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From Burnout to Mindfulness Distribution: Supply Chain Paths of Recovery and Teaching among Middle-aged MBSR Instructors

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Abstract

Purpose: This study investigates the supply chain of recovery among middle-aged women who transformed burnout into mindful teaching. By conceptualizing recovery and teaching as distributional flows, it traces the logistical "paths" through which mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) practices move from personal healing to pedagogical delivery, sustaining both resilience and professional presence. **Research design, data and methodology:** Seven women who experienced burnout and later completed MBSR instructor training were interviewed in-depth. Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method was applied to capture key distribution nodes in their recovery process. Data analysis mapped the experiential supply chain, identifying critical transfer points from individual healing practices to instructional embodiment. **Results:** Five thematic distribution hubs emerged: burnout as demand shock, entry into mindfulness as supply input, transformation as process realignment, practice as restorative logistics, and integration as final delivery. Participants reported improved emotion regulation and nonjudgmental awareness, which circulated into their teaching, reinforcing both personal recovery and mindful instruction. **Conclusions:** Mindfulness operated not merely as a stress-relief product but as a supply framework enabling identity reconstruction and ethical teaching. Through sustained engagement, participants achieved resilience and compassion, which were redistributed into educational contexts. These findings suggest that MBSR functions as a self-sustaining supply chain of healing and mindful pedagogy.

Keywords : Burnout Recovery, Distribution Flow, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), Supply Chain Resilience,

JEL Classification Code: L83, Z20, C46

1. Introduction

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn, 2020) is a structured meditation program developed from the core practice of Vipassanā meditation. It aims to enhance self-regulatory capacity by cultivating mindfulness—nonjudgmental awareness of the present moment and of emotional experiences (Chems-Maarif et al., 2025; Zainal & Newman, 2023; Hanley et al., 2021). MBSR has been widely validated as an effective psychological intervention for reducing emotional exhaustion and enhancing emotional regulation and self-awareness (Dou et al., 2025; Feldman & Kuyken, 2019; Parker & Schooler, 2024; Salvado et al., 2021; Talebiazar et al., 2024; Wilson et al., 2024). Recently, there has been growing interest in the effectiveness of MBSR-based interventions for alleviating burnout (Gan et al., 2024; Sercekman, 2024). Sanilevici et al. (2021), Garro et al. (2023), and Othman et al. (2023) have

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explored various dimensions of Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs), including participants' emotional changes, the acceptability of mindfulness practice, and the influence of organizational settings.

These studies emphasize that mindfulness practice contributes not only to stress and burnout reduction but also to deeper internal transformations, including enhanced self-compassion, shifts in identity, and reconstruction of life meaning. The MBSR (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction) program is increasingly recognized as a valuable resource for middle-aged women experiencing identity crises, as it enhances emotional awareness and acceptance, fosters resilience, and deepens self-compassion and inner insight (Gan, et al., 2024; Kvamme et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2022). Burnout, meanwhile, is not merely a state of fatigue but a chronic stress reaction characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished sense of personal accomplishment (Demerouti, 2024; Brady et al., 2020).

In South Korea, middle-aged women are particularly vulnerable to burnout due to the structural burden of simultaneously managing roles in the workplace, family, and caregiving domains (Wi & Park, 2023; Park, 2022; Pérez et al., 2022; Yazdani Aliabadi et al., 2021). MBSR has gained attention as an alternative approach for supporting the recovery of middle-aged women from burnout. Mindfulness practice contributes to enhanced emotional resilience through increased emotional awareness and acceptance, and it fosters self-compassion and inner insight—making it a valuable resource for middle-aged women facing identity crises (Gan et al., 2024; Kvamme et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2022).

Salvado et al. (2021) and Strauss et al. (2021), through quantitative meta-analysis and qualitative meta-synthesis respectively, demonstrated the effectiveness of MBIs in reducing burnout and emphasized the importance of both structural features and contextual conditions in shaping outcomes. However, most of these studies have focused on specific occupational groups—such as healthcare professionals, teachers, and corporate employees—leaving the experiences of individuals with emotional distress or psychological burnout outside of professional contexts underexplored. In particular, qualitative research exploring how middle-aged women, who have recovered from burnout through MBSR practice, reinterpret their past suffering after becoming meditation instructors remains exceedingly rare.

This study, therefore, aims to conduct an in-depth exploration—using Colaizzi's phenomenological method—of the internal transformation, healing experiences, and existential reorientation of middle-aged women who experienced burnout due to work overload and dual burdens of work-family conflict, subsequently recovered through MBSR, and later transitioned into roles as mindfulness instructors. From the perspective of these instructors, the study sheds light on how they embodied MBSR, empathized with the suffering of practitioners, and expanded their own practice. It further investigates how such practice has led to life transformations and restructured their experiences of healing and meaning making.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design based on Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological approach to deeply explore the lived experiences of middle-aged female MBSR instructors. Colaizzi's method is particularly suitable for identifying the essential structure of a phenomenon through a systematic process of description. The analysis followed the seven procedural steps outlined by Colaizzi (Morrow et al., 2015):

1. Obtaining participants' rich and vivid descriptions,
2. Extracting significant statements,
3. Formulating meanings,
4. Organizing meanings into thematic categories,
5. Developing an exhaustive description,
6. Constructing a fundamental structure,
7. Validating findings through member checking

2.2. Setting and Participants

This study targeted middle-aged women (aged 45 to 65) who had previously worked in various professions before transitioning into full-time meditation instructors. The research was conducted at three MBSR centers located in Seoul, South Korea. To ensure external validity in qualitative research, a purposive sampling strategy was employed. The directors of each center were informed of the study's objectives and intent and were asked to recommend participants who met the criteria. With the cooperation of these directors, suitable participants were identified. Additionally, snowball sampling was used to supplement the initial recruitment, resulting in a final total of seven participants.

- Inclusion criteria were as follows:
• Female participants aged between 45 and 65,
• Previous professional experience in a non-meditation occupation,
• Primary reason for career transition was burnout,
• A minimum of seven years of continuous meditation practice,
• At least five years of experience teaching MBSR and

currently working as a full-time meditation instructor.

- Exclusion criteria were as follows:
• Less than one year of teaching experience as a meditation instructor,
• Primary affiliation with meditation practices other than MBSR,
• Currently maintaining a secondary career (i.e., not a full-time instructor),
• Career transition due to reasons other than burnout (e.g., family issues, alternative job opportunities),
• Receiving psychiatric or medical treatment for current psychological or physical condition,
• Lack of voluntary consent to participate in the study, or difficulty in providing meaningful responses during interviews.

Although the basic inclusion criterion for this study was age 45 or older, participants were exceptionally included at the researcher's discretion if they had substantial professional experience and a clearly identifiable transition into meditation instruction following burnout. In cases where the reasons for resignation were multifaceted, the inclusion criteria were applied flexibly if in-depth interviews confirmed that burnout had been a primary catalyst for career change, as clearly articulated by the participants.

Ultimately, seven middle-aged female participants were included in the study, with ages ranging from 41 to 57 years (M = 50.14, SD = 5.73). Among them, two were single, four were married, and one was divorced and living independently. Their prior occupations before becoming meditation instructors included flight attendants (n = 1), executives at a large corporation (n = 3), private academic instructors (n = 2), and middle school teachers (n = 1). The participants' average tenure in their previous jobs was 23.57 years (SD = 8.31), and they had an average of 2.57 years (SD = 0.79) of MBSR-based meditation experience before entering instructor roles. Most of them experienced emotional exhaustion after long-term professional duties and the dual burden of balancing work and family life. They chose meditation as a turning point for personal recovery and redefinition of life.

At the time of the study, their average experience as meditation instructors was 11.86 years (SD=3.63), indicating a meaningful connection between their post-burnout transformation and sustained engagement in meditative practice and instruction. Demographic and Occupational Background of Middle-Aged Female Meditation Instructors (see Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic and Occupational Background of Middle-Aged Female Meditation Instructors

ID	Age	Gender	Marital Status	Previous Job	Years of service	Years of meditation experience	Years as instructor
P1	41	Female	Single	Service Industry	10	2	7
P2	45	Female	Single	Corporate Sector	35	3	15
P3	48	Female	Married	Corporate Sector	32	2	10
P4	52	Female	Married	Private Education	20	2	12
P5	57	Female	Married	Private Education	23	3	15
P6	53	Female	Married	Corporate Sector	20	4	13
P7	55	Female	Married	Public Education	25	2	11

2.3. Procedure

The research team clearly explained to all participants that the aim of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of their inner transformation following burnout, focusing on their experiences transitioning from MBSR practitioners to instructors. This explanation was provided consistently using a standardized procedure.

Interviews were conducted jointly by the first author and a trained research assistant over an 18-day period, from March 13 to March 31, 2025. Both researchers had no prior acquaintance with the participants, and measures were taken to minimize the intrusion of preunderstanding.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to explore key themes such as emotional exhaustion, empathy, and transformation through mindfulness. Each interview lasted an average of 64.1 minutes. The full list of interview questions and their corresponding exploratory focus is provided in Appendix A. The guide was designed to elicit rich, experiential narratives from participants. Although the possibility of recruiting additional participants was considered during the analysis phase, the research team determined that theoretical saturation had been reached and finalized the sample size accordingly.

Interview transcripts were produced through a two-step process combining automated voice recognition and manual correction. All interview recordings were initially transcribed using Clova Note, an AI-powered speech-to-text program developed by Naver. Subsequently, the research assistant who was present during the interviews thoroughly reviewed the audio files and manually corrected the transcripts to ensure accuracy. This process ensured high-fidelity transcripts by eliminating omissions, misinterpretations, and tonal inaccuracies, thus faithfully reflecting the original interview content.

2.4. Data Collection

Data collection and analysis were conducted using Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method. This approach is particularly suitable for understanding how individuals experience and interpret specific phenomena or events within the context of their lives, focusing on capturing the essential structure of the experience through participants' direct narratives (Colaizzi, 1978; Sanders, 2003; Morrow, 2015). The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format and designed to allow participants to freely share their experiences of change following their participation in the MBSR program.

All interviews were individually recorded and transcribed through a two-step process combining automated and manual methods. First, Clova Note, an AI-based speech recognition program, was used to automatically segment speakers and generate initial transcripts. Then, the research assistant who was present during the interviews carefully re-listened to the audio files and manually corrected the transcripts. This process helped eliminate errors such as missing utterances, semantic distortions, and omitted intonations, thereby ensuring the accuracy and fidelity of the final transcripts.

The interview guide included the following three general questions: 1. What motivated you to participate in the MBSR program? 2. What were the significant events or changes you experienced as both a practitioner and instructor? 3. What major changes have occurred in your life since becoming a mindfulness instructor?

Participants were encouraged to provide concrete and specific examples during the interviews. They were also given the opportunity to review and revise their own statements to enhance both the accuracy and clarity of their responses. Given that this study focused on experiences of change, more in-depth analysis was performed primarily on participants' responses to the third interview questions.

2.5. Trustworthiness

To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of this qualitative study, we adopted the four criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985)—credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability—and implemented a range of strategies accordingly. First, to ensure credibility, the analysis adhered strictly to Colaizzi's method, and participants' narratives were accurately reflected. A member checking process was conducted to validate the findings: summaries of the themes derived were shared with participants, who confirmed whether the interpretations aligned with their lived experiences. Second, to enhance dependability, all stages of the research process—including participant selection, interviews, transcription, analysis, and interpretation—were meticulously documented.

A consistent interview guide was used to maintain uniformity across data collection procedures. Third, for confirmability, the researchers articulated their pre-understandings prior to data collection and maintained a reflexive journal throughout the entire study process. The first and second authors conducted repeated cross-checks and discussions during the analysis phase to strengthen the objectivity and validity of the interpretation. Fourth, transferability was ensured by providing detailed contextual information about the participants, including age, previous professional background, duration of meditation practice, and years of teaching experience. These details enhance the applicability of the study's findings to other groups in similar conditions. Together, these procedures enhanced the interpretive depth of the study and contributed to the credibility and qualitative validity of its findings.

2.6. Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study followed Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological method. This approach emphasizes the extraction and articulation of the essential structure and meaning of participant's lived experiences through their own statements. It is widely regarded as an appropriate method for ensuring both rigor and credibility in qualitative research (Sanders, 2003). The analytic process was carried out in the following steps:

1. Familiarization with the transcripts: The first author repeatedly read each transcript to grasp the overall tone, mood, and emotional atmosphere of the participants' narratives.

2. Extraction of significant statements: The first author identified and extracted significant statements from the interview specifically, those directly related to the research questions and key experiential accounts.

3. Formulation of meaning units: Both the first and second authors independently derived formulated meanings from the significant statements. Through comparison and in-depth discussion, they reached consensus on the meanings, ensuring interpretive consistency and analytical validity. This step prioritized the extraction of the essential meaning embedded in the participants' experiences, guided by the researchers' intuitive insight and hermeneutic sensitivity.

4. Organization of thematic clusters: The identified meaning units were grouped into higher-order thematic clusters based on conceptual similarity and internal coherence. This process was led by the first author, while the second author cross-checked the structural relationships between themes and the recurrence of meanings across narratives.

5. Development of an exhaustive description: Based on the refined thematic clusters, the first author constructed a comprehensive description that systematically captured the

essence of participant's shared experiences.

6. Formulation of the fundamental structure: The first author synthesized the comprehensive descriptions into a concise summary that reflected the core meaning of the phenomenon, which was then reviewed and refined collaboratively with the second author to finalize the structural description.

7. Member checking: The summarized findings were shared with all participants to verify whether the described content accurately reflected their lived experiences. Feedback from participants was incorporated to strengthen the trustworthiness of the analysis.

2.7. Trustworthiness

All interviews were conducted by the first author, who had no prior acquaintance with the participants. Each interview was audio-recorded in its entirety and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. The second author served as the principal supervisor of the entire analysis process. The first author holds a graduate degree in Buddhist philosophy, has completed formal training in MBSR instruction, and is certified as a Level 2 mindfulness instructor. The second author is a professor of Buddhist philosophy and has extensive personal experience with mindfulness meditation.

3. Results

Based on the participants' significant statements regarding their experiences as both mindfulness practitioners and instructors, a total of 33 formulated meanings and 15 themes were identified. These were ultimately integrated into five overarching categories: "Burnout and Introduction to Mindfulness," "Empathy and Recovery," "Moments of Transformation," "Practice and Healing," and "Integrations of Life." Each category emerged from participant's narratives and captures the transformations they underwent throughout their journey as meditation instructors across temporal, emotional, physical, cognitive, and ontological dimensions. Thematic categories, themes, and constructed meanings derived from Colaizzi's seven-step analysis illustrate how inner changes and practical insights are progressively accumulated and deepened through long-term mindfulness practice and teaching experience.

3.1. Burnout and Introduction to Mindfulness

Participants described their introduction to mindfulness as a "last attempt at recovery" amid severe psychological and physical exhaustion. Before enrolling in the MBSR program, many had been overwhelmed by chronic overwork, caregiving, family obligations, and emotional strain in complex social roles. While functioning outwardly, they felt internally depleted, noting that "only the roles remained and the self -disappeared." Mindfulness was not simply seen as a tool for stress relief but as a desperate effort to reconnect with a fragmented self. The structured, non-judgmental environment of the MBSR program created emotional safety that allowed deeply buried feelings to emerge. As one participant recalled:

On the first day of mindfulness practice, I suddenly burst into tears when someone tried to take care of me. It felt unfamiliar... and then I realized how exhausted I truly was. I had been pretending to be okay for so long, and all those suppressed emotions just came flooding out. Such moments marked a turning point in their self-concept—from caregivers to individuals who also needed care. Through mindfulness, they began to acknowledge unmet needs and allow space for emotional release and rest. For many, it was the first time they experienced inner stillness, making mindfulness not a casual choice, but a necessary path toward existential healing and the reclamation of self.

3.2. Empathy and Recovery

Participants reported that through repeated mindfulness practice and empathetic group interactions, they came to re-recognize themselves as beings worthy of respect and care—an awareness long obscured by constant external demands and emotional exhaustion. Within the shared space of meditation and group practice, they encountered nonjudgmental listening and unconditional acceptance, creating a safe emotional environment where long-suppressed wounds could surface.

These experiences suggest that the MBSR program offered more than emotional release; it enabled a deeper recognition of inherent dignity and the restoration of trust in one's existence. As one participant expressed: After starting mindfulness, I realized it was okay to do nothing. I finally accepted that I didn't have to do everything, and that it was okay to stop when I was overwhelmed.

This experience of being accepted without condition allowed participants to release the burden of constant responsibility and self-criticism, fostering a more compassionate and nurturing stance toward themselves. The emotional spaciousness they reclaimed became the basis for extending empathy toward others, allowing for more restorative and balanced relationships rooted in mutual care and authenticity.

3.3. Moments of Transformation

Many participants described that repeated mindfulness

practice and empathetic interactions within group settings allowed them to recognize themselves as beings worthy of care and respect. This marked a significant departure from a life dominated by self-neglect, external evaluation, and emotional depletion. The shared space of meditation offered emotionally safe experiences of unconditional acceptance, through which long-buried emotions could surface and be acknowledged. One participant reflected: It was important to reflect on myself through mindfulness, but what comforted me the most was knowing that someone was there whom I could ask for support.

3.4. Practice and Healing

The participants' decision to become MBSR instructors did not stem from a mere professional choice but was deeply rooted in an inner motivation to meaningfully transform their experiences of suffering and recovery. As practitioners, they learned how to care for themselves through meditation and gradually felt a natural desire to share their journey of healing with others. Through meditation, I was able to face the exhausted and wounded version of myself, and that process led to healing. I felt this experience was too precious to keep to myself, so I decided to become a mindfulness instructor to share it with others who are going through the same pain.

This statement reflects more than a personal recovery; it illustrates how the experience of healing from burnout became a catalyst for a practical and ethical transformation. Particularly for those who had lived under excessive responsibility and self-criticism while suppressing their emotions, mindfulness practice taught them not to eliminate or avoid emotions but to observe and accept them as they were. This shift did not stop at improved emotional regulation but extended to a restorative recognition of selfhood that had been shattered by burnout.

Within this newly created space of emotional openness, participants found time to attend to their own needs, which in turn expanded their capacity for empathy toward others. This inner change became a crucial foundation for their transition into the role of instructor. The belief that "my healing experience can be helpful to someone else" evolved into an ethical impetus for action. Thus, the participants' experiences of burnout were reconstructed through their engagement with MBSR meditation. This transformation played a pivotal role in forming their identities as healers and guided them toward a path of compassionate practice.

3.5. Integrations of Life

Participants described mindfulness not merely as a temporary emotional regulation technique but as an enduring way of being that permeated their daily lives. Especially for those who had experienced burnout, their habitual strategy had been to suppress emotional pain and push through suffering. However, through sustained mindfulness practice, they began to create moments of pause in which they could observe themselves with clarity and gentleness, marking a significant ontological shift in how they related to suffering and the self. One participant reflected: As I watched my students change through meditation, I came to see suffering not just as something to overcome, but as a resource that helps us understand life. That realization allowed me to interpret myself with more softness and compassion.

This insight highlights a transformation in which painful experiences are no longer regarded as obstacles but are reinterpreted as meaningful parts of life. Mindfulness evolved into a constant inner presence—an awareness that supported participants in navigating daily interactions, family relationships, and emotional fluctuations with greater balance and compassion.

They described no longer perceiving meditation as confined to formal practice but as an internalized stance that allowed them to stop when overwhelmed and to embrace vulnerability without judgment. For those long driven by external demands, mindfulness offered the radical possibility of resting as an act of self-care rather than defeat. This expanded view of mindfulness enabled participants not only to reconstruct their own lives but also to extend healing presence to others through their roles as instructors.

Ultimately, mindfulness practice served as an existential framework for self-reflection and integration, allowing participants to align their personal recovery with a broader commitment to supporting others' healing journeys (See Table 2).

Table 2: Thematic Summary: Burnout and Introduction to Mindfulness

Burnout & First Encounter	Emotional / Cognitive Change	Relational & Empathic Support
Self-acceptance & Compassion	Motivation & Role Transition	Early Teaching Experiences
Teaching as Healing	Reflective Learning through Teaching	Integrated Life Transformation

4. Discussions

This study aimed to understand how participants who had experienced burnout underwent personal transformation and healing through the practice and instruction of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). Through a phenomenological analysis of participants' narratives, five overarching thematic categories and fifteen subthemes were identified:

1. Burnout and Introduction to Mindfulness

2. Empathy and Recovery
3. Moments of Transformation
4. Practice and Healing
5. Integration of Life

The first theme, "Burnout and Introduction to Mindfulness," highlights how participation in the MBSR program offered emotionally exhausted individuals a space for nonjudgmental self-reflection and emotional pause. Initially, many participants engaged in mindfulness as a coping tool for reducing stress or managing difficult emotions. Over time, however, their perspective shifted toward simply observing emotional experiences "as they are" (Hsieh et al., 2021; Scheepers et al., 2020), reflecting a deeper alignment with core mindfulness principles such as present-moment awareness and acceptance (Bishop et al., 2004). This shift enabled participants to transform their relationship with distress—from avoidance to somatic presence. Rather than escaping discomfort, they cultivated a sensitivity to bodily sensations and emotional cues often neglected in daily life. Through this embodied awareness, they disrupted habitual patterns of emotional reactivity and replaced them with mindful acceptance (Feldman & Kuyken, 2019, p.12). Instead of judging or trying to eliminate internal experiences, participants learned to remain with them, a process reflecting metacognitive acceptance (Scheepers et al., 2020; Sevinc et al., 2018; Roemer et al., 2008). Ultimately, mindfulness emerged not merely as a stress management technique but as a new mode of being—one that reorients how individuals relate to suffering in everyday life.

The second theme, "Empathy and Recovery," was centered on participants' experiences of forming new emotional connections through interpersonal relationships during the MBSR program. Recent qualitative studies have shown that participants often experience emotional healing through empathetic connections formed during the program. For example, El Morr et al. (2023) found that participants expressed a deepened sense of self-acceptance after "sharing emotions with others and experiencing nonjudgmental acceptance," which was closely linked to their recovery of trust in interpersonal relationships following emotional burnout. Such findings suggest that empathy extends beyond an affective response to another's suffering; it is also a relational practice grounded in the acceptance and awareness of one's own emotions. Similarly, Lyons et al. (2021) observed that MBSR participation led to "a decrease in emotional avoidance behaviors and an increase in self-expression within relationships," highlighting a process in which self-critical thinking gradually transformed into empathy and self-acceptance. Particularly notable were participants from emotionally demanding professions who stated that they regained a sense that "I, too, am someone who deserves to be protected like others," reinforcing the therapeutic role of mindfulness-based programs in restoring a coherent self-concept. These findings indicate that the transformative process within MBSR extends beyond emotional regulation, pointing instead to the expansion of an accepting awareness of both self and others—what may be described as ontological healing. Empathy, in this context, is not merely an emotional reaction but a mediating force that facilitates simultaneous healing of both internal wounds and interpersonal relationships.

The third theme, "Turning Points," focuses on the internal shifts in direction and perception that participants experienced during their MBSR practice. Participants described how their emotional regulation strategies and ways of relating to psychological pain evolved over time—after three months, one year, and even three years into their practice. These narratives suggest that the core mechanism of MBSR was at work, enabling a transformation away from cognitively driven strategies aimed at eliminating or avoiding anxiety, toward a tendency to acknowledge, stay with, and respond to present emotions and suffering. This finding also reveals that mindfulness is not a one-time "release," but rather comprises multiple "turning moments" of awareness over time. Yavuz (2024) reported that MBSR participants gradually shifted from treating anxiety or distress as something to be eliminated or controlled, to adopting an attitude of mindful recognition and acceptance. This shift reflects a new form of emotional regulation: rather than relying on avoidance-based coping, participants moved toward a way of being rooted in nonjudgmental attention and acceptance. Importantly, these "turning moments" of awareness reported by participants were not experienced as abrupt changes, but as gradually accumulated shifts in perception over time. This suggests that mindfulness practice operates through a repetitive cycle of awareness and response, ultimately reconstructing one's everyday mode of existence—not merely as a technique but as a fundamental shift in being.

The fourth theme, "Practice and Healing," focuses on the participants' experiences after transitioning from mindfulness practitioners to instructors. Through repeated practice and their interactions with students, participants described reengaging with their own unresolved wounds and experiencing relational healing. By witnessing their students' pain, deeply empathizing with them, and observing their gradual healing through mindfulness, participants reported a profound realization: "My own healing has become meaningful for someone else." This process went beyond the act of instruction, serving as a powerful opportunity for participants to revisit and heal their inner scars. The experience of mutual healing—where instructors and students face suffering together—deepened their identity as mindfulness teachers and reinforced the ethical foundation

of their practice.

The fifth theme, "Integration of Life," reveals how mindfulness practice extended beyond structured sessions and became deeply embedded in participants' daily lives, leading to a profound transformation in their mode of being Pérez et al. (2022) observed that mindfulness was no longer viewed merely as a stress-reduction technique, but had evolved into a way of life, fostering sustained awareness across domains such as work, relationships, and daily challenges.

Participants reflected, "Mindfulness is no longer something I do only during practice—it's infused into my breathing, conversations, and even the way I walk," indicating that mindfulness had been internalized as an attitude and internal resource. Gu et al. (2015) similarly found that mindfulness-based interventions reduced emotional reactivity and enhanced decentering, allowing individuals to respond to situations more intentionally rather than reacting automatically.

These transformations extended beyond psychological recovery to influence participants' self-concept, identity, and interpersonal relationships. One participant remarked, "It's not that I've become someone completely different from who I was before—rather, I feel that my past and present selves are now connected." This illustrates how mindfulness promoted self-acceptance by integrating past experiences with the present self. Yazdani et al. (2021) emphasized that such change is not instant but deepens through sustained practice within a structured container.

In this study, participants actively nurtured conditions for long-term mindfulness, including regular peer gatherings, dedicated practice spaces, and cultivating self-compassion. Crane et al.'s metaphor of "warp and weft" captures this weaving of external structure with personal experience, portraying mindfulness as more than a skill—it became an ethical orientation toward living. Ultimately, MBSR did not offer participants a way to eliminate suffering but provided a space to learn how to live with it, restoring self-trust and grounding their existential foundation (Gan et al., 2024; Park et al., 2022; Schllekens et al., 2021; Sutliffe et al., 2021).

All researchers had personal mindfulness experience, and the first author was a certified MBSR instructor. This background enhanced emotional resonance and empathy during interviews, helping to interpret participants' meditation-related experiences and ask meaningful follow-up questions. However, this prior understanding may have limited their ability to fully perceive early-stage discomfort or resistance from a beginner's perspective, potentially introducing bias in interpretation.

This study has several limitations. First, all interviewers had prior mindfulness experience, including the first author who was a certified MBSR instructor. While this enhanced empathy and contextual understanding, it may have limited the ability to fully capture beginners' early resistance or discomfort, potentially introducing interpretive bias. Second, the study did not assess the MBSR instructor's teaching competence or program fidelity, which are known to influence the effectiveness of mindfulness-based interventions. Without this evaluation, the role of facilitator expertise in shaping participant outcomes remains unclear. Third, participants who dropped out of the MBSR program were not included, restricting insight into why some individuals disengage from mindfulness. Future research should include a broader range of participant experiences to explore the variability in acceptance and engagement.

This study emphasizes that the core aim of mindfulness-based programs is not self-optimization, but deeper self-understanding and compassionate self-acceptance. Participants initially approached mindfulness as a self-improvement tool but gradually shifted toward self-friendliness and acceptance. This highlights the need for instructors in clinical and educational settings to offer stronger support in helping participants internalize acceptance—not as a cognitive strategy, but as a cultivated, embodied disposition. Accordingly, future MBSR training should incorporate sustained practice in acceptance and self-compassion to support not only stress reduction but also existential healing and expand self-awareness.

Table 3: Thematic Summary: Empathy and Recovery

Bodily Shifts & Emerging Awareness of Recovery	Emotional Acceptance & Restoring Self-Regard	Healing Through Shared Suffering
Greater sensitivity to breath, pain, and bodily sensations enhanced awareness of internal change and early signs of recovery.	In a space of acceptance where doing nothing was allowed, participants gradually reconnected with their sense of worth and resilience.	ong-suppressed emotions were expressed and reframed as compassion, cultivating a kinder attitude toward oneself.
Emotional grounding and trust formed a stable base for expressing emotions and feeling psychologically secure.	Repeated emotional sharing reduced fear and self-criticism, supporting recovery and trust. Realizing "I don't have to be perfect" and "It's okay to make mistakes" fostered self-compassion	Shared suffering became a practice of mutual recognition and healing, allowing participants to relate to their pain with gentleness.

Table 4: Thematic Summary: Moments of Transformation

Emotional Depletion	Energy Depletion	Encounter with Mindfulness
Emotional exhaustion, helplessness under work/family/social pressures	Heightened reactivity to stress, psychological vulnerability	Comfort and relief from brief mindfulness practice

Emotional Depletion	Energy Depletion	Encounter with Mindfulness
Loss of respect, lowered self-esteem, disrupted regulation	Persistent low self-worth despite continued efforts	Freedom in "doing nothing," slowing down in daily life
Chronic stress and unmet relational needs → life as mere endurance	Difficulty regulating emotions → instability	Realization of value in presence and daily mindfulness

Table 5: Thematic Summary: Practice and Healing

Bodily Shifts & Awareness of Recovery	Emotional Acceptance & Restoring Self-Regard	Healing Through Shared Suffering
Sensitivity to breath, pain, and bodily sensations enhanced awareness of recovery	Acceptance allowed reconnection with worth and resilience	Long-suppressed emotions reframed as compassion
Emotional grounding and stability for expressing emotions	Emotional sharing reduced fear, supporting recovery and trust	Shared suffering enabled mutual recognition and healing
Heightened awareness as a sign of change	Realizing "I don't have to be perfect" fostered self-compassion	Cultivating gentleness toward one's own pain

Table 6: Thematic Summary: Integration of Life

Sustaining Mindfulness Beyond the Program	Living with Mindful Presence	Balancing Structure & Compassion
Continued mindfulness as daily practice through rituals, peer meetings, and reflection	Mindfulness extended beyond sessions, influencing daily decisions and relationships	Structured support (designated spaces, group rhythms, reminders) sustained practice
Continuity supported emotional stability and gradual internalization of mindfulness	Facing challenges with intentional and accepting attitude	Alignment of internal & external systems enabled resilience
Gradual internalization of mindfulness as a way of life	Ongoing mindful presence reduced discomfort and deepened awareness	Ethical and sustainable way of living through mindfulness

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