



Mindfulness meditation in residential aged care: what frail older people identified as beneficial for their spiritual care and well-being

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ABSTRACT

Spiritual care in Residential Aged Care (RAC) is primarily concerned with meaning-making and residents' wellness. This qualitative study evaluated what older people living in RAC thought were the benefits of participating in a mindfulness meditation group and how it enhanced spiritual growth/wellbeing. Thirteen residents attended a six-week group program and were interviewed at the beginning and end of the program. Four (4) themes were identified: 1) meaningfully connecting and sharing, 2) providing a supportive and reflective space, 3) practising mindfulness-meditation and 4) practising and expressing gratitude. Findings inform the provision of better emotional/spiritual support and invite further research.

KEYWORDS

Mindfulness; meditation-groups; older people in residential aged care; spiritual care; wellbeing

Introduction

In Australia over the past decade, there has been increasing interest and application of mindfulness practice and meditation as an important tool to cope with stress and anxiety, including becoming part of the practical well-being and mental health agenda (Siganto, 2019). Wellness and spiritual care are areas of concern in Residential Aged Care (RAC). The National Ageing Research Institute (2009) identified that up to 50% of those living in RAC have either depression or anxiety or both disorders compared to about 10% of older Australians not living in RAC. Transitioning from living independently in the community into RAC is, for many people, one of the most challenging changes and adjustments in their life: it is underpinned by multiple losses, such as losing independence and the decline of health, and often is associated with the loss of a spouse or carer (Brown, 2012).

Not all loss and grief in later life is associated with death, but the loss of independent residence is an important loss . . . consequently, deciding to move from home to an aged care facility is one of the hardest decisions that older people and their families face. (MacKinlay, 2006, p. 204)

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Meaning making plays a significant role for older people when so much has been lost through their transition into RAC.

Spiritual care in RAC is primarily concerned with meaning making and promoting spiritual growth and supporting residents' wellness. The *National Guidelines for Spiritual Care in Aged Care* (Meaningful Ageing Australia, 2016) emphasised that spirituality is about seeking meaning for purpose and transcendence through the relationship with self, others, society and through nature and the significant or the sacred. Mindfulness meditation is one of the practices that fosters spiritual care and wellness. Stevens (2016) suggests that mindfulness meditation is an all-inclusive form of spirituality and can offer evidence-based benefits in RAC.

Meditation and mindfulness

This study emerged from developing and facilitating a weekly Mindfulness Meditation group in Sydney, Australia, in a small (40 residents) not-for-profit RAC. The RAC provider was founded over 50 years ago by Catholic laypeople committed to promoting the Christian way of life. The spiritual wellbeing coordinator facilitated a Christian Meditation Group based on the teachings of John Main, a Benedictine monk and founder of the World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM) in 1975 in London, UK. Main was assisted from the beginning of this movement by Laurence Freeman. The WCCM defines meditation as a:

Universal spiritual wisdom and a practice found at the core of all the great religious traditions, leading from the mind to the heart. It is a way of simplicity, silence and stillness. It can be practised by anyone, wherever you are on your life's journey (World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM), 2019, para. 1).

This type of meditation is based on contemplative prayer, which has been practised since the early Christian communities.

There has been a significant revival of this form of prayer in recent years. Since the first Christian Meditation Centre was founded in London 45 years ago, members, groups and communities of WCCM now span more than a hundred countries (World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM), 2019). Given the widespread uptake, the WCCM's main Meditation Centre commissioned a rigorous review of existing evidence on the benefits and challenges of meditation and mindfulness-type interventions for children and young people. Consequently, Graham et al. (2018) demonstrated not only how the momentum around Christian meditation in Australian Catholic schools mirrored the growing international interest in contemplative education programs (which include various forms of meditation and mindfulness), but also highlighted the recent interest and revival of this form of prayer in Christian meditation.

The instructions provided by the WCCM for meditation are to sit down, sit still, keep your back straight, breathe normally, gently close your eyes and silently say your mantra or prayer word. The most commonly used mantras *Ma-ra-na-tha*, an Aramaic word meaning ‘Come, Lord,’ which is repeated throughout the time of the meditation. The mantra helps maintain attention when distracted, like the focus on the breath in mindfulness that helps keep one’s attention in the present moment.

Mindfulness has been defined as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). This approach to mindfulness has been the basis of the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program developed by Kabat-Zinn, which has brought the mindfulness meditation practice into the health industry and is now accepted as a secular practice. However, the lines between the secular and the religious practice are not always clearly explained when mindfulness meditation practice is introduced to people to help them cope with stress and anxiety. Although Thompson and van Vliet (2018) argue that mindfulness practice is generally attributed to a Buddhist practice, it is not solely a Buddhist exercise. They argue that mindfulness meditation is found in all the mystic traditions of the main world religions such as Hinduism, Judaism, Islam and Christianity and in the beliefs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) people.

ATSI people engage in the practice of *dadirri*, or deep listening. Dr Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann brought the concept of *dadirri* to the world. It speaks to the value of deep listening and quiet stillness which has been a part of indigenous Aboriginal practices for thousands of years. Ungunmerr-Baumann states that *dadirri* recognises the deep spring that is inside each of us, and that we call on it, and it calls to us, and is similar to contemplation (Ungunmerr-Baumann, 2015). (Dr Ungunmerr-Baumann was honoured in 2021 as Senior Australian of the Year.)

There is extensive literature on the positive effects of meditation and mindfulness for emotional, physical and mental health and well-being (Lindahl et al., 2017), for example, managing and reducing stress, anxiety, depression, chronic pain and troubling thoughts (Goddard, 2019). However, this widespread amount of research on the benefit of mindfulness is in the general context of society and there seems to be negligible research on the relevance of mindfulness practice for older people living in RAC. Gard et al. (2014) researched the potential health effects of meditation for older people and concluded with preliminary outcomes that meditation interventions for older adults can possibly offset age-related cognitive decline. However, their research did not include older people living in RAC, who are regarded as frail aged, and their life stage challenges are very different to older people who have not lost their independence and home.

Research into the experiences of older people around meditation and mindfulness in RAC is very limited. Therefore, the aim of this study was to evaluate what residents living in an RAC believed promoted positive spiritual growth and wellbeing after attending a 6-week Mindfulness Meditation Research Group (MMRG), through exploring each element of the MMRG in terms of meaningfulness and wellness benefits for the residents, in order to shed light on the spiritual and wellbeing needs of older people in RAC.

Method

Approval to conduct the research was gained from the Charles Sturt University Human Research Ethics Committee: Protocol Number H18187.

Although the original pilot project used mixed methods, this paper addresses the qualitative findings of the interviews conducted with thirteen (13) residents in an RAC, which took place before and after participating in a 6 week mindfulness meditation group. Interviews were conducted to establish if there were any benefits in the participants' perception and understanding of wellness and spiritual growth from participating in the MMRG. Using interviews allowed participants to share their perceptions, depth, details and meanings in context.

Selection of participants

Cognitively competent residents were informed about the MMRG via a distributed Participant Information Sheet (PIS), which included an invitation to be part of the MMRG, its purpose, and what was involved. The PIS addressed the process and content of the MMRG, the risks of participating, funding of the study, the ability to withdraw from the study, and how the confidentiality of participating residents would be protected, and details of how the data would be used. Contact details of the researcher were provided for interested residents. The participants self-selected to participate in the MMRG and informed the researcher about their interest to join.

Sample

Thirteen (13) residents participated in the MMRG: twelve females and one male, aged between 78 and 95 (mean age of 86). Attendance each week fluctuated due to unexpected factors (for example, birthday celebrations and illness), however a majority of participants were present for each session. Out of the thirteen participants that signed up for the MMRG, nine had participated in a previous mindfulness meditation group run at the RAC.

The mindfulness meditation research group (MMRG)

A program for the six-week research group was prepared, ensuring that experience-based learning and time for reflection were incorporated throughout each MMRG. A Christian contemplative framework for the meditation practice was used, with alternatives to Christian language or concepts provided to ensure participants had options in finding a language and understanding of their own choice and meaning; for example, instead of using the mantra/prayer word 'Maranatha', other non-religious words such as 'in-out', 'thank-you' were offered.

The topics for the 6-week group included, for example: What is mindfulness and how to meditate; the importance of staying connected; connecting mind and body by practising being at home in yourself; and introducing the ATSI concept of 'Dadirri'- deep, quiet listening and living with a grateful heart. The MMRG ran once a week for six weeks, in a private common room of the RAC. The room was set up with chairs in a circle and a low table in centre. The table was covered with a coloured cloth, decorated with a candle and any other items (flowers, objects from the natural environment) to create a reflective and sacred space. Gentle music or birdsongs were played when residents arrived.

Each week, the MMRG comprised six elements which included: 1) input and reflection, 2) a period of silent meditation, 3) structured group prayer, 4) time for sharing and 5) practising gratitude, combined with 6) mindful hand massage.

Data collection

Participants were interviewed one week before the beginning of the six (6) week program and then one week after the end of the program. Interviews consisted of two sets of questions, one set for 'Pre-MMRG' and one for 'Post-MMRG', to establish if there were any changes in the participant's perception and understanding of wellness and spiritual growth through the process of participating in the MMRG. Participants were asked which elements of the group helped them the most on their spiritual journey and were invited to give feedback on group safety and the importance of having a reflective space. The questions explored resident's thoughts on which elements of the group was most enjoyable, which part of the group was most meaningful and which part would help them the most on their spiritual journey.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and de-identified.

Analysis

Themes were identified by comparing the gathered data and noting similarities and differences. In order to provide credibility checks to the theme analysis, the research supervisor and one of the researcher's colleagues reviewed the emerging themes and ensured that the themes represented the responses provided by the residents and no other potential themes were overlooked.

Findings

Four themes emerged from the data, indicating what the participants – older people living in RAC and participating in a six-week MMRG, believed promotes positive spiritual growth and wellness in older people: *Theme 1: Meaningfully connecting and sharing*; *Theme 2: Providing a supportive and reflective space*; *Theme 3: Practising mindfulness meditation*; and *Theme 4: Practising and expressing gratitude*.

Theme 1: meaningfully connecting and sharing

Participants rated the 'time for sharing' as the activity they most looked forward to and the activity they found most meaningful in the MMRG. Being in a group where they were stimulated with meaningful input from other residents and where they were encouraged to share their own reflections on topics discussed, was of great significance. Dot, the oldest (age 95) participant of the group, said:

Being in a facility with a program is interesting in itself in that we have an Activity Officer, but I need the spiritual stimulation and I love to participate with others and it is an encouragement for me personally to express myself. I believe I am a spiritual being apart from being a physical being, so I need to keep that in mind and cherish it and stimulate it with others . . . In my old age I have a lot of spare time and with that spare time I try to think more deeply about nurturing my Spirit. I love the sharing. (Dot)

Vivienne (age 84) was one of the residents who had been part of a religious order all her adult life. She had shown much leadership living in RAC, initiating meaningful activities – for example, facilitating a weekly advent reflection and starting an informal book club with some of the residents. When asked about the significance of the 'sharing activity,' Vivienne said:

I did not put much weight on this time of sharing . . . I thought the sharing was just this little thing that happened in the group, but I actually see it as a really important part. We learn a lot from you and you begin the session with something that gets our attention and points us to something that might be happening and you point this out to us. Like a change of the season or something really important that has just happened. I think that puts a colour on the time that we have together. (Vivienne)

Ella (age 94), who was relatively new in the RAC and still struggling at times with the transition into care and the associated losses, acknowledged the benefit of sharing and connecting with others while naming the challenge of living in a large community:

Well, I have come in here (RAC) and I am living with a lot of very different people, they are all different and I have to learn to live with their habits and they all have different levels of senility, and you have to try to live with these different levels. So, the meditation is good and the time for sharing. Both of those are good I think . . . most people had a very simple sharing and I enjoyed it. (Ella)

For others, like Bob (age 90), it was as simple as acknowledging:

I like hearing others [in the MMRG]. I sometimes think about something and yes, that is right, and so on. But if someone else shares it, it brings a whole new idea into it and so the more you can share, the more you can find out. (Bob).

Hearing another resident talk about how they first struggled when they moved into RAC and how with time they had become grateful for the life they now live, Bob found this was affirming and it could 'bring a whole new idea into your own thoughts,' showing that sharing can turn into learning and personal growth even when over 90 years old.

For Elaine (age 80), the time of sharing was most meaningful for her, and Nan (aged 94) agreed:

I think it is good to tell other people how you are feeling and hear about how they are feeling and I like learning about other people and what they think. (Nan)

This comment, and the other comments regarding *Theme 1, Meaningfully connecting and sharing*, recognise the importance of sharing with others about yourself and hearing and listening to what other residents are feeling and thinking as a way of connecting with other residents in a meaningful way.

Theme 2: providing a supportive and reflective space

Two questions specifically addressed the benefits of having a quiet and reflective space in RAC, and how important it was for participants to have a safe group space where they could talk and share with other residents. The comments from the interviews shine specific light on this theme.

Dot explained that having a safe space was extremely important to her by stating:

It encourages me to express my own thoughts. Just being in the room here is something I enjoy. But in the group here, is something I enjoy too, the quiet time, the quiet space. I came earlier into this room, and I thought I just do my own thing and have a quiet time with God and just be aware of God's gifts to me. (Dot)

Dot used the room provided for the MMRG at other times, for her own relaxation and quiet time with God.

Ella commented how it was a challenge to live with so many different people when you live in RAC.

Well, because you are able to share with someone else and you want to share with them. Or maybe someone is not able to share because they are at a different stage in their life. Having a safe space will encourage them in sharing. It is very important to me to feel safe in the group as I live with them [the other residents] 24 hours a day and I know most people fairly well. It is important. (Ella)

A safe and supportive group environment invites residents to share and connect

The MMRG is wonderful and great, because you are able to share with someone else and are able to kick off something with someone else. Some don't know how to share because they are at a different stage in their lives. We need to feel safe to do this. (Elaine)

I feel safe to talk in the group. Just sometimes you feel like you don't want to talk to anybody and the group helps me to talk. (Nan)

Vivienne linked the significance of being part of a supportive and reflective space with learning to be comfortable with yourself and settling into your own company. She referred to this as part of a stage in life that comes with living in aged care by stating:

It is most important to make people aware of their own inner resources and have confidence to draw on them and to be comfortable in their own quiet space alone. I see people coming in here . . . and walking around with sad faces, for months until they settle down because they have never learned to be on their own. So I think it is extremely important. Having a safe quiet space is very important and I can get on my soap box about this. I think it is really helpful to help people to be able to draw on their own inner strength and to help them to know that they have got that experience when they come to this stage of life. They have the wisdom when they come here and that they can draw on it. So, then they can deal with loneliness, isolation or not belonging that can come upon you when you find yourself in a place like this. (Vivienne)

Vivienne acknowledged that this process of feeling supported and reflective in the group takes time and comes with trust:

We need time to build up the trust, if you understand what I am trying to say. I think it is very important, it takes time to build the trust for people to feel ok to say what is in their heart and so forth. (Vivienne)

The above comments demonstrate that *Theme 2: Providing a supportive and reflective space* was expressed in different ways by the 13 participants of the MMRG, yet all agreed that it can only be created if they felt safe and there was a quiet and reflective space created in the group.

Theme 3: practising mindfulness meditation

Participants were asked several questions regarding the importance and practice of mindfulness meditation. These questions were linked with spiritual growth, wellness, enjoyment and having a meaningful experience. Overall, many of the participants identified mindfulness meditation as increasingly important in developing wellness and spiritual growth, as a consequence of having attended the six-week program, and thus the program had increased their perception of wellness and spiritual growth. Participants equated mindfulness with spiritual growth and prayer, relaxation, helping them to sleep and still their mind, and helping them with problem-solving. This theme of practising mindfulness meditation to promote wellness and spiritual growth was expressed in several different ways by the participants.

Nan, who had a history of managing anxiety, did not join in with many activities at the RAC apart from attending the mindfulness meditation group. The only other activity she attended was the weekly rosary group. She would spend most of her day in her room. Reflecting on the benefits of mindfulness meditation, Nan said:

I just like the quiet period of meditation. It just feels like it is the right way to relax and get yourself together . . . I think it has a lot to do with the way you are thinking and with the way you approach everything. I think about a lot of things and try to keep unhappy thoughts out of my mind. (Nan)

Vivienne, a retired health professional with a doctoral degree, was most articulate when talking about the importance of the practice of mindfulness meditation in RAC. Vivienne linked the practice of mindfulness to her daily life as it provided her with a pathway of reflecting and being contemplative, as well as linking meditation with wellness which gave her a certain calm and peace:

Mindfulness is very important because – you see this lovely room and lovely balcony [in her room] – I spend most of the day here. I am used to being on my own and I value it. It's precious. So while I say that mindfulness is part of my prayer time in the morning, it is also there quite a few other times in the day when I am sitting and reflecting. The mindfulness, I suppose, is there, it might not be as formal, but it is there in the day. It is there, maybe after a telephone call, or after reading something. I sit and be quiet and let that speak to me again . . . A number of residents talked about not rushing and related this to wellness. I think it is very important for me because it makes a whole difference to the whole day. It sets you up . . . I don't know how to put it . . . a certain calm and peace sort of thing. Mindfulness meditation, it is very important to me. It sets you up. That's referring to what I do for myself. The group is just a reminder to me of the methods that are very helpful. (Vivienne)

Vivienne reflected on mindfulness in light of the whole MMRG process and prioritised the meditation practice as being most important, at this stage of her life:

The actual ten minutes of quiet meditation is the most important part of that process. I really have to say that, I don't know, it is as if, as if each of the other parts are not as important . . .

At this stage of my life I can't do a lot . . . but having a period of quiet mindfulness in the structure of my daily prayer . . . is part of the overall bouquet of prayer. (Vivienne)

Vivienne recognised mindfulness meditation as the overarching process of prayer and spiritual growth. Babette (age 84), who, like Vivienne, was from a religious community, agreed:

Mindfulness meditation is the vehicle through which I look at what I am doing in life. I take my life to meditation. My whole life is based around meditation and presenting my life to God and assessing it at different times. (Babette)

These two statements from Vivienne and Babette clearly reflect that mindfulness meditation is linked with spiritual growth.

Bob provided a more pragmatic answer about the value of mindfulness meditation, and linked mindfulness meditation with spiritual growth, when he said:

It helps you to keep going. It is not blindly important, but very important. It gives you time to think and make enquiries in what you think and that is important . . . My meditation is my relationship with the Good Lord. (Bob)

Other participants linked mindfulness with the promotion of wellness:

Sometimes when I can't sleep I meditate. Your mind is going all the time and it slows you down. And you know it is a good thing and it is not anything harmful. (Elaine)

The group helps me to relax. (Jane, age 80)

Mindfulness meditation helps your mind just to go softly. It is a restful space. Your mind really rests. (Liz, age 90)

I have never really done mindfulness meditation before, but I think it is important to relax. I think just joining in with other people is good way to relax. (Vera)

Joanne (age 73) did not join in many group activities in RAC as she went out nearly every day with her carer. When she joined the MMRG, she connected more with other residents and she talked about what benefits she gained from mindfulness meditation:

I think meditation solves a lot of problems, I think things come out of your brain and then you can deal with it calmly. See, sometimes you lock things away and when you are doing the meditation - things just pop out. It is very, very good for you. So I think it is important because otherwise you are not dealing with anything and you can't process them [thoughts]. You have to process them. It is important to me. I don't meditate in my own room, but I do it when I am with you and that's why I keep coming. (Joanne)

The above statements regarding *Theme 3: Practising mindfulness meditation* demonstrate that, from the participants' lived experiences, practising mindfulness meditation promotes wellness and spiritual growth in different ways for each individual elderly resident.

Theme 4: practising and expressing gratitude

Participants rated and reported that the opportunity to learn and express gratitude in the MMRG was also a part of the group sessions they looked forward to. Participants were invited to massage their own hands mindfully with hand cream while they listened to other participants talk about what they were grateful for in their lives. The following comments demonstrate how this theme of practising and expressing gratitude emerged and its significance for the participants.

The gratitude activity encouraged participants to name the simple things that we take for granted. Ella remembered this, and stated:

I like the gratitude activity, because some people's gratitude was the simple things, the little things that are important. And that spoke to me. (Ella)

For Gracia (age 78), actively practising and expressing gratitude was a new concept. (Gracia was particularly challenged in this activity as she could only express her gratitude via writing a small note on a notepad, which the group facilitator would read out to the group. Gracia had had a stroke many years ago and lost her ability to communicate with her voice.) The group was very respectful in receiving her messages of gratitude.

Thinking of what I am grateful for is a shortcoming of mine. I feel ingratitude has been a spiritual shortcoming of mine that I would like to change. (Gracia)

Here Gracia identified for herself that being grateful is a spiritual activity that she wanted to develop further in her life.

Vera also talked about this infectious nature of gratitude:

Hearing others sharing grateful thoughts is infectious. Practising gratitude is good. Yes, I am very lucky to be in this place and so I am very grateful. I love this place . . . I have always been a positive person. (Vera)

Others also commented on the gratitude activity:

Yes, I think it is really good to be grateful and I also like the hand massage mixed with that . . . You can get an idea what everyone else is thinking and they usually have a different answer . . . Being asked 'what are you grateful for' and everyone gave a different answer is uplifting. (Elaine) Practising gratitude is so important to me, I think, I am just very grateful for my family. (Vera)

Thinking of something you are grateful for is so important. (Dot)

Practising gratitude makes me feel alive. It is important. (Mary, age 87)

All the above statements from the residents about *Theme 4: Practising and expressing gratitude* have a tone of positivity and encouragement, which the participants generated amongst themselves in the MMRG. Each week when the group finished, participants left on an uplifted note.

Discussion

This study of the MMRG was conducted in RAC to evaluate the understandings of residents regarding the benefits of mindfulness meditation for their overall wellbeing and exploring what keeps them spiritually connected to what is meaningful, when much has changed at this last stage of their lives. The four themes that emerged from the participants' responses provide insight into what can help make life more meaningful for frail older people in RAC, as well as promote a sense of wellness and calm. Mindfulness practice in a group builds trust and being together in silence creates a culture of support without words, allowing residents to be together in a supportive space. Meaningfully connecting and sharing is best facilitated in a supportive and reflective space. Intentional self-care and gratitude activities build a culture of positivity and compassion. The responses made by the participants in this study uphold these findings.

All the four themes are interconnected. For example, the link between *Theme 1: Meaningfully connecting and sharing* and *Theme 2: Providing a supportive reflective space* is clearly demonstrated by Vivienne, who remarked on 'the sense of being comfortable in yourself' as critical for finding your inner strength, which allowed people to deal with loneliness, isolation and not belonging. Vivienne stated that these challenges come up when transitioning into RAC: having 'a safe quiet space is very important in feeling comfortable in yourself'. This finding supports the suggestion of Wadensten and Carlsson (2003) that older people need to be provided with quiet times, which could be for solitude and 'meditation.' However, they proposed that the rationale for this is that older people become more selective and less interested in superficial relationships and tend to show more interest in solitude. This MMRG study found that having a reflective space was valued, yet sharing with others was also important.

Solitude and meditation are key elements of a contemplative spiritual life. Two of the participants had devoted their adult lives to a religious order. One expressed that mindfulness meditation was an overarching process of prayer and spiritual growth, and the other described it as the "vehicle through which I look at what I am doing in life. I take my life to meditation My whole life is based around meditation and presenting my life to God and assessing it at different times" (Babette). Their examples clearly reflect that mindfulness

meditation is linked with spiritual growth, and resonate with Tornstam's (2005) theory of gerotranscendence. where he proposed that the gerotranscendent ageing person typically experiences a redefinition of the self and of relationships to others and a new understanding of fundamental existential questions. A meditative space and having safe solitude would be a key element for this redefinition and for growth to occur. Tamari (2010) suggested that some of the elements of gerotranscendence lead to positive spiritual growth and focus on wellness, and argued that when this occurs, the older person may also experience a decrease in interest in material things and a greater need for solitary meditation. Positive solitude, according to Tamari, becomes more important, often being accompanied by a feeling of cosmic communion with the spirit of the universe, and a redefinition of time, space, life and death (2010).

Meaningfully connecting and sharing was a major finding in the MMRG and is consistent with other research findings. For example, a major evidence-based research venture, the *Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project* (Government Office for Science, 2008) identified connecting and sharing as being the most important drivers of mental capital and wellbeing. The project's aim was to develop a long-term vision for maximising mental health capital and wellbeing in the UK for the benefits of all its people, and defined wellbeing as feeling good and functioning well. In terms of functioning well, it claimed the need to experience positive relationships, have some control over one's life and have a sense of purpose. This MMRG study is consistent with the 2008 study, as one of the short-list actions that emerged in 2008 was the importance of connection with others, one of the cornerstones for wellness that enriches lives and makes them meaningful.

The fourth theme, *Practising and expressing gratitude*, was highlighted when participants reported that they looked forward each week to the opportunity to learn about and express gratitude in the MMRG, and that gratitude increased their sense of wellness and linked it to spiritual growth. This theme is consistent with Seligman's (2011) research, based on positive psychology principles with a strength-based focus, which stressed the importance of flourishing and wellbeing going hand in hand with recognising the good things in life and being thankful for these. Peterson et al. (2005) suggest that the psychological consequences of gratitude are enhanced social connections with others, feelings of joy and an extended positive effect. Comments made by the participants in the MMRG interviews echo these findings.

Mindfulness meditation groups have not traditionally been part of mainstream spiritual care provision in RAC in Australia, which has usually taken the form of religious services from different faith backgrounds. The lived experiences of residents who participated in the MMRG in this study show that mindfulness meditation can help provide better emotional and spiritual support for other older people residing in RAC. Mindfulness meditation can provide universal and inclusive spiritual care and can be made available to all

residents, if incorporating a secular and/or religious approach in its content. The practice, itself, is universal, and can be adapted for different RACs and groups of older people, depending on their preferences and needs. For this study, the meditation practice was based around the Christian Meditation model and incorporated relevant themes that residents were familiar with, such as the ATSI form of deep listening, *dadirri*. Equally, other themes and religious, non-religious or culturally relevant topics can be incorporated, provided they focus on contemplative practice. Thus, the findings from this research validate the importance of having certain processes in place to make the mindfulness meditation experience meaningful, so that wellness can be experienced and promoted. These processes are encapsulated in the four identified themes, as well as invite further discussion and research.

The MMRG discussed in this study was conducted in late 2018, before the COVID-19 pandemic spread to Australia. The mindfulness meditation group has continued being facilitated on a weekly basis in the RAC facility since the completion of the research. Following up with the participants since the completion of the MMRG, anecdotally the original participants have said that the group has kept them going through the very long periods of COVID lockdown and isolation. The group has helped them keep connected with other residents and has provided a space to talk about how they are getting through the tough times of being separated from their families and loved ones. These anecdotal comments of the residents echo the research findings of Zhu et al. (2021) whose study demonstrated that practitioners of mindfulness meditation manifested less pandemic-related distress than non-practitioners during the COVID-19 pandemic in China. Their results indicated that mindfulness meditation might be a viable low-cost intervention to mitigate the psychological impact of the COVID-19 crisis and future pandemics. Further research into this and its relevance to older people who live in RAC would be highly recommended.

The MMRG research also raised the question of further exploring the connection between wellness and spirituality. Mindful meditation is connected to wellness and spirituality. Are wellness and spirituality seen as the same thing by the residents? One participant referred to mindfulness meditation as a 'vehicle' for prayer and another identified it as a form of relaxation. Further research is required to explore if residents associate spiritual growth synonymously with wellbeing. How exactly would the residents of the MMRG know or describe they are growing spirituality?

Methodology considerations

It is recognised that, as with all research, there are limitations to the study. The findings are based on one RAC facility, from one mindfulness meditation group. Participants were predominantly from an Anglo-Celtic background,

from the lower middle-class, and had spent most of their adult lives living in a metropolitan area. This homogeneity was not deliberate, although it reflected the social demographics of the RAC facility. One challenge raised in the MMRG was the issue of participants complying with their weekly group attendance commitment: this was not unexpected, given the nature of research in RAC. Participants spoke about unexpected events that seemed to be more prevalent since they started to live in RAC, which occasionally interrupted their attendance. Further research directions can be identified to address these limitations.

Conclusion

This qualitative study evaluated what older people living in residential aged care (RAC) thought were the benefits and value of participating in a mindfulness meditation group and how meaningful meditation could enhance spiritual growth and wellbeing. The findings demonstrate that older people believed that spiritual growth and wellbeing is possible and is enhanced through a group process of meaningfully connecting and sharing, providing a supportive and reflective space, practising mindfulness meditation, and practising and expressing gratitude. What can be learned from this group of frail older people living in RAC holds promise to provide better emotional and spiritual care to other residents in RAC, and invites further research.

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