

# The Experiences of A Mindfulness-Based Workshop: A Focus Group Study

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## Abstract

This study used a focus group approach, inviting participants to an eight-week workshop on mindfulness that met for two hours each week. The program integrated mindfulness techniques aimed at enhancing both physical and mental well-being. Research indicates that mindfulness can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression by promoting present-moment awareness without judgment. For many local Chinese Canadians, this concept was novel. During the focus group discussions, participants examined their relationships with food and reflected on their personal experiences. The study was co-facilitated by a social worker and a registered dietitian and included 16 female participants with an average age of 56.6 years. Four semi-structured interview questions guided the discussions, and content analysis revealed five key themes: (1) A new and exciting experience, (2) the practice is challenging and requires time, (3) transforming stressful situations into purposeful, healthy experiences, (4) regaining control, and (5) supporting one another. The findings highlight the transformative potential of mindfulness-based interventions, particularly in mindful eating. Participants found mindfulness engaging but recognized the difficulty of maintaining a consistent practice, emphasizing the need for long-term reinforcement. Notably, mindfulness allowed them to reframe stress as an opportunity for growth, fostering resilience. The theme of regaining control illustrated how mindfulness empowers individuals to cultivate healthier relationships with food and emotions. Additionally, the focus on social support underscores the communal benefits of mindfulness. This study contributes to the literature on mindfulness by demonstrating how virtual interventions can facilitate meaningful change. Future research should refine program delivery to enhance accessibility, engagement, and sustained impact.

**Keywords:** mindfulness, focus group, content analysis, Chinese, experiences

## 1. Introduction

According to a report by Elflein (2022), over 35% of Canadian adults were classified as overweight in 2021, and within that group, 29% were considered obese. The rates of obesity and overweight individuals have been steadily increasing each year (Elflein, 2022). Being overweight or obese poses significant health risks, as it is associated with various life-threatening diseases. Individuals with these classifications are at a higher risk for serious health conditions, including type 2 diabetes, coronary heart disease, several types of cancer, reduced quality of life, and mental health issues such as clinical depression and anxiety (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). To mitigate these risks, health experts recommend maintaining a healthy body weight, managing stress, and following a nutritious diet (Bennett & Latner, 2022; Knol et al., 2021). Mindful eating involves applying mindfulness to our thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, and behaviors related to eating (Lindsay et al., 2019; Choi & Lee, 2020; Winkens et al., 2020).

Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) employ mindfulness techniques to enhance both physical and mental health outcomes (Sharma et al., 2023). Research indicates that MBIs can alleviate stress, anxiety, and depression while also fostering resilience (Bahadir-Yilmaz & Yuksel, 2024). Mindfulness itself is about being fully aware of the present moment without judgment, while concentrating on our thoughts, emotions, and sensory experiences (González-Blanch et al., 2022; Matsuhisa et al., 2024). Practices such as mindful meditation and mindful movement can effectively help manage stress and improve emotional regulation.

Knol et al. (2021) developed a mindful eating intervention and assessed its impact on various outcomes. They

discovered that after the 8-week program, participants showed improvements in stress-related eating scores, body weight, waist circumference, and systolic blood pressure. The authors concluded that the mindful eating intervention could help reduce maladaptive coping strategies, such as mindless and stress-related eating, and lead to positive changes in overall health status. Similarly, Gidugu and Jacobs (2019) implemented a mindful eating intervention with patients suffering from serious mental illness. Their findings indicated that participants became more aware and less distracted during meals, which contributed to a decrease in emotional eating behaviors.

A pilot study conducted by Smart et al. (2015) employed a mixed-methods approach to explore women's experiences, including their attitudes, feelings, and behaviors, after participating in an eight-week mindful eating course. The interviews revealed three major themes: increased awareness, new eating behaviors, and barriers to practice. Participants reported a reduction in their food intake, and the quantitative data indicated a significant increase in the women's awareness scores.

Further studies have shown that mindful eating interventions have a positive impact on eating behaviors, mental well-being, and overall quality of life (Carlson et al., 2017; Chin et al., 2017; Choi & Lee, 2020). In a study involving 205 nurses, Choi and Lee (2020) examined factors that influence mindful eating and identified a positive relationship between mindful eating and mental well-being. They suggested that future researchers use their findings to develop effective mindful eating interventions aimed at improving eating behaviors and enhancing mental well-being.

A growing body of research highlights the strong connection between nature, mindfulness, and mental well-being (Kang et al., 2023). A systematic review and meta-analysis conducted in 2023 (Lu et al.) found that horticultural therapy effectively reduces psychological stress and enhances overall mental health. This finding aligns with broader research on habit formation and behavior change, which emphasizes the importance of time, repetition, and a supportive environment (Gardner et al., 2020; Warren et al., 2017). Natural settings play a crucial role in promoting mindfulness. Exposure to nature has been linked to a reduction in depressive symptoms and an increase in overall well-being by minimizing distractions and encouraging present-moment awareness. This indicates that the environment where mindfulness is practiced can significantly affect its effectiveness. Additionally, family dynamics and consistent participation in mindfulness-based programs are essential for achieving long-term benefits (Crane et al., 2017; Dalen et al., 2015). Together, these insights underscore the importance of integrating natural spaces and supportive social environments into mindfulness practices to maximize their positive impact on mental health.

Existing literature on the factors' influencing mindfulness has primarily focused on Western contexts, often neglecting other sociocultural backgrounds. Over the past 20 years, many Chinese migrants have settled in Canada. As an ethnic minority, they may experience health disparities and are often underrepresented in health research. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate how a mindfulness-based workshop can affect their eating behaviors and mental well-being.

This study aimed to explore participants' experiences with food and their reflections following an eight-week Mindfulness-based workshop. The workshop is a new training program that combines mindfulness relaxation techniques with various food-related experiences. This approach may be unfamiliar to many local Chinese Canadians. A workshop centered around mindful eating can foster a deeper connection to the body through food-related experiences and enhance individual awareness of their relationship with food. The workshop addressed common concerns and guided participants to pay full attention to their food experiences through hands-on training in mindful techniques, including simple vegetable gardening, cooking, and eating.

## 2. Method

A focus group study was conducted from July to August 2022. After obtaining ethics approval, a convenience sample of 16 participants was recruited from a community health center. Information flyers were distributed through the center's website, and potential participants were contacted by email, where they received a detailed description of the study before agreeing to participate. The inclusion criteria required participants to be Chinese adults aged 50 years or older with internet access. Confidentiality and privacy were assured for all participants. They were invited to join the workshop via Zoom.

The workshop lasted for two hours each week over eight weeks. It was co-facilitated by the first author, a social worker, and a registered dietitian with extensive mindfulness techniques experience with diverse populations. The topics covered in the workshop included: Week 1: Introduction; Week 2: Mindful Eating Techniques; Week 3: Mindful Vegetable Growing; Week 4: Mindful Cooking; Week 5: Demonstration; Week 6: Sharing Mindful Food; Week 7: Storytelling; and Week 8: Focus Group Discussion. To show appreciation for their time and effort, participants received a \$15 gift card after the completion of the study.

TYL and GH facilitated the focus group discussion by asking participants four semi-structured interview questions: 1. Which topic covered in the workshop did you like the most? 2. Which aspects of the workshop did you find most challenging to apply in practice? 3. What daily activities might hinder or affect your ability to practice mindfulness? 4. Did you discover anything new about yourself after participating in the workshop, and is there anything else you would like to share? The focus group discussion lasted two hours, was video recorded, and was transcribed verbatim in written Chinese.

### 2.1 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using content analysis as outlined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). They described seven specific steps in their conventional content analysis approach, including the following: 1. Data Immersion: Researchers read through the data multiple times to comprehensively understand the overall content. 2. Open Coding: Codes are generated directly from the data without preconceived categories. Researchers highlight key phrases and assign labels that represent emerging concepts. 3. Code Categorization: The codes are grouped into broader categories based on similarities and relationships. 4. Theme Development: Categories are further refined into themes that capture the deeper meaning of the data. 5. Consensus and Validation: Multiple researchers engage in discussions to compare and refine themes through consensus-building, ensuring reliability and accuracy. 6. Illustration with Data: Representative quotes or excerpts from the data are utilized to support the identified themes. And 7. Interpretation and Reporting: The themes are contextualized within existing literature and aligned with the study's research objectives.

In this study, the three authors independently coded the narrative material and subsequently held discussions to reach a consensus on five key themes.

## 3. Results

All participants were female, with an average age of 56.56 years. While all of them were housewives, some had to miss one or two weeks of the workshop due to family obligations or illness. Most participants (68.8%) were married and held a high school diploma, while 25% had a university degree. The majority reported having no religious beliefs (56.3%), and 81% came from low-income families.

Five themes emerged as data were analyzed: (1) A new and exciting experience, (2) The practice is challenging and requires time, (3) Transforming stressful situations into purposeful and healthy experiences, (4) Regaining control, and (5) Supporting one another.

### 3.1 A New and Exciting Experience

Some participants practiced various meditation styles, such as yoga, tai chi, or qigong, in groups both outdoors and indoors before the workshop. However, after the COVID-19 pandemic began, most classes were suspended. As a result, participants either practiced alone at home or stopped altogether. The classes they had previously attended were unrelated to food. Our workshop introduced them to mindful eating and body scan exercises, which were new experiences for most. During the workshop, many participants used their cell phones to connect with others from their homes and browse the internet for news. While they were familiar with using the internet, participating in Zoom classes was a novel experience.

A cancer survivor, Participant E, mentioned, *"I am always interested in food, cooking, or growing vegetables. Most of the time, I stay home because it feels unsafe outside. Seeing many of you here, even in a virtual environment, is enjoyable. This workshop helps distract me from my illness and allows my body and mind to relax."*

Participant D shared that she had joined several yoga classes before and was aware of mindfulness, but she thought it only involved breathing. After attending the workshop, she learned that mindfulness can also relate to food and the body, which was a new and exciting experience for her.

Participant F expressed, *"I am happy to incorporate mindful eating exercises and body scans into growing, cooking, and eating vegetables, which I had never tried before. I felt relaxed. I have grown several vegetables, but I have never grown sweet peas. This process is beneficial for my physical and mental health."*

### 3.2 The Practice Is Challenging and Requires Time

When participants were asked which part of the workshop they found most challenging, most replied that the classes were informative and easy to understand. However, applying what they learned in these classes to their daily lives proved to be difficult.

Participant B stated, *"Practicing mindful eating at home is challenging because I am impatient and sometimes forget. I tend to do it only when I remember. But this practice has helped me and changed my life. I also practiced body scanning only when I remembered."*

Participant C mentioned, *"I shared the concepts with my husband, but it took us time to start practicing them. I had heard of body scanning before but never tried it until now!"*

Participant O shared that practicing mindfulness can significantly impact one's lifestyle. Walking outdoors to focus on thoughts, relax, and pay attention to breathing can be transformative. However, practicing mindfulness at home can be challenging, especially when family members, such as spouses or children, do not understand the importance of mindful eating.

Participant H expressed that it can be difficult to practice mindful eating during family meals, as family members often prioritize simply eating together and engaging in conversation. The environment also plays a crucial role in mindful eating. For example, when H is outdoors and hears birds, she now pays attention to them mindfully, whereas before, she would have just walked past them. H emphasized that developing this habit takes time.

### 3.3 Transforming Stressful Situations into Purposeful and Healthy Experiences

Practicing mindful eating transforms participants' stressful relationships with food into a more joyful, intentional, and healthful experience.

For example, Participant N shared, *"Before the class, I understood the concept of mindfulness, but I thought it was simply about taking a deep breath and letting it out. This time, I learned that mindfulness can also be combined with eating and being aware of our bodies. I enjoy gardening, which is my favorite activity. I have had this habit for so long that changing it all at once is challenging. However, I have found that positive thinking helps me feel more open. Now, I feel more relaxed. When planting vegetables, I try to engage all five of my senses. I shared this class with my 14-year-old child, and we plan to do this once a fortnight, exploring where our food comes from."*

Participant A mentioned that she used to consume an entire bag of chips while watching TV. She felt guilty and upset about her gradually increasing weight. However, she learned to eat slowly, savor each bite, and stop when she felt satisfied rather than stuffed.

Participant K stated, *"When I felt sad or stressed, I often turned to junk food or cookies for comfort. After eating those unhealthy foods, I would feel anxious and guilty. Sometimes, when I was busy, I would eat quickly and still feel unsatisfied and hungry, even after consuming a lot. Now, thanks to this mindful workshop, I can recognize the situations that trigger my emotional distress and address them without relying on food. Instead, I choose nourishing meals with intention. I set aside time to eat in a calm environment, fully tasting and enjoying the food."*

### 3.4 Regaining Control

Participants reported feeling a renewed sense of control over their bodies as the Mindfulness-based workshop encouraged awareness, balance, and self-compassion through the utilization of the five senses.

Participant I shared that she often turned to sweets or comfort foods to cope with stress and expressed regret about her overeating habits. However, by applying mindful eating strategies—such as using smaller plates, pausing during meals to assess her fullness, and learning to stop eating when she felt satisfied—she experienced a greater sense of control and balance in her eating habits.

Before joining the workshop, Participant J described herself as "hotheaded" and often impatient, struggling to maintain composure in various situations. This tendency affected her eating habits, leading to rushed meals, overeating, and a disconnect from the sensory experience of food. However, Participant J shared, *"The mindful eating workshop has taught me to eat slowly, chew my food thoroughly, and engage all five senses to fully appreciate and enjoy my meals. This program helps me calm down."* Her journey with mindful eating illustrates that it is not just about the food but also about creating space for mindfulness in daily life. By incorporating the program's principles, she could replace impatience and impulsivity with calmness and intentionality, ultimately achieving greater control and peace.

Participant P shared that she used to watch her iPhone or iPad while eating, focusing more on the news than on the food itself. After attending the workshop, she consciously turned off her phone and TV, allowing herself to fully experience the eating process and recognize her satisfaction with the food. Through activities that emphasized the sensory aspects of eating, Participant P learned to pay attention to her meals' aroma, texture, taste, and visual appeal. This practice fostered mindfulness, helping her shift her focus away from external stressors and toward the immediate, enjoyable experience of eating.

### 3.5 Supporting One Another

Participant F noted that her family supports her mindfulness practices. Although their communication has become less frequent as a result, they still enjoy drinking tea together and sharing their daily activities after meals. Sometimes, they also cook together. She believes these moments make her happy and bring them closer.

Several participants formed friendships by joining the workshop and created a WhatsApp group to discuss growing peas and beans. They valued the support from group members, especially during times of frustration when their crops did not grow as expected. Participant G shared that she had previously planted flowers and vegetables but had not put much effort into it. At the start of the workshop, her beans failed to grow due to incorrect methods. However, another group member explained how to observe the growth process and suggested that she spray water on the beans from above. This guidance helped her beans finally sprout, making her feel satisfied and happy.

While the workshop focused on growing beans and peas using a sprouting kit, some participants applied the concepts they learned to cultivate vegetables and flowers in their backyards. One member (L) of the WhatsApp group expressed her gratitude, saying, *"I would like to thank Alice (pseudonym) for her patience and expertise in teaching me how to pay attention to sunlight and pH levels when growing vegetables and planting flowers. Her guidance enabled me to create a beautiful, thriving garden. I truly appreciate it!"*

#### 4. Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into participants' experiences during their mindful eating journeys. These insights align with and contribute to the existing literature on mindfulness-based interventions and their effects on eating behaviours. The emerging themes highlight various aspects of this journey, allowing for a deeper understanding of the complexities of adopting and maintaining mindful eating practices.

##### 4.1 A New and Exciting Experience

The workshop introduced participants to mindful eating and body scan exercises, which were new experiences for most attendees. Participants noted that mindfulness extends beyond just breathing; it also includes food and body awareness. This insight is consistent with research by Gidugu and Jacobs (2019), which emphasizes the versatility of mindfulness practices in improving eating behaviors and enhancing self-awareness. Additionally, some participants applied mindful eating to growing, cooking, and consuming vegetables, reflecting findings that suggest integrating mindfulness into daily activities promotes holistic health benefits (Chin et al., 2019).

Feedback from participants highlights the emotional and social benefits of the workshop. Even in a virtual setting, connecting with others fostered a sense of community and provided a distraction from illness. This aligns with research indicating that virtual mindfulness programs can help reduce feelings of isolation and stress, particularly for individuals with chronic illnesses (Lindsay et al., 2019). The focus on mindfulness as a coping strategy for dealing with illness and isolation reflects broader findings in psycho-oncology, where mindfulness interventions are associated with an improved quality of life for cancer survivors (Carlson et al., 2017).

Participants' reflections reveal a newfound appreciation for mindfulness's practical applications. For instance, Participant F shared how mindful eating and body scan exercises positively impacted their mental and physical health while gardening. This aligns with research emphasizing the therapeutic benefits of incorporating mindfulness into everyday activities, such as gardening, which helps reduce stress and fosters a deeper sense of well-being (Lu et al., 2023).

##### 4.2 The Practice Is Challenging and Requires Time

Participants in the mindfulness-based workshop faced challenges that mirror findings from current literature, especially regarding the application of mindfulness concepts in daily life. While the workshop was engaging, participants struggled to implement practices in their routines consistently. Research shows that while mindfulness interventions enhance awareness and self-regulation, integrating these practices into daily behavior often requires additional support (Warren et al., 2017). A significant barrier to maintaining mindful eating was forgetfulness and impatience. Studies indicate that changing behaviors requires time, repetition, and supportive environments (Gardner et al., 2020). This inconsistency highlights the need for strategies to improve adherence, such as reminders and structured routines.

Environmental and family influences also posed challenges. Dalen et al. (2015) note that family dynamics, especially during shared meals, can prioritize social connection over individual mindfulness. As Participant O mentioned, distractions at home can further limit focused practice. In contrast, Participant H found mindfulness easier to practice outdoors, supported by Kang et al. (2023), which suggests that natural settings enhance mindfulness by reducing distractions. Time is crucial in developing mindfulness habits. Crane et al. (2017) emphasize that consistent practice is essential for long-term benefits, but time constraints often pose obstacles. Therefore, mindfulness interventions should be flexible, allowing participants to adapt practices to their schedules.

#### *4.3 Transforming Stressful Situations into Purposeful and Healthy Experiences*

Participants' experiences highlight the benefits of mindful eating for both emotional and physical well-being, aligning with recent research findings (Winkens et al., 2020). By transforming routine habits into opportunities for engagement and relaxation, mindful eating fosters sensory awareness and creates a deeper connection to food. For example, one study found that mindful eating can enhance psychological well-being and increase meal enjoyment. Engaging family members in mindfulness practices, as Participant N did, supports evidence that shared family meals can positively influence children's eating behaviors and promote healthier eating habits (Dalen et al., 2015).

The transition from mindless snacking to intentional eating emphasizes the advantages of slowing down and savoring food. Research shows that mindful eating can improve dietary habits and reduce the risk of obesity. Participant K's experience of replacing emotional eating with nourishing food choices in a calm environment reflects the psychological benefits of mindfulness. Various studies have demonstrated that mindful eating helps individuals recognize their emotional triggers and make conscious food choices, thereby reducing instances of emotional eating. Overall, the findings underscore the importance of mindfulness in promoting healthier, more balanced eating habits and emotional regulation, suggesting that mindful eating can be a powerful tool for enhancing overall health and well-being (Crane et al., 2017; Dalen et al., 2015).

#### *4.4 Regaining Control*

The mindfulness-based workshop helped participants regain control over their eating habits by fostering increased awareness, balance, and self-compassion. Participants employed mindful eating strategies, such as using smaller plates and pausing to assess their fullness, which assisted them in stopping overeating and taking charge of their eating behaviors. Participant J, who often struggled with impatience and rushed meals, learned to slow down, chew thoroughly, and engage her senses. This enabled her to eat more mindfully and improved her emotional state, creating a sense of calm. Similarly, Participant P eliminated distractions like her phone and TV, allowing her to fully engage with the sensory experience of eating and better manage her food intake. These experiences align with research indicating that mindfulness enhances self-regulation, emotional responses, and eating behaviors. By cultivating mindfulness and awareness in their daily lives, participants achieved more significant control over their eating habits and improved their emotional well-being (Choi & Lee, 2020; Dunn et al., 2018).

#### *4.5 Supporting One Another*

Participants' experiences highlight the significant role that social support plays in reinforcing mindfulness practices and enhancing overall well-being. Family support is particularly important; mindful moments, such as sharing meals and cooking together, help strengthen family bonds and increase emotional satisfaction. Research supports the notion that engaging in shared activities can enhance emotional well-being (Sharma & Palomares-Fernandez, 2023).

The WhatsApp group created by participants demonstrates how peer support can promote learning and resilience. For example, Participant G shared a story about how she received guidance from the group to grow her beans successfully. This illustrates how collaborative problem-solving and peer mentorship can improve engagement and motivation. Studies have shown that peer support is linked to increased learning and the achievement of goals. Additionally, applying mindfulness concepts to gardening shows how attention and patience—key aspects of mindfulness—can be transferred to various areas of life. Gardening has been found to reduce stress and improve mental health (Kang et al., 2023).

One participant expressed gratitude for her mentor's guidance, underscoring the importance of expertise and positive feedback in fostering community connections and personal growth. These findings suggest that mindfulness practices are more effective when supported by social networks, whether through family or peer groups, and can lead to lasting behavioral changes and improved well-being.

### **5. Limitations and Future Studies**

One key limitation of this study is its small sample size, which may restrict the application of the findings. Additionally, the focus group format raises the risk of social desirability bias, which could lead to overestimating the workshop's effectiveness and a lack of critical insights for improvement. To enhance the reliability and applicability of future research, it is essential to diversify the sample by including participants from various age groups, cultural backgrounds, and professional fields. A more heterogeneous sample would provide broader perspectives and ensure the findings reflect a wider range of experiences. Furthermore, employing mixed methods—integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches—would capture self-reported perceptions and measurable outcomes, offering a more comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences.

Incorporating a comparison group would further strengthen the study by distinguishing the workshop's true effects

from external influences, thereby providing stronger evidence of its impact on mental well-being and behavioral changes. Additionally, follow-up studies are crucial for assessing the long-term benefits of mindfulness interventions, as short-term feedback may not fully capture sustained effects. Despite the success of introducing mindfulness in a virtual format, challenges such as digital fatigue and limited interpersonal connection must be considered. The lack of in-person engagement may hinder peer support, which is a crucial component of mindfulness-based programs. To address this, future research should explore hybrid approaches that combine virtual and face-to-face sessions, leveraging the accessibility of online learning while preserving the benefits of in-person interaction. Comparing virtual and in-person workshops would yield insights into their relative effectiveness, informing best practices for program implementation. By addressing these limitations and implementing these methodological improvements, future research can provide more robust, credible, and actionable insights into the impact of mindfulness workshops.

## 6. Conclusion

This study highlights the transformative potential of mindfulness-based interventions, especially in the context of mindful eating. Five key themes emerged from the workshop participants' experiences: (1) A new and exciting experience, (2) the practice is challenging and requires time, (3) transforming stressful situations into purposeful and healthy experiences, (4) regaining control, and (5) supporting one another. These themes illustrate the multifaceted impact of the workshop on participants. While participants found mindfulness to be a novel and engaging approach, they also recognized the challenges of establishing a consistent practice, emphasizing the need for long-term support and reinforcement. Importantly, the workshop allowed individuals to reframe stress as an opportunity for growth, suggesting that mindfulness promotes resilience and adaptive coping mechanisms. The theme of regaining control further demonstrates how mindfulness practices empower individuals to develop healthier relationships with food, stress, and emotions. Additionally, the emphasis on supporting one another highlights the social aspect of mindfulness, emphasizing the potential benefits of community-based learning.

In summary, this study adds to the growing body of literature on mindfulness and mindful eating by showing how virtual interventions can facilitate meaningful change. By capturing participants' lived experiences, the findings not only reinforce existing research but also offer new insights into how mindfulness can support well-being, stress management, and interpersonal relationships. Future studies should build on these insights and refine program delivery to maximize accessibility, engagement, and long-term impact.

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