

An in-depth understanding of heartfulness meditation

Amutha Aruvi Kaniamuthan, Alexius Weng Onn Cheang

ABSTRACT

Background: Heartfulness meditation aims to help individuals connect to their inner self to attain peace and a balanced state of mind. Previous studies have been conducted to gain mechanistic insights into the effects of Heartfulness meditation on bodily and cellular functioning as well as in enhancing one's psychological, emotional and social well-being. However, most of the research is quantitative in approach, and has not been able to capture the intricacies of human lived experiences involved during the process of meditation. This qualitative study aims to understand the lived experiences of Heartfulness practitioners.

Method: A thematic analysis strategy was utilized to discover the themes which represented the meaning behind the reported narrative experiences of Heartfulness practitioners. Twenty-five Heartfulness meditation practitioners were recruited at a Heartfulness retreat at the International Heartfulness Centre in Hyderabad, India to gain their insights.

Result: The current study found that for Heartfulness practitioners, positive changes become gradually visible with regular practice. The process of Heartfulness meditation was found to directly influence physical, psychological, social, cognitive, as well as spiritual benefits.

Conclusion: In-depth lived experiences were explored which add personalized human elements to the field of Heartfulness meditative practice. Implications and limitations of the current study were also addressed and suggestions for future research were discussed.

Keywords: *qualitative, biopsychosocial, heartfulness meditation, well-being*

Introduction

Although the mind has been the focus of current studies in multiple domains, the heart has been universally accepted as the seat of divinity, epitome of intelligence, love and wisdom since time immemorial. Studies are acknowledging the foremost function of the heart in the feedback loop between the heart and the brain (McCraty & Zayas, 2014; Snyder, Lopez, Edwards & Marques, 2009).

Making recent breakthroughs in science is Heartfulness meditation which is inspired by yoga and yogic traditions to promote self-awareness (Patel & Pollock, 2018). Heartfulness meditation focuses on meditating on the heart where human life is centred. Regular meditation on the heart is perceived to holistically affect the lymphatic system (Chandra, 1979; Daugherty, 2014, Patel & Pollock 2018). In addition, the factor that differentiates Heartfulness from other meditative practices is the element of yogic transmission (Arya et. al., 2018).

Research to date on Heartfulness meditation has focused on utilizing quantitative approaches to measure physiological changes such as heart rate variability, respiratory rate and blood pressure (Arya et. al., 2018), quality of sleep (Arya et. al., 2018), improvement in electroencephalogram (EEG) signal and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) frequencies from the heart to the brain (Arunachalam, Jagatheesaperumal & Sundaram, 2020). Besides, quantitative measures were also used to understand the role of Heartfulness meditation on psychological aspects such as depression, anxiety, and stress (Singh, Mohan & Kumar, 2011), gratitude (Amarnath et. al., 2019), and loneliness and sleep quality (Thimmapuram et. al., 2020). However, these mechanistic approaches could not adequately

Department of Psychology, School of Medicine, International Medical University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Address for Correspondence:

Ms Kaniamuthan, Amutha Aruvi, School of Medicine, International Medical University, No. 126, Jalan Jalil Perkasa 19, Bukit Jalil, 57000 Kuala Lumpur. Tel: 012-4067511 Email: amutha.aruvi@student.imu.edu.my

capture the states of consciousness of Heartfulness practitioners. This led to the current qualitative study to explore the role of Heartfulness meditation through personal lived experiences.

Studies have been conducted to understand the effects of Heartfulness meditation on a physical level. For example, heart rate variability (HRV) is a psychophysiological factor that is found to be an indicator of lifespan and cardiac health (Arya et. al., 2018). Studies demonstrated that daily 30-minute sessions of Heartfulness likely regulates heart rate variability, respiratory rate and blood pressure in both long term meditators and beginners (Arya et. al., 2018).

On a cellular level, a 12-week intervention study on Heartfulness Meditation for healthcare professionals demonstrated an increased telomere length in younger populations from the experimental group which brought prospective improvement of burnout and emotional wellness (Thimmapuram et. al., 2017). Another study done by Thimmapuram et. al., (2019) demonstrated that heartfulness meditation was associated with substantial decrease in emotional exhaustion, in those aged 30 to 50 years. Besides, an 8-week Heartfulness Meditation program conducted on patients that were being treated for chronic insomnia demonstrated statistical improvements in the scores of the Insomnia Severity Index (ISI). The study supported Heartfulness Meditation as a viable option in the combination of treatment options for chronic insomnia (Thimmapuram et. al., 2020).

A study of the effects of six weeks of Heartfulness meditation on brain activity demonstrated that Heartfulness Meditation was seen to yield a state of mind that was distinct from effortful problem solving (Gupta, 2018). In addition, a 24-week Heartfulness self-

development program demonstrated an improvement in psychological stability, moral reasoning, self-efficiency and positive attitude among participants (Arya et. al., 2018). Amarnath et. al., (2019) even found that Heartfulness meditation cultivated gratitude. Unique to Heartfulness meditation is the rejuvenation (i.e. cleaning) process and it was found to improve quality of sleep by minimizing negative thoughts (Arya et. al., 2018). Heartfulness meditation was also found to reduce depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms and was beneficial for the welfare of individuals undergoing psychological distress, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and emotional turmoil (Singh, Mohan & Kumar, 2011).

A study conducted by Cashwell, Bentley and Bigbee (2007) described how Heartfulness aided in the prevention of depersonalization of counsellors towards their clients. Heartfulness was also instrumental for achieving higher levels of self-compassion and gratitude in relationships (Amarnath et. al., 2019). Besides, the effects of remote Heartfulness meditation have demonstrated an improvement in loneliness and sleep quality among physicians and advanced practice providers in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States of America (Thimmapuram et. al., 2021). With the supportive background of previous quantitative studies, the current study aimed to understand the personal lived experiences of Heartfulness practitioners from a qualitative perspective.

Methods

Study design, setting and sample

A basic qualitative research design was utilized to understand how Heartfulness practitioners structured their experience (Merriam, 2009). An in-depth interview technique was used to gather detailed, precise

and meaningful insights of the participants' experience and encounters (Minikel-Lacocque, 2018).

A purposive sampling method was used in this study where announcements were made at a heartfulness retreat at the International Heartfulness Centre in Hyderabad, India inviting active practitioners from around the world to share their lived experiences. A data saturation point was achieved after 25 participants were interviewed. The international participants came from 7 countries – India, the United States of America, Malaysia, New Zealand, Portugal, Fiji Island, and France

(Table I). All participants met the following inclusion criteria: (i) meditators who were practising Heartfulness meditation for at least 1 hour a day, for 6 days a week for a period of at least 1 year (Amarnath et al., 2017; Patel & Pollock, 2018), (ii) were at least 18 years old and above, and (iii) possessed the ability to converse in English at a moderate level. The exclusion criteria for the participants were: (i) participants who practised any other form of meditative practices apart from Heartfulness Meditation. The exclusion criteria stated is to ensure the objective of the research was fully met by reducing confounding factors.

Table I: Participants' Demographic Information

Participant	Age	Gender	Religion	Country
Anu	47	F	Hindu	India
Jane	42	F	Non-religious	Fiji Island
Amanda	25	F	N/A	USA
Aaron	51	M	N/A	France
Daisy	40	F	Hindu	Fiji Island
Naida	51	F	-	New Zealand
Abby	52	F	-	New Zealand
Oscar	40	M	-	Portugal
Tan	39	M	Buddhist	Malaysia
Dhruv	56	M	Hindu	USA
Onir	56	M	-	USA
Asad	41	M	-	USA
Arith	57	M	-	USA
Ojal	22	F	-	India
Jones	22	M	-	USA
Shail	38	F	Hindu	USA
Sonu	41	M	-	USA
Anay	22	M	Hindu	India
Asad	30	M	Hindu	India
Aish	70	F	Hindu	India
Prasad	29	M	Hindu	India
Ovi	23	F	Hindu	India
Mary	38	F	-	Portugal
Kelly	58	F	-	New Zealand
Lao	49	M	Buddhist	Malaysia

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Joint Research Ethics Committee of the International Medical University (BPS I-01/17(28)2019), as well as the Heartfulness Institute in India to conduct the research.

Interview process

A screening process was conducted before each interview to ensure participants met the inclusion criteria. An informed consent was provided to participants with every interview session being recorded with an audio recorder. Data collection was obtained from at least two in depth interviews with each participant.

Trustworthiness of data

During data collection and analysis, member check was done to authenticate the accuracy of the data obtained. A constant reflection was conducted using the bracketing technique to ensure the validity of the data and to manage any researcher biases. The data obtained was triangulated by the researchers to attest the uniformity of all the emerging codes and themes from all participants.

Data collection

Following the announcements to participate in the research at the Heartfulness retreat, participants who consented were screened, and those who met the inclusion criteria were interviewed. The data collection was carried out in February 2020.

Data analysis procedure

Thematic analysis was used to analyse, classify and present themes that are related to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) through the six stages as shown below.

1. The researcher actively examined the data through repetitive reading to spot emerging patterns. Crucial attention was paid to both the latent and lucid meanings that transpired from the transcription.
2. Preliminary codes were generated in a systematic fashion across the entire data set with mindful consideration to prevent any biases.
3. The analysis re-focused on a broader level to sort various codes into possible themes. A thematic map was drawn to organize codes into its themes and subthemes and all codes were retained at this stage for further analysis before discarding any irrelevant codes.
4. Internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity were considered at this stage by reviewing and thoroughly reading the codes within each theme, to ensure that data within the themes were jelled together while maintaining the clarity between the themes (Merriam, 2009).
5. All coded data extracts for each theme were articulated with a description.
6. A conclusive analysis was done by repeatedly vetting the themes before the complete write up of the study.

Results

Six common themes emerged suggesting that the lived experiences of the Heartfulness meditation practitioners corresponded to the biopsychosocial model (physical, psychological and social experiences) with added factors of cognitive and spiritual experiences. The themes are further elucidated in Figure I.

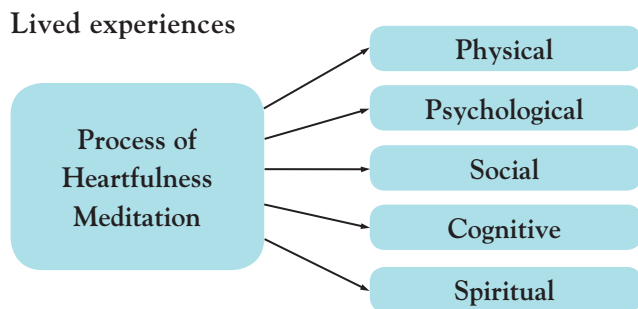


Figure I: Themes pertaining to lived experiences of Heartfulness practitioners

Theme 1: Process of Heartfulness Meditation

Hailing from various backgrounds and beliefs, participants aspired to seek deeper into the essence of their own lives:

“When I started heartfulness, it was a feeling of coming home... heartfulness is the one until now that allows me to be very well aligned and it seems like the part of me that was searching outside, now it wants to search inside”. P1/I1/Line 55-58

The major practices in Heartfulness meditation were also acknowledged by the practitioners:

“I would say it’s a scientific and practical method for connecting with your heart, which is really where the decisions happen. So might as well make it conscious. It took me about two weeks to really focus on the heart because we’re not wired for that. We are always here (pointing to the head). So, I tell people, give it time...” P2/I1/Line 400-406

The aspect of yogic transmission that was known to be the signature of heartfulness was also explained by the participants:

“I relate it to universal energy. We have energy all around us, it’s just that we don’t feel it. It’s like we have air around us, we don’t feel it and when you put the fan on, and you feel it. Similarly, when this energy is channelled, through the guide or through the trainers, you actually feel that something is entering your system. And that energy is what I refer to as transmission within the system”. P12/I1/Line 123-125

Practitioners also mentioned about the experience of the inner connection which they do as part of the heartfulness practice describing it and its effect as follows:

“So, the science behind that is, you get into a prayerful state at night and then your subconscious maintains that overnight. So, you’re starting to reprogram your subconscious brain into being in a more divine state overnight as opposed to watching a horror movie and then carrying that overnight”. P11/I1/Line 12-16

Theme 2: Physical Experiences

Most practitioners stated that Heartfulness has brought positive changes to their biological or physical self.

Dhruv stated that he was suffering from intense sciatic pain for 20 years and the pain remained post-surgery. However, he managed to deal with the pain through the process of meditation:

“When you’re going through pain, in the process of fighting it and feeling uncomfortable with it, you make it worse. So, the spiritual practice through Heartfulness, ... if you follow it diligently, builds up a lot of mental strength giving you the ability to deal with all these things and accept it. It may not go away, but you can accept it”. P10/I1/Line 217-225

Heartfulness was seen to create a physical change not only in the realms of physical pain and body sensations but also in strenuous physical activity, such as sports. As such, Anay who finds his passion in playing football, stated that his physical self has changed while carrying out strenuous activities:

“I play football and though it’s a very rough physical activity, there is always an inner softness and lightness in me while I play it, which makes me feel more confident and score better in my games, which I totally attribute to the benefits of heartfulness”. P18/I1/Line 80-83

Most practitioners also stated that they saw a shift in their energy capacity for the day when they meditated. One participant stated that Heartfulness acted as a buffer:

“I don’t have as much stress... I attribute that to meditation... it doesn’t mean that I don’t have the same amount of responsibilities as other people, it just means that I am not so stressed out about those things and heartfulness has really helped me in a physical well-being perspective”. P7/I1/Line 120-124

In brief, most participants stated that their physical experiences were positive after heartfulness meditation, attributing it to their mental state which improved with the meditation.

Theme 3: Psychological Experiences

Participants also stated that they experienced psychological changes. Most participants highlighted that heartfulness helped them develop the sensitivity to be more responsive to life events as they changed from a reactive mind to a responsive heart which also made them more compassionate in nature:

Jane states that:

“Before getting into heartfulness meditation, I used to

react very abruptly to turn of events but now, I’m able to distance myself and view it through the right perspective”. P2/I1/Line 65-66

Practitioners also stated how heartfulness meditation keeps them centred in life. As such, Asad discovered that he was able to differentiate between his needs and desires which gave him a sense of direction in life:

“It allows me to be more authentic with myself, it allows me to sense more of what life is wanting to live through me, instead of what I want from life. Of course, I have needs and desires, but through heartfulness, it seems like I’m entering in an alignment with life itself and it’s easier”. P19/I1/Line 555-558

Finally, Onir stated that Heartfulness meditation has given him the wisdom to recognize that happiness is very transient and that the goal of life is about fulfilment rather than happiness:

“The more you try and search for happiness, the more you want it. The game never ends, so then what wisdom finally tells you is it’s not happiness that you’re searching for but fulfilment. While happiness is external to you that you feel by getting it, fulfilment is something that you get within yourself only through a spiritual practice and when you get this fulfilment ..., you’re not looking for happiness anymore”. P11/I1/Line 410-418

In brief, participants gained psychological awareness and managed to successfully integrate what they learned into their own lives.

Theme 4: Social Experiences

A consistent pattern was found among all participants encompassing elements of compassion and kindness that was reflected in their day to day living. Aaron expressed his sentiments, stating that:

“The touch of heartfulness has helped me respond with more love, openness and be less judgmental of people”. P4/I1/Line 69-72

In line with being less judgemental, Dhruv stated that Heartfulness meditation has given him the acceptance, making him more patient with his daughter’s learning styles; he stated that:

“If you’re able to be patient and then understand how your child learns and all that, it creates a much more healthier family environment and I think that wouldn’t have been the case if this (Heartfulness meditation) wasn’t a part of it”. P10/I1/Line 500-502

The concept of universal brotherhood was also highlighted in this theme. Jones stated that:

“Within the heartfulness community, people are a lot more relaxed and friendlier, which also gives you that community aspect, it gives me a sense of belonging”. P15/I1/Line 123-130

Theme 5: Cognitive Experiences

Participants stated that their thinking ability improved with the practice while some shared that their awareness had expanded.

Dhruv stated that he used to get very stressed at work and could not find a way to de-stress. He would even wake up in the middle of the night with vigorous thoughts, but this meditation was so simple that he acquired the ability to observe his mind without getting affected by it. He stated with a sense of joy that:

“The ability to detach from stressful thoughts during meditation was found to be liberating because over time it became clear that, if I am able to detach myself from these

thoughts during meditation, then I can detach myself from these thoughts during my day to day life”. P10/I1/Line 109-112

Arith on the other hand noticed that he began seeing life in a broader perspective after starting meditation.

“I found that all these things that happened around me was put into my life for me to grow be it any situation . . . , there has been a real good change in the way I start to look at things after this practice”. P13/I1/Line 344-345

Understanding their own cognitive experiences gave the participants a good outlook on the way they approached both positive and negative life events.

Theme 6: Spiritual Experiences

Most of the participants had spiritual experiences which was not surprising seeing as Heartfulness meditation was deeply rooted in spiritual origins. Nevertheless, how each participant experienced spirituality was uniquely their own. Dhruv stated that Heartfulness meditation had made him more interested in the evolution of himself:

“I was like everyone wishing to (have) a happy and successful life, but this really made me understand the significance of evolution of what we are here, born for and that’s helped me become more divinized over time”. P10/I1/Line 120-122

While social connection was what everyone craved for, as it was a fundamental survival aspect for humanity, living alone did not trouble Asad:

“I’m much more peaceful. I can stay very much alone and don’t feel lonely because after a while, this meditation leads to feeling the presence of the divine in us. And it’s such

a joy to live life in the presence of the divine in day to day life, this is the heartfulness way” . P12/11/Line 20-23

Discussion

This study aimed to understand the lived experiences of Heartfulness practitioners, and the themes suggest the structure that Heartfulness practitioners go through in their journey of meditation. The themes found were: process of heartfulness meditation, physical experiences, psychological experiences, social experiences, cognitive experiences, and finally spiritual experiences. All the themes are discussed in detail in this section.

Process of Heartfulness Meditation

In line with previous studies, participants have stated that despite hailing from different social and cultural backgrounds, the flexibility of Heartfulness meditation allowed them to integrate it into their modern lifestyle. In addition, the Heartfulness cleaning process was found to be helpful to subdue thought intrusion and confusion (Amatya, 2019). The aspect of yogic transmission expedites the meditation process, thereby allowing new practitioners to feel the effects within a brief period of time (Arya et. al., 2018).

Physical Experiences

Participants stated that Heartfulness helped them to build mental strength to deal with physical pain which led to the acceptance of their physical condition. This was elicited in a study done by Amatya (2019), which supported that Heartfulness meditation aids in relieving stress and healing our bodies. Many participants stated that the positive changes observed in their physical self was a result of a peaceful mind. In addition, a study done by Arya et. al., (2018) also found that Heartfulness

meditation decreases sympathetic effect, therefore increasing parasympathetic tone.

Psychological Experiences

Participants reported that they gained a pause between stimuli in the environment and their own natural response which allowed them to view life events through different lenses. Participants mentioned that they managed to overcome their feeling of insecurity and introverted behaviour with the Heartfulness practice and felt more comfortable in their own skin. This is aligned with a study that found Heartfulness meditation was beneficial for individuals suffering from anxiety, depression, psychological distress, PTSD and undergoing emotional turmoil (Singh, Mohan & Kumar, 2011).

Social Experiences

In the social domain, although many participants were introverted in nature, they now found themselves to be more comfortable in social situations. In addition, an interesting finding was that parenting styles have also taken a different direction after practising Heartfulness, promoting healthier family dynamics. Although the study did not specifically mention Heartfulness, nevertheless Burgdorf, Szabó, & Abbott (2019) found that mindfulness interventions for parents may reduce parenting stress and thereby improve youth psychological functioning. This is an area that needs to be explored in the future.

Cognitive Experiences

Participants broadly stated that their thinking ability had improved with the practice as they were now able to take better control of their lives as they viewed life events as opportunities which help them evolve. These findings are in line with the study done by Arunachalam,

Jagatheesaperumal and Sundaram (2020) which demonstrated an improvement in electroencephalogram (EEG) and functional MRI (fMRI) signal frequencies from the heart to the brain that was observed in regular practitioners of Heartfulness meditation. This has been shown to improve one's cognitive performance. Arunachalam and colleagues (2020) also further support these findings by showing evidence that cognitive skills, contextual memory, attention, logical thinking, and problem-solving capability are highly improved in Heartfulness practitioners.

Spiritual Experiences

This study found that spirituality was an individual goal. Participants who initially approached heartfulness with various aims, such as relief from a stressful lifestyle, to increase physical well-being, or seeking mental clarity and emotional balance, upon commencing meditation, soon began to harvest benefits that far exceeded these aims. Participants shared that Heartfulness helped them balance their spiritual and material life as it embraces experiential learning, which was highlighted in a study done by Varu (2017).

Implications

The findings of this study have the potential to provide deeper and more comprehensive understanding on the lived experiences of Heartfulness practitioners, particularly from multiple life domains. The findings are useful in providing important information for seekers to experience this system of meditation and to be explored as an intervention in clinical settings for relevant biopsychosocial problems. Moreover, the findings of this study also have the potential to contribute to the literature in Malaysia and other countries as research on Heartfulness is still at its infancy.

Limitations and Future Study

The participants as practitioners of Heartfulness meditation were selected based on their ability to converse in English. However, such lived experiences could be different for those who natively spoke other languages. In addition, only those participants who regularly practised this form of meditation diligently for at least a year were selected. The findings of this study beg the question on whether the benefits experienced varied by how much time each practitioner devoted to Heartfulness meditation. Future studies could explore wider components of Heartfulness meditation and its role in coping strategies as well as epigenetics.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this study provide an insight on the lived experiences of Heartfulness meditation and has found that practitioners could develop their physical, psychological, social, cognitive, as well as their spiritual life. Findings of this study helps to shed further light on Heartfulness in the realm of science, giving voice to a personal world that is often unheard, with more to discover.

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