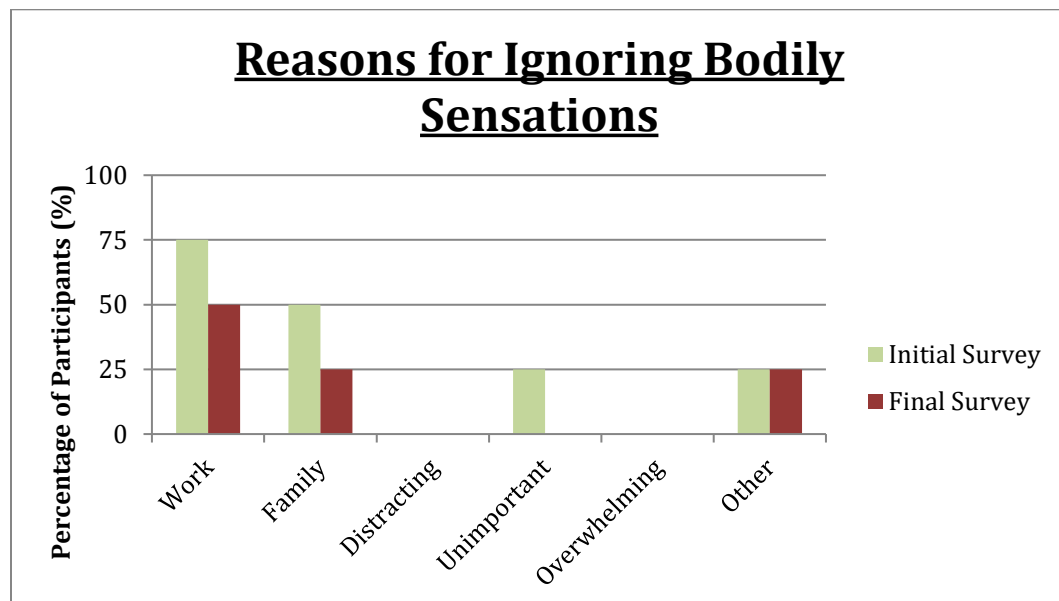


Figure 5. Participants were asked the same question on both surveys: Which of the following reasons motivates(s) you to ignore feelings and sensations in the

body? Circle all that apply. The “Other” category provided space for a qualitative response.

These results indicate that work and family responsibilities are the most frequent reasons the participants ignored bodily sensation. This is interesting to note if having an awareness of bodily sensation is related to empathy, as my results suggest, since work and family relationships might benefit from an empathic mode of engagement.

The qualitative response provided by one of the participants for this question brings up a reason I had left out of my options: fear of discovering a health problem.¹¹ Fear was not a reason I had considered, but is probably a large motivator of avoidance of bodily sensation for many, and thus deserves further investigation.

c. Stress and Emotional Wellbeing Results and Discussion

The stress and emotional wellbeing questions yielded interesting results in light of global events at the time the Final Survey was completed.

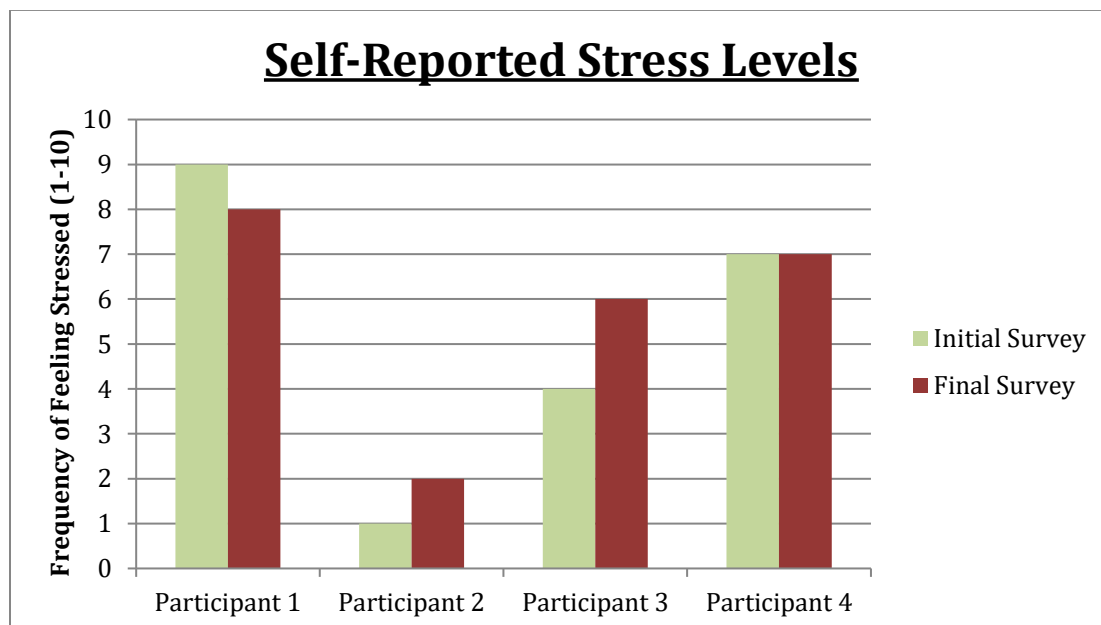


Figure 6. Participants were asked the same question on both surveys: On a scale of 1-

¹¹ One participant answered “Not sure” in (I) and “Not sure maybe afraid of the answers if a health problem is discovered” in (F) (see Appendix D).

10 (with 1 representing almost never and 10 representing almost always), how often do you feel stressed, on average?

The final mindfulness training session for this study took place on February 28, 2022 – four days after Russia invaded Ukraine. The subject came up during our discussion, and several participants expressed their deep unease and upset over the situation. The results in **Figure 6** may reflect this elevated stress caused by global events. Mindfulness techniques that incorporate embodied awareness have been shown to support stress reduction in other studies, such as Kabat-Zinn’s ([1982]1991) *Stress-Reduction and Relaxation Program*, later re-named *Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction* (Khouri et al. 2017 p. 1163), thus this was not an expected result.

However, since the majority of participants did report an increase in empathy (see **Fig. 1**), I wonder if it is possible that the increase in stress reported by some participants is an example of increased empathic resonance resulting in empathic distress? If so, it would further support the argument that the practice of willfully embodied perception increases empathy, and also emphasize the importance of incorporating love and compassion practices into any practice related to empathy.

Varied results in self-reported wellbeing among participants may have also been affected by the aforementioned factors:

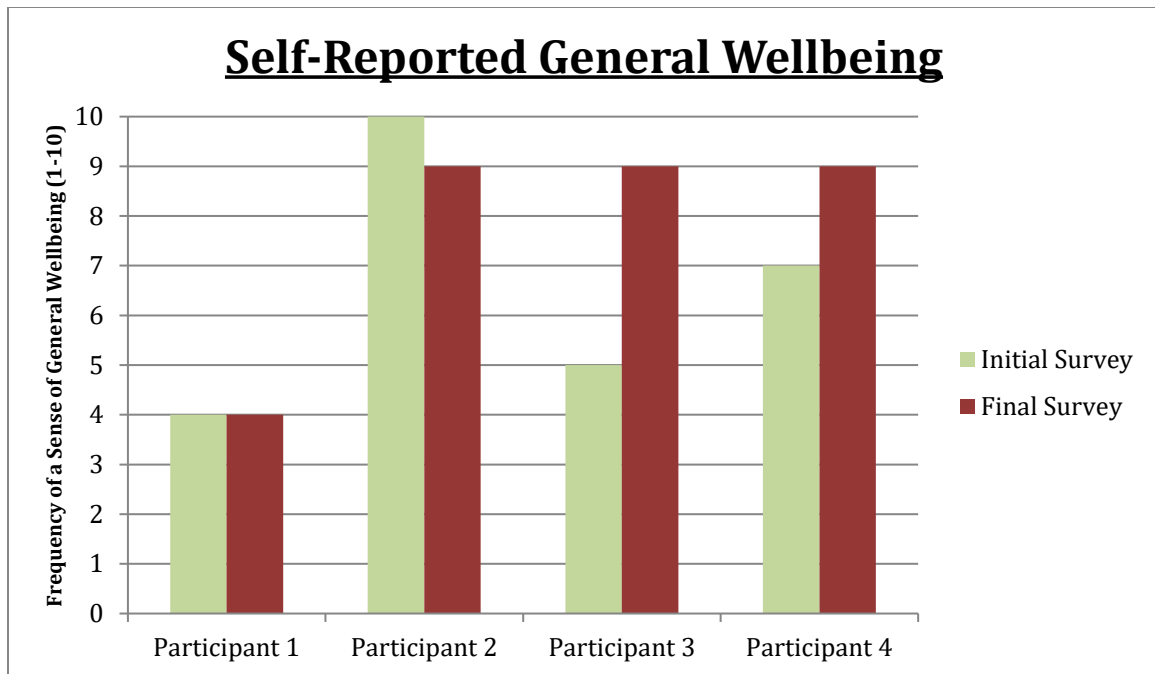


Figure 7. Participants were asked the same question in both surveys: On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 being almost never and 10 being almost always), how often do you feel a sense of general wellbeing?

Although two participants reported increased levels of general wellbeing on the Final Survey, one participant indicated no change, and one participant indicated a drop in general wellbeing. Increases in general wellbeing as a result of mindfulness practices is in line with several other studies. It is notable that only one of the participants who indicated elevated stress levels on the Final Survey also indicated a drop in overall wellbeing; this brings up the question of whether stress is harmful to general wellbeing. Our education systems frequently characterize stress as a negative state of being and attempt to insulate students from difficult knowledge that might induce stress, such as relational or psychic conflict; Sonu (2020) suggests this could be due to adult discomfort rather than a concern for student wellbeing (p. 109). Further research into the relationship between stress and general wellbeing might yield insight on how to re-frame “stress” in a more positive way,

which could support students (and maybe even teachers) experiencing stress in the classroom.

Participants were asked to estimate how often they experienced what they would define as an emotional outburst before and after the mindfulness training. The frequency of each result is expressed in **Figure 8 a.** and the percentage of participants who reported a change in frequency of their emotional outbursts is expressed in **Figure 8 b.**

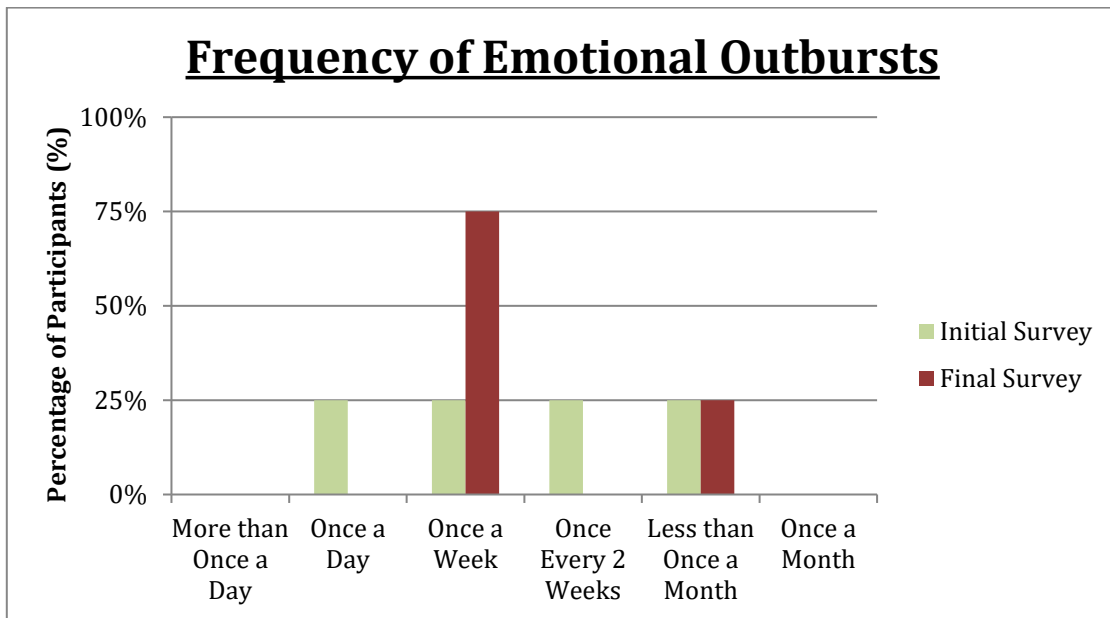


Figure 8a. Participants were asked the same question on both surveys: How often do you notice yourself experiencing emotional outbursts?

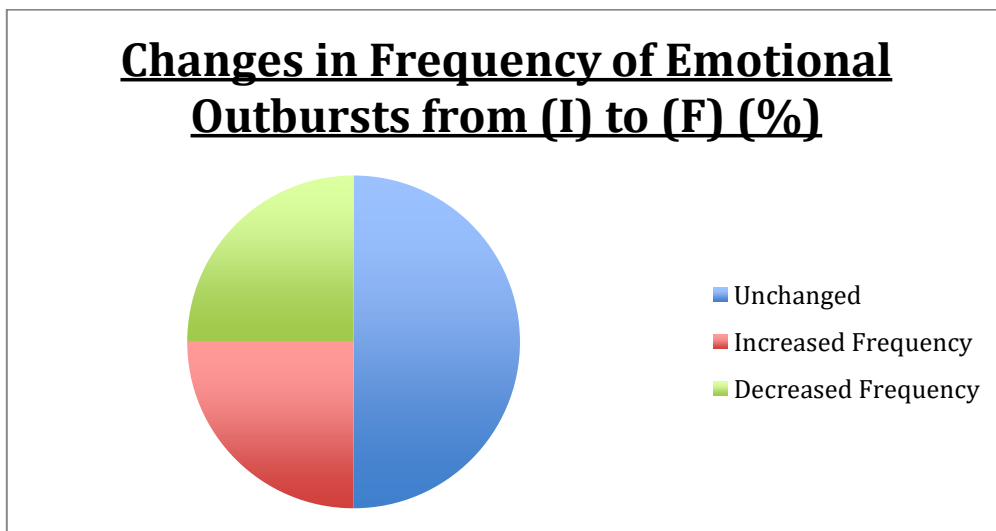


Figure 8b. Half of the participants reported an unchanged frequency of emotional outbursts from the Initial Survey (I) to the Final Survey (F), while 25% reported an increase and decrease, respectively.

These results suggest that the practice of *willfully embodied perception* while engaging with narrative may not influence the frequency of emotional outbursts, and that the frequency in which the participants experienced such an outburst varied widely. Similar results occurred when participants were asked to rate their ability to manage their behavior during such outbursts; the results are shown in **Figure 9**.

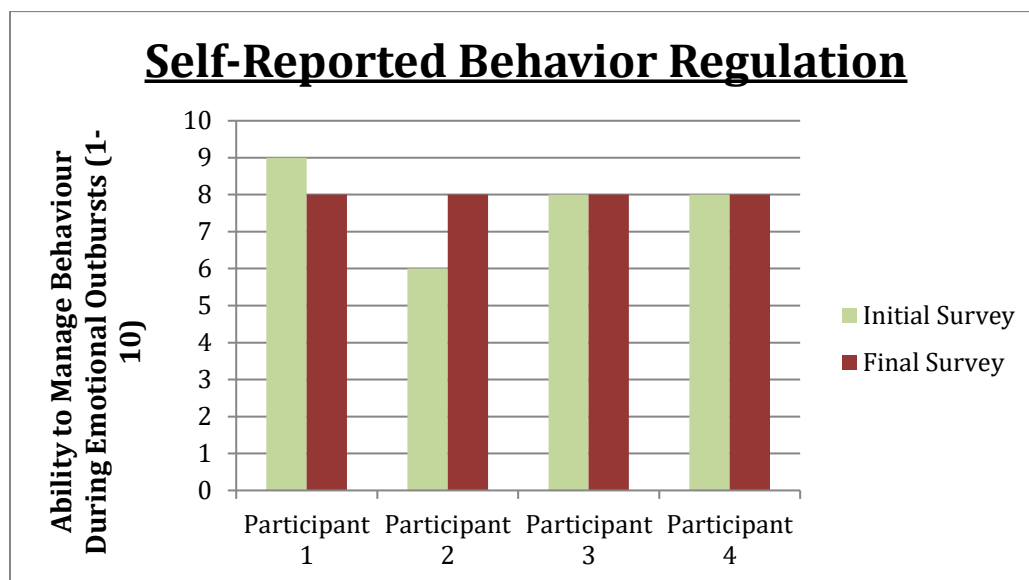


Figure 9. Participants were asked the same question on both surveys: On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 being not at all and 10 being completely), how well do you think you can manage your behavior when experiencing an emotional outburst?

Two participants reported no change, one reported a slight decrease in their ability to regulate their behavior, and one reported a slight increase. These results suggest that the practice of willfully embodied perception while reading short stories may not have an effect on ability to manage behaviour during emotional outbursts.

d. Effectiveness Results and Discussion

During the sessions, participants regularly commented on the mindfulness techniques we were exploring, and the general consensus was that they enjoyed the practices,

especially the Guided Deep Body Scan. Their survey responses reflect this in **Figure 10** and **Table 3**.

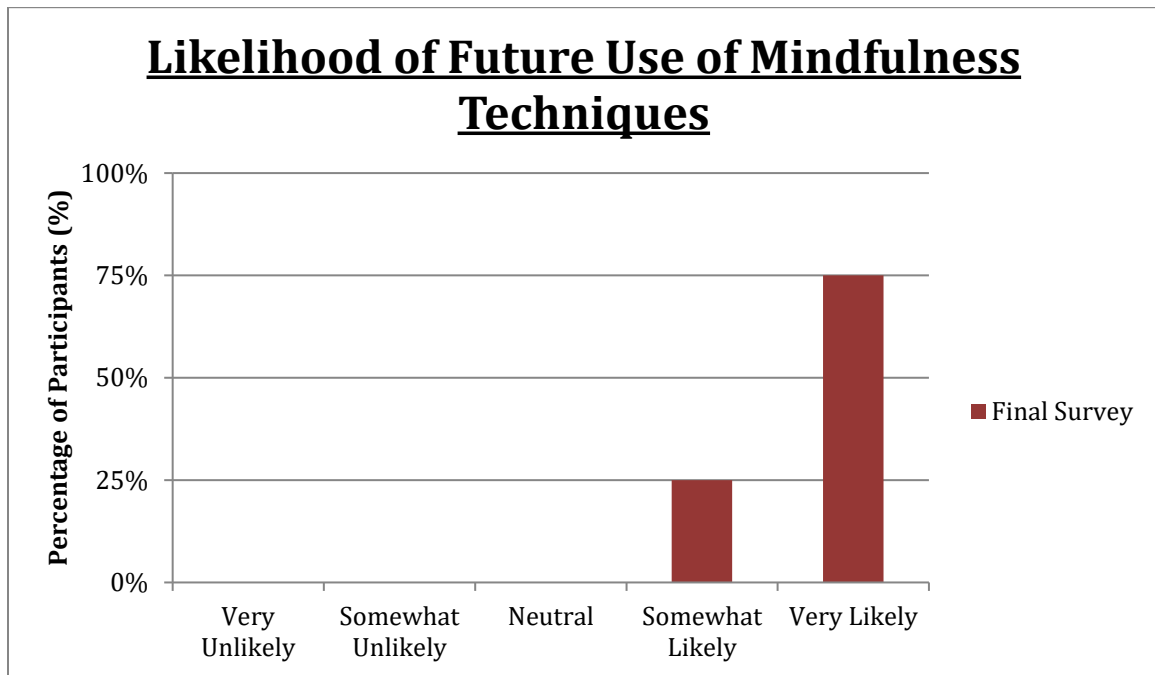


Figure 10. This question appeared on the final survey only: How likely do you feel it is that you will use mindfulness techniques learned in the program in your everyday life going forward?

Participant	Have you applied mindfulness techniques you learned in the program to your daily life?
1	The deep body scan meditations I try to use daily
2	I try to bring some of the techniques we learned in the sessions into my meditation. I find the acknowledgement of certain feelings, oojaioo [sic] breaths and just mindfulness in general to be the biggest ones I took from the sessions
3	Practicing body scans and oceanic breathing
4	Yes. The eating mindfulness I practice almost every day and the overall body scan/body check in I use periodically

Table 3: Applied Mindfulness Techniques. This question appeared on the Final Survey only.

All participants indicated it was somewhat likely or very likely that they will use mindfulness techniques they learned in the sessions in their everyday lives going forward. Three indicated they have practiced the Guided Deep Body Scan specifically, two indicated *ujjayi*/oceanic breathing, and one indicated they had adopted the eating mindfulness practice explored in Lesson 3. The Guided Deep Body scan is probably the most focused practice of what I am calling willfully embodied perception, therefore I think it is significant that most participants (in fact, the same participants) emphasized their application of that specific practice and also experienced increases in empathy (see **Fig. 1**).

The last question on the Final Survey asked participants if they felt that exploring their own emotions, behavior and embodied experience had made them more empathic; their results in **Table 4** are varied and reflect the different definitions of empathy the participants were working with based on their answers in **Table 1**:

Participant	Do you feel that exploring your own emotions, behavior and embodied experience has made you more empathic?
1	Not more empathic but exploring my emotions, feelings behaviors help me to understand them more and have more control over them
2	I believe that perhaps a small part of myself has become more empathic. I typically am only empathic towards people I know, or a situation that concerns me. Essentially, I have a harder time being empathic towards people I don't know
3	Not as much empathic as more respectful to the self. I have begun to trust myself more, definitely more resilience and self-reliant emotionally. Do not actively seek validation, but respect it when it comes my way

4	Yes. Because it is allowing you to become more in tune with yourself, and who you are. For example, without exploring my own emotions I would not be able to see, necessarily, what triggers me to act a specific way. Without this awareness, I am unable to be empathic to myself (sending love and compassion) and also unable to see the situation clearly. I feel as though exploring emotions/behavior and embodied experiences are the root of personal growth
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Table 4: Embodied Experience and Empathy.

Interestingly, two participants explicitly stated they felt they had become more empathic, and the other two expressed that they have a more positive relationship with themselves. Although far from definitive, their subjective responses are an encouraging sign. During the sessions, we discussed the difficulty of having empathy for oneself. I wonder if the written responses from Participants 1 and 3 – which do not explicitly state that they are experiencing self-empathy – hint at a realization that self-empathy is possible or, conversely, reflect their belief that self-empathy is not possible through their reluctance to label their self-understanding and self-respect/trust as increased empathy for the self? Participant 4, on the other hand, explicitly expresses that awareness of their emotions, behavior, and embodied experience enables them to be empathic to themselves and to other situations.

Participant 3's response is notable because it seems to denote a shift in their definition of empathy. In previous questions, Participant 3 stated that they viewed empathy as "going out of your comfort zone to help someone" and listed instances in which they suffered personal risk or discomfort in the act of helping friends as those which had been motivated by empathy (in **Table 2**). In this final response (in **Table 4**), Participant 3 expresses that they are more respectful to the self and "do not actively seek validation." This response makes me wonder whether the helping actions listed by Participant 3 (in **Table 2**) were perhaps more motivated by the pursuit of validation from their friends than

by empathy. Participant 3's responses in both **Table 2** and **Table 4** could explain why this participant had such difficulty feeling empathy for themselves; they judged their self-worth based on how much their helping behavior was validated by others. Participant 3's responses thus offer a different motivation for helping behavior than the other participants; it is even possible that Participant 3's helping behavior was motivated by empathic distress rather than compassion, since it is associated with discomfort. It is therefore possible that Participant 3's response to the final question denotes the beginning of a shift from empathic distress to compassion towards both themselves and others.

It is important to note that all participants reported personal change/growth because of exploring their emotions, behavior, and embodied experience. Participant 1 reported that they understood and had more control over their emotions, behavior and embodied experience; Participant 2 reported a slight increase in empathy and demonstrated self-insight; Participant 3 reported an increase in resilience and self-respect; and Participant 4 reported greater clarity of understanding of the self and others, increased self-compassion, and explicitly stated their belief that "exploring emotions/behavior and embodied experiences are the root of personal growth."

e. Empathy and Narrative

Participants were asked two questions regarding empathy and narrative; **Figure 11** expresses how likely participants were to feel empathy for characters in a narrative and **Table 5** provides their qualitative responses regarding aspects of narrative were most likely to make them feel empathic.

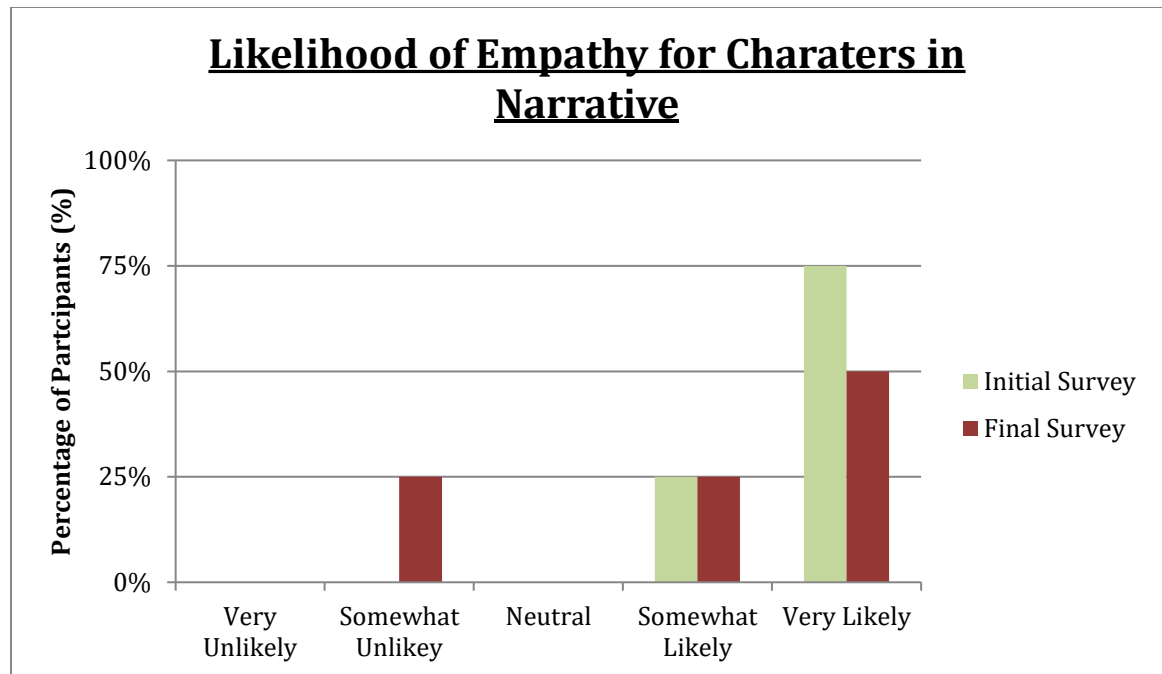


Figure 11. Participants were asked the same question on both surveys: When reading or listening to a narrative (story), how likely are you to feel empathy for the characters?

Most participants indicated they would be somewhat likely or very likely to feel empathy for a character in a narrative, and most participants' answers did not change between the two surveys. Although this is an extremely small sample of participants, their responses lend credence to the idea that narrative may be an effective medium through which to engage with empathy, and that the tendency to feel empathy for characters in a narrative may not be affected by the practice of willfully embodied perception.

Participant	Please describe what aspects of a narrative are most likely to cause you to feel empathy for the characters.
1	A character that is distressed or in despair, and/or overcoming hardship/the odds in their life/the story
2	The aspects that would make me feel empathic would be loving, kind, caring, and overall good moral. It would lead me to be more empathic when a person of these qualities had something unfortunate happen to them

3	Unresolved emotional/psychological trauma/issues pertaining to childhood and young adulthood
4	When characters are going through a challenging time, especially true, when we are given significant details (to relate/understand). And/or, when the story is written in 1 st person

Table 5: Aspects of Narrative Evoking Empathy.

These responses are particularly important to me, as I am interested in further exploring the capabilities of narrative as a medium through which to engage with empathy and difficult knowledge. Participant responses, although subjective and from a small sample, could help to predict effectiveness of narratives with certain traits, or at the very least, provide direction for further investigation. For example, all participants indicated that a character overcoming hardship, trauma or challenges in a narrative would be likely to cause them to feel empathy for the character. This suggests that engaging with difficulty – maybe even with discomfort and stress – through a character in a narrative is a powerful means of experiencing empathy. Additionally, Participants 2 and 4 emphasize the level of detail known about the character as important to empathy, Participant 4 specifies a true story written in the first person, and Participant 3 specifies unresolved issues from the past as particularly empathy-inducing for each of them respectively. Since the results of this study suggest that engaging with the medium of literature through the lens of willfully embodied perception can encourage empathy as a mode of responsiveness, further studies might explore whether different types of narratives and or/means of delivery (oral, written, hybrid; prose, verse, drama; etc.) would be effective.

f. Limitations

First and foremost, this was a very small study with only four participants, therefore larger studies across more varied demographics and environments would be necessary to confirm these results. Additionally, due to the constantly changing restrictions and provincial guidelines throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, I moved the mindfulness sessions to online delivery. I believe that the results have been impacted by this change of delivery method as the activities in the lessons themselves also had to be changed to accommodate moving them online. This mostly constituted changing group activities to individual ones, which obviously has massive implications in a study focused on empathy. Further, the mindfulness training sessions had to be truncated in order to make up for COVID-19-related delays. The original course outline had 9 sessions, but the final version delivered had 5 sessions, therefore it is possible that a longer series of lessons could have had a different effect. Additionally, it is possible that the results would be different if the mindfulness training was provided by a different instructor; perhaps future research could investigate this. Moreover, due to the varied methods of practicing willfully embodied perception used in the training sessions, it is difficult to pin down which method or combination of methods had an effect on empathy, or whether simply trying to teach empathy in general contributed to the results. More research is necessary to clarify whether specific techniques are effective. It may also be useful to explore this type of engagement with a novel rather than a series of short stories; one participant commented that they felt they would empathize more with a protagonist in a novel due to more background information being available, and two participants indicated that high

amounts of detail about a character would increase their probability of an empathic response.

Finally, this study was conducted during an extremely volatile time from a global perspective; I have already commented about the possibility of certain responses being influenced by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but it is also important to note that these participants have been dealing with COVID-19 stress and restrictions for two years. It is possible that participants in a similar program without these very significant stressors in their lives would produce different results.

CHAPTER FIVE: Implications for Future Practice and Research

It is my hope that the findings of my research can be the first steps towards creating a blueprint for future lessons that value the emotional qualities of learning, not instead of, but in addition to analytical logic. My results show nascent support for my assertion that greater awareness of embodied experience while engaging with literature is positively related to the ability to experience empathy. They additionally show that a pro-social response to empathy can be practiced, encouraged, and learned through embodied mindfulness programs engaging with literature. These findings have the potential to begin a shift within the education system, and within the study of literature specifically.

a. Education

Anna Freud's (1960) critical analysis of education systems in *Psychoanalysis for Teachers and Parents* positions social adaptation through instinct-restriction as the main goal of her contemporary pedagogy, and demonstrates why this central aim is problematic. Although she was writing in 1935, the aims of education systems have changed little since her time. In many ways, education forces children to act against their (embodied) instincts from the very beginning (Freud, 1960, p. 58), which, if the embodied simulation theory of empathy is correct, could be complicating the experience of empathy for youth from an early age. It strikes me as problematic that although embodiment is implicitly involved in so many facets of lived experience, it is rarely a central focus in current education systems, at any level. For the purposes of this section, I will use Farley & Kennedy's (2020) definition of embodiment as "the symbolic labour of creating, through symbols and words, a meaningful relationship to the self, to the body, and to the world" (p. 168). Although Farley & Kennedy define embodiment this way

specifically in the context of gender history, I argue that the definition can also be applied to discourse on identity formation as a whole – including emotion and empathic responses – through the lens of performance expectations. MacLure et al. (2012) argue that schools pressure students to “perform the identity of the ‘good school student’” (p. 449). Being a good student involves being “kind, dedicated to sharing, keen to please, and able to control unsanctioned emotions such as jealousy, anger, self-interest, obsession, boredom or spite” (p. 464). I believe that these types of restrictions on emotions in the name of performing ‘the good student’ are affecting students’ ability to empathize, because it denies them opportunities to truly engage with their felt experience of emotion. Freud (1960) likewise points out that “the originality of the [student], together with a great deal of [their] energy and his talents, are sacrificed to being ‘good’” (p. 77). These demands only get more restrictive as the student continues through the education system, which focuses so heavily on the intellectual and conceptual development of the child that emotional components and the embodied nature of human experience, including empathy, are not only ignored, but even maligned. Cohler and Galatzer-Levy (2006) additionally point out that while education teaches children to control their bodies, they are not taught to value or care about them. (p. 246).

It should be noted that I am not advocating for disregarding disembodied logic in education in favour of purely embodied experience; I am simply pointing out that it would be more advantageous if we engaged with the multiple modes of learning available to us, including felt experiences in the present moment. The results of this research suggest that individuals can better understand these bodily means of communication through the practice of willfully embodied perception, according to participants’

qualitative responses in **Table 4**. Therefore, in order to begin to create classroom environments that provide opportunities and support for the embodied experience of emotion and empathy, introducing the practice of willfully embodied perception into lessons could be a preliminary step.

b. Re-thinking STEM

In 1949, during his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, William Faulkner proclaimed “the poet’s voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.” Faulkner clearly understood that poetry can function not merely as an aesthetic expression or distraction, but as a tool that can be utilized to help humanity endure hardship and prevail over destruction. Seventy-three years later, however, contemporary Western education systems - and to some extent, Western culture as a whole - teach that narrative literature, and all the arts, are less-valuable subjects than so-called STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) courses. In fact, the Ontario Government recently announced that they are changing Ontario Curriculum for the first time since 2007 in order to focus *more fully* on STEM courses across all grades (Ontario Government, 2022). The rationale is that STEM courses will open more pathways for students to enter the workforce in the future – but should that be the only function of education? A stable career is of course part of a desirable future, but does not solve all of life’s problems; it does not guarantee healthy interpersonal relationships with others; it does not guarantee mental or physical health; and it does not guarantee a sense of well-being within one’s individual and social life. The rising rates of depression, anxiety and self-harm among adolescents and young adults (Twenge, 2017 p. 302) suggest that young people were not being adequately prepared to face the challenges that

the contemporary adult world presents even before the COVID-19 pandemic. I believe that a contributing factor to the mental health crisis is our education system, because it has become micro-focused on one version of “optimal” thinking - logical reasoning - in the belief that logical reasoning is the single best tool available to humans to facilitate their role in the adult world.

The ongoing overvaluation of logic can be traced to such influential Western philosophers as Plato, Descartes, and Kant, who believed that “logic will, by itself, get us to the best available solution for any problem [...and] to obtain the best results, emotions must be kept *out*” (Damasio, [1994] 2005, p. 171). *But what if that were not true?* Damasio suggests that logic alone will not lead to the best possible solution because it represents only one part of our cognition; emotions are just as cognitive as any other perceptual image (p. 158). These emotions produce feelings in the body which, he suggests, may contribute to more advantageous and efficient decision making (p. 172). If he is correct, then our education system, with its almost complete lack of attention to emotional processes, is only providing youth with a fraction of the preparation they need to navigate adulthood. I suggest that emotional exploration and understanding should be incorporated into both the educational methodology *and* the content of what is being taught wherever possible; units that incorporate embodied learning such as the one used in this research can begin to transform educational methodology. Bringing value back to courses outside of STEM, such as the arts, which more naturally lend themselves to embodied learning, could be another step towards building this kind of educational environment.

Damasio (2012) suggests that art functions as an “external memory system parallel to those held by each brain” (p. 307). Cultural artefacts such as paintings, carvings, sculpture, tools, jewelry, funerary architecture, and the written word thus provide a way for one human to give another human a sense of what it is like to *be* that first human. This is evident in the comparison between the different artistic periods of Picasso, which give viewers a sense of what he *felt* as he transformed through life. His Blue Period is a particularly poignant example; these paintings use cool tones of blue instead of realistic colours, and feature sombre subject matter. This period expresses Picasso’s depression after the suicide of a close friend (Richman-Abdou, 2019). Viewers of the art *feel* a sense of what Picasso felt while creating. I argue that this offers a way of ‘practicing’ embodied perception for spectators, since humans have innate “emotive reaction[s] of pleasure to certain shapes and certain pigments [... as well as to] certain features of sounds and certain kinds of organization of sounds,” such as timbre, pitch and rhythm (Damasio, 2012, p. 313). If we bring our attention to how these innate reactions *feel* in the body through the practice of willfully embodied perception, we can begin to experience the art – and the artist – more directly. Damasio (2012) describes what he views as the evolution of the function of art:

Art may have begun as a homeostatic device for artist and recipient and as a means of communication. Eventually [...] art became a privileged means to transact factual and emotional information deemed to be important for individuals and society, [...] a means to induce nourishing emotions and feelings [...] a way to explore one’s own mind and the minds of others, a means to rehearse specific aspects of life, and a means to exercise moral judgement and moral action. [...] In

brief, the arts prevailed in evolution because they had survival value and contributed to the development of the notion of well-being (pp. 313-314).

If we take Damasio seriously, various forms of art are in fact vitally important to cultural and individual well-being for a variety of reasons, and should therefore be accorded equal value to STEM courses in our education system. The results of this research suggest that shifting educational approaches to narrative literature can be an initial step towards reclaiming the value of non-STEM courses and offer a practical means of incorporating embodied learning into the classroom.

c. Changing the Study of Narrative Literature

When engaging with media such as visual art, perception is usually momentary and private; however, linguistic expressions are “something repeatable and communicable, which is essential to the accumulation and transmission of culture, as well as to social interactions” (Nagataki & Hirose, 2007, pp. 229-230). This brings us back to Faulkner’s observation of poetry as a pillar that can help humanity endure and prevail, because poetry - like narrative literature - has the power to induce an experience in the reader that is more representative of the experience of the poet than could be achieved without words. Language allows a clearer social message to be transmitted because it *extends* perception to some extent; instead of momentary viewing of a piece of art or a single listen to a piece of music, narrative literature demands that one sit with the text for long periods of time to resonate with its meaning. Literature, then, is well positioned to function as a tool for practicing embodied awareness due to its form, which is uniquely balanced so as to situate the experiencing ‘self’ in both the mode of disembodied/logical perception (through language) and the mode of embodied perception (through language’s

power to elicit embodied experiences via devices such as rhythm, imagery and metaphor) simultaneously. Moreover, the detail in narrative literature allows the reader to get a very clear perception of the internal life of another human, facilitating the transmission of experience beyond what is literally written in the text. The participants of my study seem to support this: they indicated that the more detail they received about a narrative character, the more likely they would be to experience empathy for that character.

Damasio (2012) writes that our brains produce “a well-defined protagonist, an autobiographical self” (p. 216) and that “a simple protagonist [is] a clear advantage, because it generate[s] a firm connection between life-regulation needs and the profusion of mental images that the brain [is] forming about the world around it. The guidance of behaviour [is] optimized” (p. 305). Damasio is writing about how the brain produces a sense of *self* through which to encounter the world, but the mechanism of a protagonist in narrative literature is very similar; a protagonist provides a single, specific set of somewhat stable characteristics through which the world of the narrative can be engaged. Perhaps, then, narrative literature is engaging because the use of a protagonist mirrors the way that we consciously perceive ourselves. Novels can provide an extremely deep understanding of this other protagonist because the narrative transmits the experience of the protagonist’s consciousness, which adds to the depth of emotion felt while reading. No other art form provides such an abundant description of the internal life of another human in a format that is so similar to our immediate experience.

The protagonist serves an additional function; it permits the reader to experience difficult situations at a distance. Damasio (2005) suggests that reasoning and deciding are especially arduous “where one’s personal life and its immediate social context are

concerned” because this immediate social domain is the one which “involves the greatest uncertainty and complexity” (p. 169). Observing a protagonist in a piece of narrative literature provides a measure of distance between the reader and his or her emotions during difficult situations within the narrative; if Damasio is correct, this distance may be a facilitator of reasoning in such situations, and therefore an excellent opportunity to practice observing, reflecting on, and to some extent experiencing difficult emotions. Participants’ responses regarding relational groups that would elicit the strongest empathic response seem to align with Damasio’s notion. Participants indicated that a spouse of a friend going through difficulty or a family in need in the neighborhood would elicit more empathy than a disaster in a foreign country or reading about a stranger overcoming an obstacle (**Fig. 2**). The former two choices are closer geographically and relationally to the participants than the latter two choices.

This idea was also demonstrated during the mindfulness sessions in this project. In one instance, a participant commented that because the story being read was about losing a grandmother and the participant still struggled with the loss of their grandmother, it made them feel a more complex emotional response and heightened empathy than they had felt in response to the other short stories. However, during the subsequent discussion, the participant was able to reflect on their own sense of loss and experience the difficult emotion in a supportive way, even coming to a new conclusion about their own grief. It is possible that this working through and acceptance of feelings of loss was facilitated by the distance provided by the protagonist combined with embodied engagement with the text.

Incidentally, the psychological theory of catharsis also posits that the patient must be distant enough from the traumatic situation to *observe* their feelings while simultaneously *feeling* their feelings (Powell, 2008, p. 2). To begin to learn from and even affect those feelings, observing them seems like a reasonable first step; narrative literature, I argue, allows the reader to engage with difficult knowledge and situations through the filter of the protagonist, which provides the distance necessary for the supported exploration of emotions and the feelings they elicit.

In the same way that this distance is necessary for a cognitive shift within the theory of psychological catharsis, a protagonist *other than ourselves* may facilitate beneficial emotion exploration by providing that same measure of distance. Interestingly, several traditional mindfulness techniques also advocate for psychological distance from the situation at hand. One such philosophy is the idea of consciousness being derived from a layered series of conceptual bodies, called *koshas*, beginning with the physical layer and moving through the breath layer, the mental/emotional layer, the witness or awareness layer and finally up to the highest state, the bliss body. Positioned right before the bliss body in the sequence is the *vijnanamaya kosha* which is often thought of as the witness to all other *koshas* (Easwaran, 2007, pp. 252-253). By embodying the role of the witness, you are observing yourself as a protagonist in your own life, thereby providing again that distance prescribed by catharsis theory. Mindfulness practices that bring our awareness to our embodied state, to our thinking mind, or to our emotions – such as the Guided Deep Body Scan used in this research – invoke the witness perspective, which I believe is key to their usefulness from an educational and mental health standpoint. If the protagonist in narrative literature plays a similar role from a consciousness perspective,

as I believe, then the form of the narrative itself as a whole can be viewed as a valuable emotional educational instrument.

From the point of view of Gangopadhyay's (2014) embodied simulation view of empathy, the presence of a protagonist in narrative literature may allow individuals to practice shifting to an empathic mode of responsiveness (by increasing familiarity with their own action control, emotions and sensations), which could lead to the adoption of the same mode of responsiveness in real-world situations with continued practice. The results of this research support this idea; after completing sessions that used embodied mindfulness techniques to explore literature, a modest majority of my participants reported an increase in their general empathy levels (**Fig.1**) and an increase in empathy leading to helping behaviour (**Fig. 3**). This suggests that the mindfulness sessions delivered for this study began to facilitate an empathic mode of responsiveness. This is a function of narrative literature that is completely overlooked in contemporary education; engaging with narrative using willfully embodied perception can allow us to reflect on the actions, emotions and sensations experienced by a protagonist as he or she moves through a character arc¹², which facilitates gaining familiarity with one's own action control and feelings; if Gangopadhyay is correct, and according to the results of this study, this aspect of narrative literature provides a means of *practicing* empathy.

Literature, with its deep emotional character, and its mirroring of human conscious experience through the mechanism of a protagonist, has one further element that I believe is key to its usefulness as a means of practicing empathy: a *narrative*.

Firstly, a narrative describes how the protagonist feels, how their thoughts are patterned,

¹² The transformation (physical, emotional, relational, mental, etc.) of a character over the course of a narrative.

what they are thinking about and how they are coming to decisions as they move through a character arc or situation; as I have said, this is arguably the closest one human can get to perceiving the felt experience of another human. Furthermore, these are the things we are encouraged to investigate in ourselves during mindfulness practices, so it could be that the act of *observation* during an embodied state of perception - *regardless* of whether the observation is of the self as protagonist or the protagonist in a narrative - is an element that contributes to empathy. This research suggests that both the observation of the self as protagonist and a narrative protagonist *in tandem* is related to the ability to empathize. Most participants indicated they would be “very likely” to feel empathy for a character in a narrative (**Fig. 11**) and indicated, through their qualitative responses, that they had begun to observe themselves using mindfulness practices (**Table 4**), and that their empathy levels increased (**Fig. 1**). Secondly, the narrative provides a detailed and ongoing description of the protagonist’s internal world. If the writing is skilled enough or relational enough to generate an emotional response in the reader, the brain can simulate certain body states as if they were occurring, causing the reader to literally *feel* as if the body state is actually occurring, even if it is not (Damasio, 2012, p. 109). Thus, the narrative causes the reader to literally *feel for* the protagonist, creating a sense of heightened emotion in order to *experience it* and, importantly, simultaneously providing an opportunity to practice empathy. Participants commented during several of the sessions after reading the stories that they felt the emotion of the character in their bodies in ways that the character might themselves feel. Lesson 3 included a short story about a sweat-lodge experience, and participants commented that they felt as though they had also gone through a spiritual experience after reading the story.

The protagonist in a piece of narrative literature usually goes through a character arc that often results in a change in perspective; this arc can provide a model of how one might engage with difficult situations. I am not suggesting that we do or should strive to model our lives off of protagonists in narrative literature; rather, I posit that experiencing how an other behaves, thinks, and feels can begin to teach us, perhaps at an unconscious level, the types of emotional responses that are and are not beneficial in specific circumstances, and let us experience, in a sense, the consequences that those responses can result in. If even one ‘lesson’ is realized by the reader through narrative modelling, then a change in worldview has occurred, since embodied, emotional responses are so vital to cognition. Practices that allow a shift in awareness to embodied physical experience, such as guided deep body scans, can “[open] the eye to a new possibility of rebuilding our worldview [...] by educating our bodily consciousness” (Francesconi p. 281). Facilitating a change in worldview in individuals is necessary if we are to collectively interact with the world and each other from an empathic mode. What Damasio (2012) terms “social emotions” - compassion, embarrassment, shame, guilt, contempt, jealousy, envy, pride, and admiration - incorporate several moral principles and “form a natural grounding for ethical systems” (p. 134). Conveniently, these social emotions are explored in many works of narrative literature, again making it a valuable tool for emotional education in individuals, and also providing a means of exploring empathy. For example, if I experience crippling embarrassment through a protagonist who is mercilessly bullied, I might be motivated not only to never be a bully myself, but to do my best to stop other people from being bullied because it feels so unpleasant. Perhaps that is wishful thinking, but Damasio (2012) makes an important point: “moral

behaviours are a skill set, acquired over repeated practice sessions and over a long time, informed by consciously articulated principles and reasons but otherwise ‘second-natured’ into the cognitive unconscious” (p. 287). Moral behaviour and empathy, like willfully embodied perception, require practice; narrative literature offers many practice instances experienced by one protagonist over a long period of time, especially in a novel, and can therefore be viewed as a mechanism through which a change in worldview can occur. The findings of this study suggest that literature units that incorporate embodied engagement can provide access to this function. The more opportunities that we can create for young people to recognize and make these small shifts in worldview, the more natural the empathic mode of responsiveness will become.

With almost no attention paid to emotion in education, it is no wonder that youth are overwhelmed when something truly difficult does happen. After teaching high school for a decade, I am very aware of how difficult educating emotions can be - but I believe that makes it all the more important to provide whatever guidance we can to those who come after us. Literature is a uniquely far-reaching medium of expression; it spans across space (due to its portable nature), time, culture (due to translations), and consciousness (embodied and disembodied). Literature *as a medium* is present in almost every contemporary culture, which facilitates ‘translating’ experiences between cultures, since it makes use of an existing conceptual framework. The written word also carries on long after the author has passed, therefore preserving some version of his perceived self for generations to learn from. Finally, from the perspective of contemporary Canadian education systems, making use of narrative literature as a means of emotion education makes sense, since students are already expected to read narrative literature, and no new

resources would need to be allocated; teachers need only change the way narrative literature is taught to help young people, and the world, begin to benefit from more of the functions this incredible tool possesses. I hope that the lesson plans in the unit I created for this research can serve as preliminary models for exploring what this kind of education could look like in the classroom.

d. Literature and *Willfully Embodied Perception*

Literature can provide *insight* in the traditional understanding of the word, but I suggest that it can also facilitate our ability to observe ourselves - in other words, to move our 'sight' inwards, to our bodies. Practicing willfully embodied perception while engaging with narrative literature may allow us to become aware of uncalibrated somatic markers associated with certain situations. In fact, psychology already uses an intervention based on this assumption, called affective bibliotherapy, which involves guided reading of fictional stories focusing on emotional self-exploration, repressed thoughts, and experiences. Betzalel & Shechtman (2010) give the example of children being read a story about other children experiencing fear; after hearing the story, the children began to share their own emotions and experiences with fear (p. 430). Literature, in other words, can provide a means by which to enter into a conversation about the issues that created the 'faulty' somatic markers in the first place; perhaps by becoming aware of these processes, individuals may be able to explore and work through their emotions enough to recalibrate those somatic markers. When combined with the practice of willfully embodied perception, I believe narrative literature is an excellent tool to help us move towards a more balanced mode of consciousness and facilitate empathic responsiveness.

The findings of this study, and in particular the responses of one participant, might indicate that somatic markers have begun to recalibrate as a result of the mindfulness sessions. The participant stated that they had been unable to continue to read aloud the story in Lesson 4 because they had become too choked up because the story was about losing a grandmother. The participant even expressed that they “hated themselves” at one point. During the subsequent discussion, the participant expressed that reading the story and observing their embodied response had resulted in the realization that the overwhelming emotion the story elicited was guilt because the participant still blamed themselves for not being there at the time of their own grandmother’s passing. The participant expressed relief that they had pinpointed the source of their overwhelming emotion and we discussed the idea that this passed loved-one would never want the participant to feel guilty about their passing. This participant seemed visibly relieved by the end of the session. Although more discussions over a longer time would be required to ascertain whether or not this change in mindset endures over time, it was an interesting shift to note during the sessions.

e. A Note on Mindfulness in Education

In contemporary education circles, mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) have been critiqued as having been “overly instrumentalised in a manner consistent with a ‘technical’ worldview, in order to serve the broader goals of neoliberalism” (Brito et al., 2021, p. 303). Indeed, this critique importantly mirrors broader critiques of how philosophical concepts and experiences – including empathy, but also ethics more broadly – become diminished when they are instrumentalized to serve rather narrow educational outcomes (Todd, 2003). However, if mindfulness is conceived of “as

education” instead of as a tool “in education,” Brito et al. argue, it can “offer the potential for more holistic and authentic learning” (2021, p. 302). It is this idea of mindfulness *as* education that I believe may hold the key to a pedagogical approach that garners the kind of truly meaningful, embodied learning that facilitates empathy. It is, however, important to consider the neoliberal traps that MBIs can fall into. For example, MBIs are often linked to wellbeing, and wellbeing is often equated with fun experiences. Vintimilla (2014) suggests, when “fun” learning is equated with “good” learning, it downplays engagements with difficulty, trouble, and even upset as important places of making meaning (p. 83). In Vintimilla’s words, a neoliberal pedagogy of fun supports pedagogical practices that “have moved away from allowing ambivalence in children’s emotional lives or supporting ways of being that are more complex than being happy” (p. 82).

By putting this important critique at the fore, mindfulness *as* education may help educators enter precisely this terrain of difficulty by re-introducing the *uncomfortable* experience of other ways of being in the world into the classroom. Sonu (2020) writes that in classrooms, both psychic and relational conflicts are often repressed because of “the intolerance adults have to engage that liminal gap between what we do and do not want to know” (p. 109); this is problematic because these conflicts also “engage us with feelings that are central to our understanding of self and others” (p. 108). Avoiding difficult knowledge in the classroom could thus be complicating student’s capacities to relate to and/or empathize with themselves or others because it denies them a supported environment in which to experience other ways of being in the world.

The short stories used in this study included many opportunities to engage with difficult knowledge, including themes of unfairness, deprivation, betrayal, loss, and despair. However, each of the stories was insulated by a Guided Deep Body Scan before reading and a guided meditation on loving compassion afterward, and participants commented that although what they were feeling was sometimes difficult, they understood and embraced the value of engaging with those feelings. All participants expressed that they felt they had grown beneficially throughout the sessions (**Table 4**) *despite* the difficult subject matter. The structure of the mindfulness sessions used in this study could thus serve as a blueprint for bringing difficult knowledge into the classroom – including difficult knowledge that might produce feelings of empathy – in a supportive, meaningful way. I argue that encountering difficult knowledge can be assisted by the practice of experiencing emotional *discomfort* in the body in a supported environment, such as a classroom. Mindfulness as education can thus be a resource for what Dr. Vidya Shah (2019) calls “socially engaged Buddhism,” which “invites the *embodiment* of interconnectedness instead of the rational understanding of it” [*italics mine*] (p. 54). It is this *embodied experience* aspect of Buddhism that particularly intrigues me as a mode of learning that might also be valuable from a pedagogical perspective.

Sonu (2020) further suggests that educational discourses tend to aim for “resolution or consensus, rather than sitting with affect and emotion as the mode of explanation itself” (p. 108). To move towards a more balanced engagement with students, contemporary pedagogy may do well to place value on felt, emotional experience as a mode of explanation and learning. Exploring learning through embodied experience could inform future pedagogy and produce a more socially engaged, emotionally

significant learning environment for youth, one in which they have the opportunity to engage with difficult knowledge and empathy in a supported setting.

f. Conclusion

This thesis has argued that pairing a GDBS with engagement with narrative literature can allow the reader to experience the narrative from an embodied mode of perception rather than simply a disembodied one, which has traditionally been considered more valuable. It further argued that experiencing literature in this way allows for an opportunity to practice an empathic mode of engagement through bringing awareness to bodily sensation while reading about heightened emotional situations, thus allowing the reader to become more familiar with what certain emotions feel like within their own body. If practicing a GDBS can help individuals engage with literature in this way, perhaps a re-imagining of current English curriculum - one that includes and values emotion and bodily sensation - can begin, and literature can reclaim a lost purpose.

In his book, Loy (2008) points out that the attention of contemporary culture has been conditioned to be fragmented due to the constant availability of connectivity to infinite information (p. 97). Further, he suggests that our attention has become commodified by our consumer society, in which advertisements capture our awareness (p. 98). Finally, Loy suggests that our attention is controlled by the media, which “focus our collective attention on the things that really matter: the Superbowl, the price of gas, the latest murder or sex scandal,” even as “the earth begins to burn [and] ecosystems start to collapse” (p. 101). With so many attention traps pulling us ever further away from an embodied state, it is little wonder that we rarely bring attention to our present embodied state. Damasio (2012) cautions that, “in the generation that has grown up multi-tasking,

in the digital age, the upper limits of attention in the human brain are being rapidly raised, something that is likely to change certain aspects of consciousness in the not-too-distant future, if it has not done so already.” These changes, while producing some advantages, “may have trade-off costs in terms of learning, memory consolidation, and emotion” (p. 185).

I argued that narrative literature can shift our attention away from attention traps because it provokes experiences which are felt in the body for more protracted periods over a longer timespan than any other art form. In this way, it can function as a method of willfully shifting one’s engagement with the world towards a more embodied state - in other words, it can be a method of practicing willfully embodied perception. A Guided Deep Body Scan (GDBS) practiced before engaging with literature calls for awareness to be brought to the embodied experience, and thus may contribute to a more empathic mode of responsiveness to the world according to Gangopadhyay’s (2014) embodied simulation view of empathy. Further, if literature is *experienced* in the body rather than simply read in a disembodied way, it too can be considered a method of practicing an empathic mode of responsiveness, since the heightened emotion in the narrative can cause the reader to literally *feel for* the protagonist. This is useful in a society that has valued disembodied modes of consciousness which, based on Gangopadhyay’s embodied simulation view, can complicate practicing an empathic mode of responsiveness.

The findings in this study suggest that practicing willfully embodied perception through Guided Deep Body Scans before, during, and after reading a narrative may increase empathy and helping behaviour motivated by empathy. It thus supports the idea that pro-social responses to empathy can be practiced, encouraged, and learned through

embodied mindfulness programs engaging with literature, and suggests that a compassionate response to empathic resonance (rather than an empathic distress response) is a teachable skill. Participant responses indicated that engaging with difficulty – maybe even with discomfort and stress – through a character in a narrative is a powerful yet supportive means of experiencing empathy. Taken together, the results support the idea that a simple shift to an embodied engagement with literature in the classroom can have a profound positive impact on relationships between students, schools, and communities.

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APPENDIX A: Guided Deep Body Scan (GDBS)

*The following GDBS is inspired by *yoga nidra*, or “yogic sleep,” a guided meditation meant to suspend the practitioner in the state of consciousness between waking and sleeping to induce a sense of deep relaxation. My version is more focused on the practice of consciously shifting awareness to the practitioner’s embodied state, although it will likely ultimately have a similar sedative effect.

**Please note that this only represents an initial version of the scan; practitioners can also be asked to move their attention to different areas of their bodies in different orders, flip back and forth between areas, bring their awareness to their whole body simultaneously etc. in order to practice the act of shifting attention.

Participants are asked to lie on their mats on their backs, with their hands palm up on either side of their bodies to begin, or to sit in any comfortable position.

The following is my script. The paragraph breaks represent pauses to let participants turn their awareness inward:

Bring your awareness to your body. Is there any way that you could make yourself more comfortable? Any small shifts in position that would alleviate tension somewhere in your body?

Bring your awareness to your breath. Notice the belly rising and falling. Notice the cool air being brought into your body, and the warm air being expelled.

Begin to slow your breathing. Breathing in through the nose and out through the nose, try to make your exhale slightly longer than your inhale. If you’d like to count, try for an inhale to a count of 4 and an exhale to the count of 6.

Notice if your breath is shallow. We often do not take full breaths throughout our day. Think about breathing deeply into the lungs, filling them with as much air as they can hold, and then exhale with control, again making your exhale slightly longer. Try to let the belly rise first on the inhale, followed by the chest, as you fill the lungs from

bottom to top. On the exhale, repeat the process in reverse, first letting the chest empty, and then the belly, top to bottom.

See if you can make your exhales audible by slightly constricting the back of the throat; this will also give you more control over the exhale. This is called *ujjayi breath* or oceanic breath, since the sound should remind you of an ocean wave rolling on to shore. *(I will demonstrate)*

Try to keep your *ujjayi breath* throughout the practice. If you find you've lost it, that's ok, just come back to it.

Bring your awareness to your left big toe. Notice the temperature of the air or the texture of the fabric over your toe. Notice what it feels like below the skin of the toe, right through to the bone. There's no need to label anything or judge anything, just notice. Now picture all of the layers of your left big toe relaxing, melting away from the bones, as the bones sink toward the earth. Notice if the sensation has changed - you might begin to feel a tingling sensation.

(I repeat this, more or less, for each toe on the left foot).

Now bring your attention to the sole of your left foot. Think about all the places your feet take you, and maybe bring a sense of gratitude into your awareness. Picture all of the tiny bones throughout your foot, and relax everything in your foot, all the way down to those bones. Notice any sensation. Come back to your *ujjayi breath*.

(I repeat this for the right foot, then left ankle, right ankle, left shin, right shin, left knee, right knee, left thigh, right thigh, left hip and buttock, right hip and buttock, emphasizing no judgement, just pure awareness, and then release of tension)

Now bring your attention to the base of the spine and the bowl of the hips. Notice how your skin tightens when you take a deep belly breath; feel the space that each breath

creates between your bones; and let everything relax, release tension. If you come across a spot that is holding tension, pause there. Come back to your breath. See if you can get the spot to relax.

Now, can you bring your attention to your internal organs and viscera? As you take deep belly breaths imagine that you are giving your organs a gentle massage, and again bring in a sense of gratitude for all of the vital functions your organs carry out for you. Take one more deep belly breath and release, letting all tension melt away, and letting your organs sink towards the floor as everything relaxes. Feel the mid back spreading across your mat as it releases.

Bring your awareness to your rib cage and sternum. Feel the bones expand as you inhale your deepest breath yet today. Pause when your lungs are full and notice the sensation, the expansiveness. Exhale with control and notice how everything releases and empties, how the rib cage settles and the sternum sinks. Take another deep breath and bring your attention to your heart. Can you feel it beating? Notice the quality of the vibration; your heart sets the rhythm of your whole body, so when its vibration is dampened, it can have a whole host of other effects. Is there some emotion tugging at your heart, affecting its rhythm? Breathe into the emotion; just notice it, try not to judge it. It's there for a reason, and even if you don't know yet what that reason is, acknowledging it can help to move through it. Come back to your breath.

Now, can you let go of that emotion? Can you be simply a passive observer of the emotion? Take one more deep belly breath and let it simply float away. Feel your heart become lighter, more expansive. Focus on the breath.

(I then repeat the same process I used for the legs on the shoulders, upper back, left shoulder, left upper arm, left elbow, left forearm, wrist, palm, back of the hand, and each finger; same for right side)

Bring your awareness to your neck, and your throat. Feel the cool air sliding through your airway as it travels down to your lungs. Notice if the breath feels obstructed; can you release any areas that are holding tension?

Release your jaw, separate the teeth, and unstick your tongue from the roof of your mouth. Can you find the base of the tongue and release it all the way to its tip? Release the cheeks; notice how it feels to just let everything go, let everything relax. Feel your eyes become heavy in their sockets, as though they are sinking toward the floor. Notice the space between the eyebrows, and let that skin become smooth and relaxed.

Bring your awareness to your thoughts. Notice that you are not your thoughts, because you can observe them just as you can observe your body and your emotions. We often forget that we are not our thoughts, and we let them take us away from the present moment. When we think about something that happened in the past, or about something that might happen in the future, our body responds as if the thought is happening in the present; but if you come back to the present moment, to what it feels like to be in this present moment, the thoughts begin to just drift away, and the body begins to relax. See if you can move your awareness above your thoughts; notice their quality; are they racing? Are they moving slow? Again, try your best not to bring judgment, simply notice. Remember to breathe.

Imagine that someone is giving you a gentle scalp massage, stimulating every tiny hair follicle, relaxing all of the muscles across your entire scalp, letting all tension simply melt away. Notice how your entire body feels in this moment; the sense of calm, peace, expansiveness and softness. Remember that you can come back to this feeling whenever you want to.

APPENDIX B: Lesson Plans

Lesson One: Excitement/Disappointment

Activity	Time	Description
Introductions	10 min	I provide a brief introduction of myself and a brief overview of the program and its aims (this will be a review of information participants already know from the consent forms they signed)
Distribution of Materials	10 min	Participants are given their Body Scan Journals and instructions on how/when to use them. They are invited to use them immediately, if they wish.
Participant Introductions	10 min	Participants are asked to introduce themselves and share any experience they have had with mindfulness, meditation or yoga.
Mindfulness Introduction	10 min	I give a brief lesson on the definition of “mindfulness” that I am working from. I will also define <i>willfully embodied perception</i> and explain how the guided deep body scan facilitates this practice.
Guided Deep Body Scan	20 min	Participants are guided through a deep body scan that encourages them to focus on their embodied perception through bringing awareness to their <i>feelings</i> in their present state within their environment. (See Appendix A)
Snapshot #1	40 min	“Snapshot #1” is read aloud/performed. During the dialogue, participants are given three choices: read the lines as written; respond in a way that you think the character would respond; or respond the way they think <i>they</i> would respond in the same situation.

Discussion	10 min	Participants are invited to share sensations they are perceiving in their bodies, memories they are being brought back to, or thoughts they are having.
Breath Work	10 min	Participants are taught <i>ujjayi</i> breathing and led through a loving kindness and compassion visualization

Snapshot #1

Two months ago, I entered a burning building for the first time. Clad in ill-fitting ancient pants and overcoats that might once have been called yellow, three of us knelt outside of a door with smoke pouring out from its edges. Our oxygen masks, helmets, flash hoods, and boots, combined with the oxygen tanks on our backs, meant that we were each carrying around 50 pounds of gear.

I was closest to the door, holding the nozzle of a charged hose that was thicker in diameter than my forearm. Behind me, one of my classmates carried an axe in one hand, and behind him, another classmate carried the weight of the hose with it clutched under his arm like a football. We were left of centre of the door, closer to the hinge side, so that the door would offer us some protection from the blast of heat we had been told would erupt from the doorway. We were waiting – or more accurately I was waiting – for a radio order from our captain giving us permission to enter.

Suddenly, a tongue of orange flame licked out of a window to my left and I fought the nearly uncontrollable urge to run away from the fire, not towards it. A cold sweat broke out over my body; a drop made my nose itch and when I automatically went to wipe it away, my thick glove connected with my face mask. *Dumbass.*

“Alpha Team, you have permission to enter.” The radio on my shoulder crackled. I thumbed the device awkwardly. “Copy that. Alpha Team entering West rear door.” I looked over my shoulder at my two classmates, who gave me a thumbs up, and then beyond them to our fourth, who stood a little distance away, feeding the hose to us. He gave the thumbs-up too, and I turned back to the door. A blast of excitement laced with terror ripped through me as I pulled the door open with my gloved hand and then shrank back behind it.

The heat was incredible. I could feel it even through the layers of fire protective clothing, and it made the air beside us ripple as it surged out of the doorway. The tongue of flame to our left exploded momentarily into a good-sized fireball, before returning to its smaller state.

I motioned for the others to back up so that we could get around the door, and I got my first glimpse of the inside of the building. Smoke billowed down a staircase from the right, and the hallway ahead of us was only visible for a few metres before it was swallowed by dense darkness. I thumbed the radio again. "This is Alpha Team, heavy smoke coming from upper floor and main floor hallway, permission to search main floor?"

"Copy that Alpha Team, search main floor." This was it. Straight on. I motioned the others forward and we shuffle-crawled over the threshold. I immediately placed my left palm against the left wall, so that I could find my way back out if I lost contact with the hose. We continued our awkward shuffle and within about thirty seconds, we could no longer see the door. We could no longer see anything.

Suddenly, I felt the edge of an internal doorway. "Stop!" I yelled. "Door!" Number Two moved closer behind me and put his hand on my shoulder so that the force of the hose wouldn't throw me across the room when I turned it on. We took another shuffling step and I could suddenly see orange flickering light. Adrenaline rushed through me and the word "fire" ripped from my throat.

"Hit it!" Number Two yelled.

I barely remembered to turn the powerful hose on slowly, and my hand was jerking uncontrollably, so the stream of water came out in spurts and starts. Steam hissed and erupted from the corner and it suddenly became so hot that I was concerned our clothes weren't going to protect us. I also became very aware of a hole in the pinky finger of my left glove. But then, little by little, the black smoke was replaced by white steam and we could see daylight through an open window. The fire looked to have been a large pile of wood and hay. There was nothing else in the room, but there were steps leading downward on the far side, which were smoke-free.

"Alpha Team, report," the radio crackled.

"This is Alpha Team. Fire extinguished on ground floor, no victims. Permission to search basement steps?"

"Copy that Alpha Team. Leave one person at the top of the stairs with the hose to make sure fire doesn't restart. 2 to search basement."

"Copy that. " I looked to my two classmates, their eyes bright and faces flushed behind their masks. We could hear shouts of another team entering, and I suddenly became aware of the deafening wail of smoke alarms. I motioned to Number Two and myself and pointed towards the basement, and handed Number Three the nozzle.

We made our careful way down the stairs and began methodically searching for the victim we knew must be there. The basement was pitch black and smoke-filled once we reached the bottom of the stairs. Pools of water sloshed on the floor as we crawled, and streams of water seeped down through the ceiling from the hoses battling flames on the upper levels. With my partner's hand on my ankle, we searched for victims and tried to maintain our sense of the exit so that we didn't become victims ourselves. I could feel the cold water seeping into the burn holes in my left glove as I swept the floor with my palm in a wide arc. My right hand was attached to the wall this time, and without the hose, it was the only lifeline I had, since I could see nothing through the dense smoke and darkness. My partner's only lifeline was his right hand around my ankle, so I was responsible for both of us. Or, to be more accurate, my right palm attached to the wall was responsible for both of us. I could hear the rasping of the axe he carried as he swept it across the floor in an arc, covering ground that I couldn't reach without letting go of the wall.

"Hang on!" My partner tightened his grip on my ankle to stop me and I paused.

"What is it?" I yelled, my respirator making me sound like Darth Vader.

"I think I've got a victim!" he yelled back, except it sounded like "I'm a victim!" over the noise of the hoses and fire alarms, and through the filter of his respirator and my helmet and flash hood. He groped for my free hand through the darkness and guided it to the rubber arm of our "victim," which was really a semi-humanoid figure made of old fire hoses.

"Ok, let's get him out," I yelled back, not knowing if he understood me or not. He knew what we had to do regardless though. We reversed positions, now keeping both of

our left hands to the wall, and draped the heavy hose-man between us, before making our slow way back through the darkness and smoke until we saw the faint, far patch of white light that denoted the exit.

*

Sometimes I feel like I'm two different people leading two different lives. On the one hand, I'm a kind, well-liked, intelligent high school guidance counsellor who genuinely cares about her students, despite having a terrible principal who does not. On the other, I'm a firefighter in training who practices martial arts somewhat obsessively and relishes the rush of adrenaline that the latter two activities provide.

I know which one I prefer. I've almost finished the last bit of training that I need to apply to firefighting positions. I only have a little more time in this shithole office under a tyrannical boss who is incapable of completing the most basic of tasks effectively and who creates more work than she completes. Almost there.

*

Later that afternoon, I sit awkwardly in the two paper gowns I've been given by the nurse as I wait to see the rheumatologist. Obviously, I've already ripped one of the gowns. I glance down at my body to see if everything that should be covered is covered, and then reflect that it doesn't matter anyway. *Unless there was a fire alarm or something*, I point out to myself, and resume checking.

I jump as the door opens and my rheumatologist, a woman in perhaps her late thirties with dark brown eyes, dark wavy hair, and a brusque, no-nonsense vibe that I like immediately, enters the room.

I like what she has to say far less.

"Hello Violet. I've reviewed all of your test results and the reports from your other specialists," she begins, as she gestures for me to lie back. She begins methodically prodding, bending and poking each joint in my toes. "I disagree with the previous diagnosis of lupus." My heart leaps, but before I can even exclaim, she adds, "I believe you have an autoimmune condition called ankylosing spondylitis that has caused bone degeneration in some of your joints." She moves on to probe and bend my left knee as my brain jams. I can't even pronounce the condition, but bone degeneration sounds bad.

How would that affect my firefighting? “Spo,” (she pronounces it like ‘spa’) “attacks the joints and the tendons attaching to the joints. It’s a sister to rheumatoid arthritis, except it is centered in the spine, as the name suggests.”

“Could – could I ask a question?” I venture tentatively.

“Of course.” She moves on to my hips. Everywhere that she pokes hurts dully.

“Would it be possible for the degeneration that you saw to be caused by old injuries? Because I’ve had a lot of injuries from martial arts,” I say, not willing to accept her diagnosis.

Her eyes flicker to mine briefly, and I see a hint of pity that terrifies me.

“Unfortunately, no. I can see the old injuries too – the spo has likely been contributing to your injuries.” That makes perfect sense to me; I’m always getting weird injuries. I feel like I’m sinking in a pit of quicksand.

“What – what do we do about it?” My voice sounds hoarse from between my suddenly dry lips.

She rotates one of my shoulders gently and then moves down to probe the elbow.

“Well, we’ve caught it pretty early. It’s likely that a virus you’ve had recently caused the flare up, so it’s lucky we found it. I think we can halt the bone degeneration if we treat it aggressively.”

“What’s the treatment?”

“It’s a mild form of chemotherapy.” My brain jams again. *Chemotherapy?* “You take it by injection or pill form, once a week. The drug depletes your liver of folic acid, so you’ll also have to take a prescription folic acid supplement twice a week, but not on the same day as the chemotherapy.”

“What - what are the side effects like?” I manage.

She is prodding the knuckles on my hand and I can’t help but flinch as a hot stab of electric pain erupts from my ring finger. “It varies from patient to patient. Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, fatigue, weight loss, occasionally hair loss.”

Tears sting at the corners of my eyes as she switches to my other hand. I have terrible tolerance for drugs. “I – I’m trying to switch careers to become a firefighter,” I blurt, and she pauses for an infinitesimal second that causes my gut to twist in panic.

“And I train in mixed martial arts pretty intensively. How will this affect those things?” I ask, dreading the answer.

She motions for me to sit up, and then removes and discards her gloves before she answers. “Look,” she begins. “You are obviously fairly fit and healthy, right?” I nod. “The key to living with Spo is to keep moving. For most patients, I would encourage them to exercise, and it’s a challenge for them. That’s not going to be your problem. And I absolutely want you to keep exercising, but you need to change the way you recover, and try to limit high impact exercises. And you are not allowed to push through pain anymore. If you’re injured, you have to rest until you are fully healed.”

“I can do that!” I answer, my heart finally beginning to beat again. Maybe I could still make firefighting work! I would just have to train smarter! And jiu jitsu was technically low impact!

“But keep in mind, you are more prone to injury than the average person. I’m not sure how that will affect firefighting.” She looks me straight in the eyes and says, “If you were firefighting, and there was a victim trapped on the 21st floor and you had to run up the stairs to get him, knowing that your knees will be damaged because of it, would you do it?”

“Of course.” I say, without hesitation.

She nods. “That’s what I thought. Now, imagine if your knee gave out on the way up and they had to rescue you instead, and the victim died.” A swoop of nausea engulfs me. “Or imagine if your partner were to get injured, and you couldn’t help him because your knees couldn’t take it, how would you feel then?”

Heat rushes to my face and I feel my throat begin to close; this can’t be happening. Not after all the work I’ve done. Not after everything I’ve sacrificed. Not after all this time. “I’m sorry, but you need to hear the truth.” She says, and she lays a hand gently on my knee. “Some people with this condition can’t even work. I can see that that isn’t an option for you, so I’m going to treat your Spo aggressively to keep you as active as I possibly can, and hopefully we can keep you working for as long as you want. I don’t doubt that you could push through and pass the physical tests for firefighting – but just remember to consider the question of how long you could realistically serve for. If it’s still worth it to you, then aim for it. Just be careful, and think about it.”

I grip her hand, barely controlling the tears that are burning insistently at the corners of my eyes. “Thank you for being so honest with me.”

She nods and arranges some papers before telling me she’ll see me in 3 months to see how the medication is working and then breezes out of the room, leaving me clutching the paper gowns in palms drenched in cold sweat.

In all of seven minutes, my life has derailed.

Dialogue for Snapshot #1

Sitting in her car in the hospital parking lot, the protagonist (VIOLET) unlocks her mobile phone with shaking hands. She taps a circular icon labelled “Mom,” and raises the phone to her ear.

MOM: Hello?

VI: *(faintly)* Hey, it’s me.

MOM: *(a beat)* Hello?

VI: *(loudly)* Mom, it’s me. It’s Vi. Can you hear me?

MOM: Yes, I can hear you now, it’s this fucking phone, it does this all the time!

VI: *(stifles a laugh)* Uh huh. How are you and Dad?

MOM: We’re fine, how was your appointment with the rheumatologist? That was today, wasn’t it?

VI: Mom, why are you keeping track of my appointments still?

MOM: *(flustered)* I just - I just like to know, you know I like to know those things!

VI: (*sighs*) I know. Yes it was today.

MOM: What did she say?

VI: Uhh... apparently I have something called ankylosing spondylitis... it's why I was getting injured so much...

MOM: Well that makes sense, you need to be more careful!

VI: (*rolls her eyes*) Yes mother. Anyway, I guess it can break down my bones and fuse my spine if it's left untreated... but they've caught it really early on apparently...

MOM: (*gasps*) Oh Vi! (*her voice shakes*) I wish this wasn't happening to you!

VI: Ya, me too, but it is.

MOM: (*a beat*) What's - what's the next step?

VI: They're putting me on some drug. Apparently there are side effects. I guess I'll see how it goes with my firefighting testing and everything. Maybe I'll wait to start it until after the test.

MOM: Vi, you shouldn't even be thinking about doing that test now! What if you hurt yourself and can't work?

VI: Mom, I'm doing the test no matter what, I've been working towards it for over a year, I don't care if I get injured doing it. I passed it last year, I'll be fine.

MOM: (*raises her voice*) Oh don't be so stupid! What's the point anyway, you're not going to be able to be a firefighter now! Did you ask the doctor about it?

VI: (*uncomfortably*) She said if I'm careful with my training and recovery, I should still be able to pass the tests. (*suddenly angry*) This isn't going to fucking stop me! I know you didn't want me to pursue firefighting from the beginning, don't pretend that you aren't hoping that I won't be able to now!

MOM: Vi -

VI: (*fighting back tears*) Mom, I have to go, I'll call you later.

MOM: (*exasperated*) Ok honey... I love you.

VI: Love you too. (*She presses end call and drops the phone in her lap*)

Lesson Two: Trust/Betrayal

Activity	Time	Description
Guided Deep Body Scan	20min	Participants are guided through a deep body scan that encourages them to focus on their embodied perception through bringing awareness to their <i>feelings</i> in their present state within their environment. See Appendix II.
Yoga Pose	5 min	Camel Pose
CHECK IN	5 min	Body Scan Journal
Story Circle	10 min	Participants are invited to discuss instances in which they have felt betrayed or betrayed someone else
CHECK IN	5 min	Body Scan Journal
Discussion	10 min	Participants are invited to share sensations they are perceiving in their bodies, thoughts they are having, urges they are having.
Snapshot #4	40 min	“Snapshot #4” is read aloud/performed. During the dialogue, participants are given three choices: read the lines as written; respond in a way that you think the character would respond; or respond the way they think <i>they</i> would respond in the same situation.
CHECK IN	5 min	Body Scan Journal
Discussion	10 min	Participants are invited to share sensations they are perceiving in their bodies, memories they are being brought back to, or thoughts they are having.

Breath Work	10 min	Participants engage in <i>ujjayi</i> breathing and are led through a loving kindness and compassion visualization
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Snapshot #4

I'm lying on my current lover's bed on my back, with my head in the cradle of his stomach as he lays on his side perpendicular to me. The back of my hand lies in his palm, and he strokes my palm with his thumb. The sheets beneath us are damp and we are both still slightly breathless. The fan's gentle breeze brushes over my face and body, raising goose bumps along my warm skin. My eyes trace over his dresser, several drawers spilling over with clothes, a line of books balanced on top; and then across his bookcases, filled haphazardly with more books than I can count. Above one of them is a photo of a herd of sheep with a sheep dog at one corner, set on a verdant cliff somewhere that reminds me of photos I've seen of Scotland. The lighting in the photo is dramatic; the setting sun casts a golden light tinged with red across the sheep, dog, and grass, and their long black shadows stretch towards the background.

"I like that picture," I say suddenly.

He must have opened his eyes to look, because the rumble of his voice replies, "Me too. Did I ever tell you the story of that picture?" I shake my head, my hair brushing against the skin of his stomach. "Well, I think that there are three kinds of people in general: wolves, sheep and sheep dogs. The wolves and sheep dogs each have power over the sheep, but one uses that power to harm the sheep, while the other uses it to protect them. That picture reminds me to be a sheep dog, not a wolf."

I feel a smile creep across my face. I know that he's trying to impress me with his deep philosophy – but I also recognize the quote from *American Sniper*. I can appreciate the relevance though, for myself as well. I figure all fighters are like that. We have a choice to be a wolf or a sheepdog. It's a relief to me that this man favours the sheepdog – my ex favoured the wolf.

I extract my hand from his briefly so that I can flip it over and interlace my fingers with his. "I like that." I say simply. He squeezes my hand gently and curls himself closer around me. I lie there in silence, contemplating the photograph, and life, while the

ceiling fan rotates overhead.

*

Friday morning, 8:30. I'm on my back watching the ceiling fan again, but this time I am alone in my lover's bed. His scent is all around me, and I pull the covers up to my chin, relishing the feeling. He left a few minutes ago for work, but I don't start until 10, so I can rest a little more. I can't help the smile that curls my faintly tingling lips, tender from being kissed by his scruffy beard.

Cool morning light is beginning to permeate the high ceilinged room, illuminating the pile of our mingled, discarded clothing. I jump suddenly as his huge black cat launches onto the bed from the windowsill, shaking the entire frame. The cat stretches luxuriously and then hops up and sits on my chest, purring thunderously. "Well hello," I say, laughing, and the cat trills in response. I scratch behind his ears and give him attention for a few minutes before he makes me too hot with his furry bulk. I try to tilt him off gently, but he is stubborn, so I end up having to push him off the bed. He doesn't seem perturbed; he winds around my ankles as I swing my bare feet to the floor.

I use the bathroom and then putter around the apartment, collecting my scattered belongings. I toss my hairbrush, yesterday's socks and a few books into my bag, then go to unplug my phone from its perch on his kitchen-table-bar, between copious amounts of whiskey bottles. I pull the plug out and lift my phone off of a card that reads "Happy Birthday Grandson!" The edge of a photo is sticking out of the card. I smile slightly, wondering if the picture is an embarrassing baby photo of my secret lover, and pull it out a little bit more to take a peek.

It feels as though a bucket of hot, thick liquid has been dumped on my head and is slowly trickling down over my whole body. Heat rushes to my face, my heart stutters, and then a cold sweat breaks out over every inch of my skin. My brain is frozen as the photo shakes in my hand. It isn't a baby photo. It's a photo of my secret lover sitting on his roof with his arm around a girl that trains at our gym. Her shirt is open so far that I can see the edge of her breast, and she is smiling obnoxiously at the camera.

He swore to me that it was only us. I flip the photo over with a shaking hand. She's even written a note about how she'll be his gutter slut any day. And she's signed it with 'love your girl'.

Dazed, I stumble to the couch and sink down on it. There are other photos in the card too, and a postcard with a vapid attempt to sound cultured and intelligent by telling him that all the paintings in the gallery she is visiting remind her of him. And how she can't wait until his eyes are on her again.

I put the pile down on his beat up coffee table and clasp my hands to stop them shaking. I feel like I'm in free-fall. How could I have let this happen again? How could I have believed him when I knew in my heart that he was lying? How could I have been so fucking stupid?

I stand up again, needing to do something. I leave the photos on the table where he will see them. I finish gathering up my things and then go back to the bedroom to retrieve my sweater. It's then that I notice black smears on the sheets from mascara.

I don't wear mascara.

Anger explodes within me and it's all I can do to stop myself from tearing the sheets off the bed. I feel dirtier than I ever have in my life. I just had sex on and slept in sheets that he fucked that slut on. How dare he. How could he even look me in the eye? How could he kiss my lips as he left me lying in those sheets? "Fuck!" I yell, slamming my fists onto the bed, but restraining myself from further destruction. I grit my teeth so hard that I hear my jaw crack. I want to get out of my skin. I can't tear my eyes away from the black smears.

I contemplate trashing his apartment. I would never do it, but it sure is fucking satisfying to imagine it. I allow myself this indulgence for another moment and then pick up my stuff, slide my feet into my sandals and walk towards the door - but it almost hits me as it swings inward and he appears in its frame. It is all I can do not to take a swing at him.

***NOTE:** *In this dialogue, I introduce the idea of an internal "embodied voice" (EV) and "disembodied voice" (DV), where EV communicates felt, instinctual responses and DV communicates purely rational responses. EV will appear in bold, DV in italics, and will chime in throughout the subsequent Snapshots, including within the prose. Nobody except VI can hear EV and DV.*

LOV: Hey, sorry Vi, didn't mean to startle you! Forgot my - are - are you ok?

EV: RIP HIS FACE OFF WITH YOUR BARE HANDS

VI: I need to leave.

EV: HE NEEDS TO BE PUNISHED

DV: *What good would it do?*

LOV: Ok, but you don't look ok, want to tell me what's going on first?

EV: HE KNOWS EXACTLY WHAT'S GOING ON

VI: I can't talk to you right now. I need to leave. Get out of my way.

EV: PUNCH HIM IN THE GUT AS YOU PASS

DV: *He's bigger and stronger than you. Bad choice.*

LOV: Excuse me? You don't get to talk to me like that. Tell me what's going on!

EV: We'll talk to you however we want! You are NOTHING

VI: Fine, you want to know? You really want to fucking know? I found a picture. Of you with one of your other girls. And her love letter to you.

DV: *He could also kill you really easily. You know he has anger management problems. Be careful.*

EV: Fuck being careful.

LOV: (*angry*) You went through my things? How dare you snoop -

VI: I didn't go through your shit. You left it right there in the open. My fucking phone was sitting on top of it.

DV: *You didn't have to read it or look any further.*

LOV: You - you're jumping to conclusions, you don't know how old that picture is -

EV: **HE'S LYING**

DV: *Maybe the picture is old, how would you know?*

VI: So you're denying it? You're saying it's over? So, it's ok if I go and ask her about it and tell her about us?

LOV: (*steps closer to VI, clearly trying to intimidate her*) It's none of your business! It's your own fault! If you hadn't gone snooping through my stuff -

DV: *You're letting him affect you, just like you let the old one affect you. You're weak.*

VI: You said it was only us. You swore to me that it has only been us for almost a year now.

EV: **He's been lying the whole time.**

LOV: It is only us! Like I said, you don't know how old that photo is. You know I'm a really private person when it comes to relationships - I just - I don't know if I can trust you again after you rifled through my stuff and jumped to conclusions.

EV: **BLUDGEON HIM WITH ONE OF HIS OWN FUCKING BOOKS**

VI: *(barely controlling herself)* And what about the smears of mascara on your sheets?
How old are those?

LOV: *(flabbergasted)* I - I don't know what you're -

EV: **He knows. POKE HIS EYES OUT**

VI: Here's a tip. If you don't want a girl to know that you're sticking your dick in someone else, fucking wash your sheets. I'm done.

DV: *You need to get out before you do something stupid. He could hurt you.*

LOV: How dare you - What do you mean you're done?

VI: I mean I'm DONE. With YOU. You aren't the person I thought you were. You're nothing but a *coward*.

EV: **Take THAT you egotistical lying BASTARD**

LOV: *(he is shaking with anger; VI has struck a nerve)* Get out.

EV: **Sack him with your purse on the way out!**

DV: *Bad idea, your phone is in there, you can't afford a new one.*

VI: Yes, that's exactly what I've been trying to do. I'm sorry I wasted my time.

VI leaves with her head held high as he slams the door behind her.

Lesson Three: Abundance/Deprivation

Activity	Time	Description
Guided Deep Body Scan	20min	Participants are guided through a deep body scan that encourages them to focus on their embodied perception through bringing awareness to their <i>feelings</i> in their present state within their environment. See Appendix ii.
Delayed Gratification/ Mindful Eating	10 min	<p>Participants were asked to bring a favourite food to the session (preferably a candy bar/baked good/fruit, something portable). The food will be within sight/reach for the duration of class.</p> <p>Participants will be asked to describe, in detail, what it is like to eat their chosen food. They are encouraged to recall the physical sensations they experience when eating the chosen food, while staring at the food, but resisting the urge to eat the food.</p>
CHECK IN	5 min	Body Scan Journal
Breath Work	5 min	Retain breath at top of inhale and bottom of exhale. Ideally should be able to hold it at both points equally. Goal is to make peace with deprivation (at the bottom of the breath). 3 breaths with retention, warming up and recovering with Yogic breaths.
Discussion	10 min	Participants are invited to share sensations they are perceiving in their bodies.
CHECK IN	5 min	Body Scan Journal

Snapshot #3	40 min	“Snapshot #3” is read aloud/performed. During the dialogue, participants are given three choices: read the lines as written; respond in a way that you think the character would respond; or respond the way they think <i>they</i> would respond in the same situation.
CHECK IN	5 min	Body Scan Journal
Discussion	10 min	Participants are invited to share sensations they are perceiving in their bodies, memories they are being brought back to, or thoughts they are having.
Breath Work	5 min	Participants engage in <i>ujjayi</i> breathing and are led through a gratitude, love and compassion visualization exercise.
Journaling and Eating	10 min	Participants are allowed one small bite of their chosen food, with the intention of fully experiencing/focusing on the sensations they are experiencing. They are invited to free-write about the experience. Brief discussion, then participants are allowed to finish their food, trying to maintain full focus on the embodied experience.

Snapshot #3

I am in a low, womb-shaped, adobe sweat lodge on top of a mountain in the Sacred Valley of Peru. The drum beaten by the shaman beside me makes the bones in my ribcage resonate. I inhale uncomfortably hot, humid air, already lower in oxygen than I’m used to because of the altitude of the high Andes, and raise my voice in a language I don’t understand, but which nevertheless is full of meaning. The only thing I can see though the darkness is the orange glow of the pile of red-hot volcanic rocks a few inches in front of my bare feet, contained within a shallow depression in the adobe floor. The voices of four other women join mine, and our Peruvian Shaman’s, as she continues to beat the drum. The drum echoes in the adobe dome. We are at the third door, she tells us,

as she puts down the drum and moves to the pot of water, herbs and eucalyptus leaves beside the glowing stones.

My breath is catching in my throat and I'm starting to see explosions of light out of the corners of my eyes, as though I'm about to pass out. I try to take a breath and almost choke as the Shaman ladles more water onto the stones. I throw myself sideways, burying my face in the dirt beside me once again, because the air there is slightly cooler and drier than the rest of the air. I cup my hands around my face, trying to block the heat and get a breath. I'm angry at myself for not being strong enough to sit up and inhale the hot, humid air to get the full hallucinatory effect of the sweat lodge, but it's literally all I can do to keep myself from descending into panic. I desperately miss my protective firefighter clothes.

"The third door represents adulthood. It is about releasing anything that no longer serves you. It is about letting go of unhealthy attachments and embracing your own personal power." The Shaman's musical voice floats over us. Without warning, an image of my first secret lover, the only man I've ever loved, explodes in my mind. Coincidentally, he's also the only man who ever psychologically abused me. I gasp and inhale a lot of dirt. The Shaman lets out a yell in another language and sprays us with water from eucalyptus leaves that she is twirling like a lasso in the centre of the hut.

The cool water feels blissful on my almost bare, bikini-clad skin for a split second – but then it becomes so hot that I'm sure it's burning me. I let out a yell and lose control of myself. "Please! Please, I have to get out!" I'm begging, pleading, I've never felt so vulnerable or panicked in my life. All I can see is my first secret lover throwing a punch at the wall beside my head, making me feel like I couldn't live without him, like I was nothing without him. I let out a sort of shuddering scream and try to crawl over the Shaman to where I know the entrance is, like some kind of insect searching mindlessly for light. She throws back the heavy llama wool blankets and I collapse in the low, tunnel-like entrance of the sweat lodge, face fully buried in the cool grass and dirt, fingers digging into the mud, and emotions flooding me in an uncontrollable torrent. Sobs rip out of me and I gag and hyperventilate. I become aware that the Shaman is spreading cool water over my back and that the other women are breathing slowly and audibly, so that I can listen and follow. Gradually, with my face still bowed to *pacha mama*, I get my

breathing under control.

“This is the medicine working,” the Shaman tells me, squeezing more water over my shoulders. “Someone has been poisoning your heart for a long, long time. The ancestors are making you purge. That is part of the medicine.” She begins to sing and chant in a language that I do not understand.

EV: We’re dying.

DV: You’re not dying, but I’m sure this isn’t good for you. Probably a poor choice.

EV: We’re going to throw up.

DV: You can’t throw up in here, think about how gross that would be for everyone else.

EV: Can’t control it.

DV: CONTROL IT.

EV: We’re going to pass out.

DV: Better than throwing up.

EV: We need to get out.

DV: Don’t be weak. Everyone else is fine. You’re supposed to be tough.

EV: This is too hard. We can’t do it.

DV: You’ve gotten through worse things.

EV: Our heart is breaking open.

DV: You're letting him continue to hurt you. Control yourself. Don't let him win.

EV: Can't control it.

DV: You're embarrassing yourself. Stop crying and finish this.

Slowly, I am able to sit up and lean against the entrance. The Shaman bathes my almost-bare chest with water and eucalyptus leaves. Normally, I would be uncomfortable, but I feel nothing but total submission and humility in front of this tiny young woman with so much wisdom. "I might vomit," I hear myself say.

"That's alright, that's part of the purge too. If you don't do it now, it will come out later anyway." She continues to bathe my face and my throat, completely unperturbed, and her calmness calms me. "You needed this more than anyone," she says to me in a low voice, and goosebumps race across my skin.

Suddenly, she is holding a small, chipped white mug, full to the brim with blissful, clear, pure, cold, mountain water. "I don't usually do this," she says, "but this time it feels right. We will share this water with *Pacha Mama*, our sisters here, and the ancestors."

We have not had a sip of water in over five hours. I am salivating with what little moisture is left in my body. "First to *Pacha Mama*." She pours some water onto the adobe floor, where it evaporates instantly with a hiss.

EV: GRAB THE MUG FROM HER

DV: Control yourself!

She takes a small drink and then passes it to her left, away from me. Each of the other women take a sip.

DV: *You shouldn't drink that, all of their germs will be in it.*

EV: NEED WATER

The mug gets to me. There is only about the width of my pinky left. “We must save some for the ancestors,” the Shaman reminds me.

EV: NOT ENOUGH FOR ANCESTORS

DV: *Don't disrespect their traditions! Control yourself!*

I raise the chipped white porcelain to my lips and tip it upward. The cool water bathes my parched lips and mouth in an almost orgasmic symphony of taste, temperature and texture. I hold it in my mouth before swallowing, relishing this tiny sip more than I have ever relished water in my life before or since. There is not enough for a second sip if I am to leave some for the ancestors. With effort, I hand the mug back to the Shaman, who pours the last drops onto the superheated volcanic rocks at the centre of the hut, where they disappear in a puff of steam.

She turns to me. “Can you finish the last door?” The last door is death and rebirth. Four more songs in the lodge, with the heavy llama blankets back over the door.

“Yes,” I hear myself say, and I finish it. And I am reborn covered in dirt and sweat and streaked with tears, unable to walk, barely able to crawl, with every limb shaking uncontrollably. I can't stop sobbing as I strip off my muddy bathing suit and step into the cold garden shower. It feels like my old, poor, tattered, armored heart has cracked, releasing pain and rage and fear in a torrent, but eventually revealing a new, pulsing energy that had been hidden within. And a piece of that energy will always remain there, where it was unleashed.

Lesson Four: Love/Loss

*This lesson deals with difficult subject matter including physician assisted suicide.

Participants will be briefed before we begin and reminded that they are free to withdraw consent and leave the study at any time. I will additionally provide a list and contact information of mental health support initiatives that participants can access should they need to.

Activity	Time	Description
Guided Deep Body Scan	20min	Participants are guided through a deep body scan that encourages them to focus on their embodied perception through bringing awareness to their <i>feelings</i> in their present state within their environment. See Appendix II.
Breath Work/Yoga Pose	5 min	Foetal Position with <i>ujjayi</i> breathing.
CHECK IN	5 min	Body Scan Journal
Story Circle	20 min	Participants are invited to share a story about a loved one (living or passed). I will begin by sharing a funny story about my grandparents. Discussion and questions are welcome at any time, this activity is meant to be very informal.
CHECK IN	5 min	Body Scan Journal
Snapshot #5	40 min	“Snapshot #5” is read aloud/performed. During the dialogue, participants are given three choices: read the lines as written; respond in a way that you think the character would respond; or respond the way they think <i>they</i> would respond in the same situation.
CHECK IN	5 min	Body Scan Journal

Discussion	10 min	Participants are invited to share sensations they are perceiving in their bodies, memories they are being brought back to, or thoughts they are having.
Breath Work	10 min	Participants engage in <i>ujjayi</i> breathing and are led through a loving kindness and compassion visualization

Snapshot #5

I walk into the house with my Mom and the smell immediately hits me. It is the smell of childhood Christmas, birthdays and Thanksgivings. It is the smell of afternoon tea and cards with my grandparents as a teenager. It is the smell of home when I lived there in my twenties while they stayed at their cottage.

But although the smell is the same, the feeling has forever changed since the death of my grandfather. Now I am going to say goodbye to my grandmother in this house; she has elected physician assisted suicide rather than the painful death her Multiple Sclerosis would otherwise ensure. The procedure is tomorrow. This is her last night on Earth.

I remove my shoes and walk down the familiar hall, over the familiar creaky floorboards under the threadbare carpet, to the room on the end, where my grandmother lies in a hospital bed. She is propped up on a pile of pillows, and her bright blue eyes are sharp and pleased when she sees me. She calls me to her in her weak voice and I go to her side and take her hand in mine, rubbing the pad of my thumb over the papery-thin skin. I can't stop staring at her face, at the red in her cheeks, at the pulse in her neck, at her white flyaway curls, at her narrow delicate nose. It is impossible to me that she will be dead tomorrow. I do not want to leave because maybe if I never leave, tomorrow will never come. Logically, I understand why she's doing it. Emotionally, I feel strangely betrayed, and I feel guilty and selfish for feeling that. She has always been one of the strongest people I've ever known. Her choice took incredible strength. Then why do I feel like she's giving up?

Why do I want to give up too?

I collapse, sobbing, on her shoulder, soaking her flowery blue nightgown with tears. She leans her head against mine, which is the only movement she can make to return the hug because of the MS, and a surge of rage and frustration rockets through me, that such a good woman had suffered so much. I clamp my eyes shut and try to memorize the feeling of her nightgown against my cheek and the mild smell of her soap and moisturizer, as familiar as my own mother. “I understand, Nanny,” I say suddenly, raising my head to look at her through my tears. “I understand. But I just love you so much.” I collapse in tears again, unable to control myself.

When I am finally forced to leave the house, I feel like my already tattered heart is being ripped in half.

I don’t know what to do. I turn on my car, carefully back out of the narrow driveway past my parents’ and my aunt and uncles’ cars and drive automatically. My brain is jammed. No thoughts are possible. I’m shaking and I suddenly reflect that I probably shouldn’t be driving. I pull on to a sideroad out of sight of the house and carefully turn my car back off. I stare at the snow that has begun to fall in the wan orange glow of the streetlight. The flakes are small and light, and they skim the surface of my salt-stained windshield lightly, but do not settle. I want to go back to the house and demand that she cancel the procedure. It does not make sense that within 12 hours, she will be gone, even though it doesn’t have to be that way. I feel abandoned. She alone out of all of my family would be able to help me understand my recently diagnosed chronic illness, and yet she would rather just leave me behind. *That’s not fair*, a voice in my head admonishes gently. She had lived with Multiple Sclerosis for over sixty years; she had already been confined to a wheelchair by the time I was born. When I was a kid, she could still use her hands; the disease had gradually taken that from her, first her dominant right hand, then her left. On good days, she could manage to lift a few pieces of food to her mouth with her left hand, pluck a card from her card holder, or turn a few pages of a book, but even that had become less and less frequent. The disease, I knew, was now attacking her throat, affecting her ability to swallow. She was facing a death of starvation or aspiration, since it was very easy for her to choke when the muscles in her throat didn’t work properly.

Overcome with the unfairness of it all, I slam my steering wheel with my fist, and then jump as the horn blares through the quiet January suburban night. I don't want to be alone, but I can't go back to that house. I feel out of control. I feel so alone.

With shaking hands, I pull out my phone and scroll through my contacts aimlessly for a full minute before I remember what I'm doing. I stare at the name of one of my friends for a full minute before I press "call" and lift the phone to my ear. I'm not even certain who it is I've called.

FRIEND (F): Hey?

VI: *her voice shakes* It's - it's Violet, I - I really need help. I - I just - I can't - I'm afraid to be alone.

F: What happened? Where are you?

VI: My - my grandmother - she's - she's going through with it - she's doing it tomorrow - I just - I just said goodbye... *her voice breaks*

F: Do you need me to come pick you up somewhere?

VI: No - I just - can I come over for a bit?

F: Yes, but are you ok to drive?

VI: I - I think so - I'm not far away.

F: Ok. Vi, You are not the emotions you're feeling right now. You are strong and you will get through this. I'm here for you.

VI: *(breaking)* I don't think I can do this

F: Can you make it through the next 30 seconds?

VI: What?

F: Can you make it through the next 30 seconds?

VI: I mean - yes, I guess.

F: How about the next minute?

VI: Yes

F: How about the next five minutes?

VI: I guess so...

F: Then just take it like that, minute by minute. Before you know it you'll have survived ten minutes and you'll be here.

VI:thank you.

F: Just be safe, I'll see you soon.

Lesson Five: Despair/Hope

*This lesson deals with difficult subject matter including suicidal thoughts. Participants will be briefed before we begin and reminded that they are free to withdraw consent and leave the study at any time. I will additionally provide a list and contact information of mental health support initiatives that participants can access should they need to.

Activity	Time	Description
Guided Deep Body Scan	20min	Participants are guided through a deep body scan that encourages them to focus on their embodied perception through bringing awareness to their <i>feelings</i> in their present state within their environment. See Appendix II.
Yoga Pose	5 min	Child's Pose
CHECK IN	5 min	Body Scan Journal
Video: A Near Miss	10 min	Nat geo video of an animal barely escaping with its life is shown. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XaZhOtxsUnY Participants are asked to monitor their body sensations while viewing.
CHECK IN	5 min	Body Scan Journal
Discussion	10 min	Participants are invited to share sensations they are perceiving in their bodies, thoughts they are having, urges they are having.
Snapshot # 6	40 min	“Snapshot #6” is read aloud/performed. During the dialogue, participants are given three choices: read the lines as written; respond in a way that you think the character would respond; or respond the way they think <i>they</i> would respond in the same situation.

CHECK IN	5 min	Body Scan Journal
Discussion	10 min	<p>Participants are invited to share sensations they are perceiving in their bodies, memories they are being brought back to, or thoughts they are having.</p> <p>I will introduce the Buddhist idea that we can shift our perception of the world in a way that transforms it from one of <i>samsara</i> (suffering) to <i>nirvana</i> (enlightened bliss).</p>
Breath Work	10 min	Group collective breathing visualization with <i>ujjayi</i> breath and loving kindness & compassion

Snapshot # 6

I stand with my legs apart, swaying slightly. The wind picks up my curls gently and swirls them around my shoulders. Six inches in front of my toes, the huge granite outcropping of Canadian Shield on which I'm standing ends abruptly, falling in a sheer drop to boulders and dense forest a hundred metres below. I can see Lake Ontario off in the distance to my right. Straight ahead, through the dissolving mist, I can see the tiny Toronto skyline, far in the distance.

I drop my gaze to the tops of the trees, far below me. I picture my body hitting them, plummeting through them, scattering leaves and branches. I wonder what the chances are of being killed instantly. I spread my arms, take a step closer. My toes are right on the crumbling edge. It would be so easy, so fucking easy, to just step off. The wind moves through the leaves on the trees and I hear a cardinal singing her spring song from somewhere behind me. The treetops sway below me and the leaves show their pale undersides in waves.

Unintentionally, an image of my mother's face swims into my mind. Before I can stop myself, I picture her soft brown eyes filling with horror, her kind lips twisting in anguish when she hears what I've done. I feel her agony and it is like a physical punch in my chest. I stagger backwards and hit the boulder behind me hard enough to bruise my

calves, and sit down on it heavily, overcome with raking, tortured sobs. An image of my little cat meowing from the back bedroom of my apartment pops into my head, and I am immediately overcome a second time. How could I have ever thought of leaving her? My heart constricts as I picture her perched on the edge of the bed, little white paws neatly together and bobbing her head, which I have learned means she wants attention or treats. I desperately want to give her both, and cuddle her as much as she allows. I stare out over the rolling fields, forest, and distant cityscape spread before me through eyes blurred with tears. I know that I need to leave this cliff, so I shuffle backwards across the rough stone, not trusting my legs to stand until I'm beside a thick sapling to use as leverage. My boots follow the Bruce Trail automatically; I feel numb, empty.

After a time, I find myself on what looks like a newly blazed side trail; the footing is very muddy, and there are still stumps of various sizes poking up through the path in places. The undergrowth is thick with new spring life, so when I begin hearing some mechanical coughing noises, I can't immediately see what is producing them. I round a bend in the trail and I'm faced with a rather battered looking ride-on lawnmower with a small trailer attached, seemingly stalled just off of the trail. An old man with white hair and wearing coveralls straightens on the other side of the tractor. "Everything all right?" I ask as I approach.

The old man takes off his cap, wipes his brow and then looks at me. I almost fall over – his brilliant blue eyes are my grandmother's eyes. His voice is frustrated when he answers, "Damn thing's stalled again."

"I - I'm not very technical but – is there anything I can do to help?" I offer shakily.

"Actually, if you wouldn't mind, I can go to get my tractor to tow it, but I need someone to steer it while it's being towed so that the trailer doesn't get stuck anywhere. You got a few minutes?" I nod, my throat tight at the memory of what I had almost just done. "Great I'll be back in about 15 minutes." He disappears into the undergrowth and after a moment, I decide to sit in the driver's seat of the lawnmower.

The wind rustles the leaves higher up in the canopy, but it is calm down here. I close my eyes and inhale the smell of damp earth, cedar, and faintly from the trailer, cut hay. I open my eyes and a shaft of golden sun penetrates the leaves and bathes the forest

floor ahead of me with dappled points of light. Some small, flying insects seem to have just hatched, and they swirl lazily in the shimmering veil like fairies. Spring peepers, tiny frogs that can make noise louder than a jumbo jet taking off when they all sing together, are beginning to practice their high-pitched calls. Everything is unbearably beautiful.

I wipe my eyes hastily when the sound of a functioning motor finally reaches me. I help the old man secure the back end of the trailer to his tractor, meaning that I have to steer backwards. There are a few close calls in which I barely miss stumps or even trees, but he doesn't notice, since he is facing forward.

We emerge from the trees into the large backyard of a small farmhouse. The man tows me to a large shed and then shuts off the motor. I hop off the seat and help him detach the trailer. That done, he takes off his cap again and mops his brow with an old handkerchief he produces from his shirt pocket – a motion I had watched my late grandfather perform countless times. “I don’t know where you came from, but I don't know what I would have done without you young lady. Not too many people would have helped like that. You're a beautiful person.” The blue eyes bring tears to mine as he smiles warmly and shakes my hand. I return to the forest feeling a curious lightness, make my way back to my car, and return home to my cat’s waiting meows.

APPENDIX C: Data Collection Surveys

Initial Survey

1. How would you define empathy?

2. On average, on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 representing not at all and 10 representing extremely), how empathic are you on a daily basis?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

3. Which of the following situations do you think would make you feel the **strongest** sense of empathy:

- i. a close friend losing a parent
- ii. the spouse of a close friend being diagnosed with a terminal illness
- iii. seeing a homeless family in your neighbourhood begging for money
- iv. watching news coverage of a humanitarian disaster in a different country
- v. reading a biography of a survivor of a kidnapping
- vi. I would not feel empathy in any of these situations
- vii. I would feel empathy in all of these situations equally

4. On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 representing almost never and 10 representing almost always), how often do feelings of empathy become actions to help the person/group you are feeling empathy for?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

5. Please provide an example of a time in which you were motivated by a sense of empathy to help someone else (i.e. helping a struggling elderly neighbor with groceries).

6. On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 representing almost never and 10 representing almost always), how often do you feel stressed, on average?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

7. On a scale of 1 to 10 (with one representing almost never and 10 representing almost always), how often do you ignore feelings and sensation in your body?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

8. Which of the following reasons motivate(s) you to ignore feelings and sensations in the body? (circle all that apply)

- i. work responsibilities
- ii. family responsibilities
- iii. belief that feelings and sensations in the body are a distraction
- iv. belief that feelings and sensations in the body are not important
- v. feelings and sensations in the body are too overwhelming
- vi. other:_____

9. How often do you notice yourself experiencing emotional outbursts?

- i. more than once a day
- ii. once a day
- iii. once a week
- iv. once every two weeks
- v. once a month
- vi. less than once a month

10. On a scale of 1 to 10 (with one being not at all and 10 being completely), how well do you think you can manage your behavior when you are experiencing an emotional outburst?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

11. On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 being almost never and 10 being almost always), how often do you feel a sense of general wellbeing?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

12. When reading or listening to a narrative (story), how likely are you to feel empathy for the characters?

- i. very unlikely
- ii. somewhat unlikely
- iii. neutral
- iv. somewhat likely
- v. very likely

Follow-Up Survey

1. On average, on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 representing not at all and 10 representing extremely), how empathic are you on a daily basis?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

2. Which of the following situations do you think would make you feel the **strongest** sense of empathy:

- viii. the parents of a childhood friend getting a divorce
- ix. a close friend losing a parent
- x. a family in your neighbourhood being evicted due to unpaid rent
- xi. watching news coverage of epidemics in other countries
- xii. reading a narrative about overcoming a learning disability
- xiii. I would not feel empathy in any of these situations
- xiv. I would feel empathy in all of these situations equally

3. On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 representing almost never and 10 representing almost always), how often do feelings of empathy become actions to help the person/group you are feeling empathy for?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

4. Please provide an example of a time in which you were motivated by a sense of empathy to help someone else (i.e. helping a struggling elderly neighbor with groceries).

5. On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 representing almost never and 10 representing almost always), how often do you feel stressed, on average?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

6. On a scale of 1 to 10 (with one representing almost never and 10 representing almost always), how often do you ignore feelings and sensation in your body?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

7. Which of the following reasons motivate(s) you to ignore feelings and sensations in the body? (circle all that apply)

- vii. work responsibilities
- viii. family responsibilities
- ix. belief that feelings and sensations in the body are a distraction
- x. belief that feelings and sensations in the body are not important
- xi. feelings and sensations in the body are too overwhelming
- xii. other: _____

8. How often do you notice yourself experiencing emotional outbursts?

- vii. more than once a day
- viii. once a day
- ix. once a week
- x. once every two weeks
- xi. once a month
- xii. less than once a month

9. On a scale of 1 to 10 (with one being not at all and 10 being completely), how well do you think you can manage your behavior when you are experiencing an emotional outburst?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

10. On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 being almost never and 10 being almost always), how often do you feel a sense of general wellbeing?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

11. When reading or listening to a narrative (story), how likely are you to feel empathy for the characters?

- vi. very unlikely
- vii. somewhat unlikely
- viii. neutral
- ix. somewhat likely
- x. very likely

12. Please describe what aspects of a narrative are most likely to cause you to feel empathy for the characters.

13. How likely do you feel it is that you will use mindfulness techniques learned in the program in your everyday life going forward?

- i. very unlikely
- ii. somewhat unlikely
- iii. neutral
- iv. somewhat likely
- v. very likely

14. Have you applied any of the mindfulness techniques you learned in the program to your everyday life? Please elaborate.

15. Do you feel that exploring your own emotions, behavior and embodied experience has made you more empathic? Please elaborate.

APPENDIX D: Raw Data Tables

General Empathy Questions

Participant	Survey: Initial, (I) Final (F)	Amount of Empathy Felt on a Daily Basis (1-10)	Situation That Induces Strongest Empathic Response:	Friend' s loved one going through difficulty	Family in neighborhood suffering	Disaster in a foreign country	Reading about a stranger overcoming a difficulty	None of the above	Equal empathy for all situations	Frequency of Empathy Motivating Helping Behavior (1-10)	Likelihood of Empathic Response to Character in Narrative
1	(I)	6							x	5	Somewhat likely
1	(F)	7		x						7	Somewhat likely
2	(I)	7		No response indicated						2	Very likely
2	(F)	7							x	4	Somewhat unlikely
3	(I)	6							x	4	Very likely
3	(F)	7							x	4	Very likely
4	(I)	5			x					8	Very likely
4	(F)	8			x					10	Very likely

Qualitative Empathy Responses

Participant	Survey: Initial (I), Final (F)	Definition of empathy (Initial Survey only)	Situation in which empathy motivated you to help	Describe aspects of narrative that are likely to evoke an empathic response for characters (Final Survey only)
1	(I)	Feel what others feel	Donated to the Gaza fund when it was bombed last summer	
1	(F)		Cousins in another country lost their mother due to covid, sent all family members there I knew messages/phone calls of support	A character that is distressed or in despair, and/or overcoming hardship/the odds in their life/the story
2	(I)	Empathy in my opinion is having a connection of sorts to a given person. Not a conventional connection, but more of a rooted connection, holistic	There was an old man who had fallen at the doctor's office. I had offered to help him up. However, he insisted he was fine	
2	(F)		I once helped a friend who needed help with his air vent. I helped him clean it out	The aspects that would make me feel empathic would be loving, kind, caring, and overall good moral. It would lead me to be more empathic when a person of these qualities had something unfortunate happen to them
3	(I)	Empathy is the ability to step outside one's comfort zone to aid/assist someone	I'm allergic to dog hair and helped a friend who is going through a personal crisis by keeping her pet dog at my home for 4 days	
3	(F)		I broke [...] rules and protocols	Unresolved emotional/psychological

			and left my kid with family to help my friend who was struggling after a very difficult childbirth	trauma/issues pertaining to childhood and young adulthood
4	(I)	Having the ability to feel; feel the feelings of others and yourself	I saw an old homeless man outside [a store] in the winter, so I bought him a jar of peanut butter and a loaf of bread	
4	(F)		At the grocery store, when they ask to donate money to a children's foundation. This usually gets me, because it brings more awareness to my own ability to buy groceries and others might not have that luxury	When characters are going through a challenging time, especially true, when we are given significant details (to relate/understand). And/or, when the story is written in 1 st person

Embodiment Responses

Participant	Survey: Initial (I), Final (F)	Frequency of Ignoring Bodily Sensation (1-10)	Reasons for Ignoring Bodily Sensation:	Work responsibilities	Family responsibilities	Feelings and sensations in the body are a distraction	Feelings and sensations in the body are not important	Feelings and sensations in the body are overwhelming	Other:
1	(I)	8							Not sure
1	(F)	6							Not sure maybe afraid of the answers if a health problem is discovered
2	(I)	1		x					
2	(F)	3		x					
3	(I)	3		x	x				
3	(F)	4			x				
4	(I)	7		x	x		x		
4	(F)	4		x					

Stress and Emotional Wellbeing Responses

Participant	Survey: Initial (I), Final (F)	Frequency of Feeling Stressed (1-10)	Frequency of Emotional Outbursts:	More than once a day	Once a day	Once a week	Once every two weeks	Less than once a month	Once a month	Ability to Manage Behavior During Emotional Outburst (1-10)	Frequency of a Sense of General Wellbeing (1-10)
1	(I)	9				x				9	4
1	(F)	8				x				8	4
2	(I)	1						x		6	10
2	(F)	2						x		8	9
3	(I)	4			x					8	5
3	(F)	6				x				8	9
4	(I)	7					x			8	7
4	(F)	7				x				8	9

Effectiveness Responses

Participant	Survey: Final (F)	Likelihood of future use of mindfulness techniques explored:	Very unlikely	Somewhat unlikely	Neutral	Somewhat Likely	Very likely	Have you applied mindfulness techniques you learned in the program to your daily life?	Do you feel that exploring your own emotions, behavior and embodied experience has made you more empathic?
1	(F)						x	The deep body scan meditations I try to use daily	Not more empathic but exploring my emotions, feelings behaviors help me to understand them more and have more control over them
2	(F)					x		I try to bring some of the techniques we learned in the sessions into my meditation. I find the acknowledgement of certain feelings, oojaioo [sic] breaths and just mindfulness in general to be the biggest ones I took from the sessions	I believe that perhaps a small part of myself has become more empathic. I typically am only empathic towards people I know, or a situation that concerns me. Essentially, I have a harder time being empathic towards people I don't know
3	(F)						x	Practicing body scans and oceanic breathing	Not as much empathic as more respectful to the self. I have begun to trust myself more, definitely more resilience and self-reliant emotionally. Do not actively seek validation, but respect it when it comes my way
4	(F)						x	Yes. The eating mindfulness I practice almost every day and the overall body scan/body check in I use periodically	Yes. Because it is allowing you to become more in tune with yourself, and who you are. For example, without exploring my own emotions I would not be able to see, necessarily, what triggers me to act a specific way. Without this awareness, I am unable to be empathic to myself (sending love and compassion) and also unable to see the situation clearly. I feel as though exploring emotions/behavior and embodied experiences are the root of personal growth