Mindfulness Science and Practice
Psychology: L33 – 111 (1-credit course)
PREREQ: First-Year Status

Meeting Times: 5:30-6:30 PM Thursdays
Meeting Location: Lien Seminar A

Instructor:
Dr. Todd Braver
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Office Hours by Appt. (I greatly enjoy talking about mindfulness! If you would like to engage in further informal discussions outside of class hours, I strongly encourage you to set up an appointment with me)

Course Description:
Mindfulness is a term that is becoming increasingly used in popular culture to refer to a set of skills associated with increased attentional focus, successful stress-management, and improved health, sleep, and emotional well-being. But what does mindfulness really mean? How can these skills be learned? Are these putative benefits of mindfulness supported by good scientific evidence?

This course will expose you to the various facets of mindfulness from both an applied and scientific perspective. Specifically, the course will have two components. The first is hands-on and experiential, teaching mindfulness skills through a set of easy-to-learn practices, exercises, and group activity. The second component will be to survey the scientific literature on mindfulness effects on cognition, emotion, brain function, and health. Through this component we will also hopefully have time to explore the idea that mindfulness training can provide a useful scientific window into the brain’s capability for plasticity and change. The goal for the seminar is to provide practical skills that can contribute to personal development, emotional well-being, and academic success. Likewise, you will gain critical thinking skills in learning how to read and evaluate primary scientific literature to become a more sophisticated consumer of mindfulness research.

Logistics: The course will meet twice weekly at the beginning of the semester, to provide a more intensive introduction to the key material, and to reinforce learning of critical practices. The rest of the sessions will be once a week, with the course ending in before Thanksgiving. The first half of the semester will focus on structured activities and group exercises; the second half more on scientific topics. However, all sessions will be highly interactive and discussion-oriented. Mindfulness practice periods will occur in all sessions.

At the beginning and end of the semester, students will also complete a variety of self-report questionnaires and cognitive assessments to help us get oriented to how mindfulness can be studied scientifically, and to make ourselves part of the object of study.

Each student is expected to attend each class, arrive ON TIME, and be fully prepared to participate in class discussions. Further student are strongly encouraged to come to class
with an open mind, being present, attentive, and curious about the material. Student contributions of positively-framed questions and opinions will contribute to an enjoyable and respectful class atmosphere and dynamics.

**Grade Determination:** This is a pass-fail course only. Due to the nature of the course, it is important for students to attend all the classes. Information will be provided in class that will be critical to fulfilling course objectives. Most activities require class participation and absences will affect the success of the class. *If you know that you will miss more than one course meeting it is recommended that you drop the course, rather than risk failing, or not getting the full benefit of attendance.*

Grades will be determined by the following criteria. Students must achieve an 80% or higher to earn a passing grade.

- 50% Class Attendance & Participation Exercises
- 20% Completion of Practice Log & Reflection Journal
- 20% Completion of Beginning / Ending Assessments
- 10% Completion of Reading Summary Questions

**Notes on Grading:**

**Attendance & Participation Exercises:** Students will be required to attend all classes. Most the information provided about readings, exercises & practices will be delivered in class, so missing them will make it very hard to get the most out of the class. In addition, the course will have lots of in-class exercises (some written), plus both full & small-group discussion. Students who do not participate will miss out on a lot of information as well. Students will be graded on a present/absent and participated/didn't participate check for each class (i.e., no letter or point grade).

**Assessments:** Completion of self-report assessments is an important component of the course. It provides an opportunity for you to see how mindfulness is studied scientifically, by being a participant yourself. Moreover, it provides an opportunity to see what you’ve learned during the semester in terms of an impact on different aspects of their attention, mood, and other characteristics of psychological well-being and self-control. Grades will be given according only for completion or failure to complete the assessments (i.e., full-credit given for completion; no grading of response content, etc).

**Practice:** The benefits of mindfulness really only come from practicing yourself. The more you practice the more you will notice benefits. It is important to also keep a record of this practice, both in the time logged, and in any journal reflections on your experiences. Full credit will still be given for journal reflections that discuss if and why practice was missed, and entering in “zero” minutes of practice in your log. So it is important to be honest; these issues then can be discussed in class. You will be required to submit your log / journal entries each week.

**Paper Summaries:** Throughout the semester, we will be reading scientific papers on Mindfulness research as an important component of the course. You may find some papers difficult to read, but it is important to challenge yourself so we can discuss in class. Each paper will have some summary questions for you to answer to help orient you toward the key paper ideas.
Topics

The goal for the course will be to spend time on each of these topics, as time permits. However, the breakdown and content of each topic will be determined as the course progresses, with potential changes subject to the discretion of the instructor.

1. Body Awareness
   A core component of mindfulness is present-moment awareness. Bodily sensations provide an accessible window into this form of mindfulness. Students will practice exercises geared toward increasing present-moment body awareness, including breath focus and body scanning. Discussion will focus on breath-body connections, through relevant physiological concepts.

2. Mind-wandering and Attention
   Students will practice mindfulness exercises that increase awareness of attentional distractions and how to deal with tendency of the mind to wander. Current views on the relationship between mindfulness and mind wandering will be presented through research articles.

3. Emotion Awareness & Regulation
   Emotions are a highly salient part of daily life, but it is often difficult to understand our own and others emotional reactions to on-going experience. Students will be exposed to mindfulness practices that increase awareness of feelings and emotional triggers, and to research relating these to positive changes in mood and happiness.

4. Self-Compassion
   The emphasis of this section is on recent advances in the scientific understanding of emotional maturity and self-compassion. Discussion, readings and exercises will focus on the relationship between self-compassion, self-esteem, altruism, and other forms of prosocial behavior.

5. Mental Health and Physical Health
   The body, mind, and emotions provide signals that serve as early-warning signs of stress. This section will discuss psychobiological approaches to health, as well as psychological aspects of physical well-being, stress, and coping. Readings and exercises will focus on mindfulness techniques that are associated with successful stress-management.

6. Dimensions of Mindfulness & Mindfulness Studies
   Students will learn the definitions and dimensions of mindfulness currently in use by both researchers and practitioners. Readings will address different ways that
mindfulness practices map on to empirical methods for studying them, as well as the current challenges facing mindfulness research.

7. Mental Training and Neuroplasticity

One of the most exciting aspects of mindfulness training is that it reveals the capability for neuroplasticity, which refers to brain changes that occur – at a variety of different levels – in response to experience. Readings and discussion will focus on the neuroplasticity framework for understanding the effects of mindfulness training. This framework suggests that mindfulness can be seen as just another form of skill acquisition, but one which may produce enduring changes in attention, emotion, and attitudes – at the extreme, even potentially transforming what is typically referred to as personality and self-identity.

8. Self-Control, Education, and Development of Positive Habits

The neuroplasticity framework suggests that mindfulness practices may serve as an important addition to educational development and pedagogy, not only during childhood and adolescence, but also as a life-long learning endeavor. A practical consequence may be an improved ability to exert self-control over maladaptive behaviors through the development of positive habits. Discussion and readings will focus on the implication of these ideas for students’ self-directedness towards their own educational, career, and personal life goals.
**Tentative Schedule**

Week 1 (Jan 16)  Course Introduction, Practices, Assessments
Week 2 (Jan 23)  Mindfulness Practice (B) + Group Activities / Exercises
Week 3 (Jan 30)  Mindfulness Science (Discussion + Practice)
Week 4 (Feb 6)  Mindfulness Practice (R) + Group Activities / Exercises
Week 5 (Feb 13)  Mindfulness Science (Discussion + Practice)
Week 6 (Feb 20)  Mindfulness Practice (E) + Group Activities / Exercises
Week 7 (Feb 27)  Mindfulness Science (Discussion + Practice)
Week 8 (Mar 5)  Mindfulness Practice (A) + Group Activities / Exercises
Week 9 (Mar 12)  NO CLASS: SPRING BREAK
Week 10 (Mar 19)  Mindfulness Science (Discussion + Practice)
Week 11 (Mar 26)  Mindfulness Practice (T) + Group Activities / Exercises
Week 12 (Apr 2)  Mindfulness Science (Discussion + Practice)
Week 13 (Apr 9)  Mindfulness Practice (H) + Group Activities / Exercises
Week 14 (Apr 16)  Mindfulness Science (Discussion + Practice)
Week 15 (Apr 23)  Course Reflections on Mindfulness Science & Practice; Assessments

*This schedule is subject to change at the discretion of the course instructor.*