

# Mindful Self-Compassion Pilot Project

## Executive Summary

by

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*“We’re all here, we’re all going through stuff, we’ve all been through a lot, and we kind of forget how to love ourselves and, you know, have that mindfulness and compassion for ourselves. So I think a lot of us need it, even though we don’t really want to take it sometimes, I think we all need it.”*

Participant of the Bravestone Centre  
Mindful Self-Compassion Program

## **Acknowledgements**

In 2016, Marion Orr, then Bravestone Centre Women’s Counsellor, saw the potential value of offering mindful self compassion classes to the women residents of Bravestone Centre. It was through her insight and vision that the Mindful Self-Compassion Pilot Program (MSC) was set in motion. Although Marion left Bravestone Centre to launch her own successful private practise, it is her vision that has been made a reality. Thank you, Marion, for setting the wheels in motion. Providing the MSC pilot program has indeed proven beneficial for the women who call Bravestone Centre home.

The pilot MSC program and its evaluation would not have been possible without funding from The Winnipeg Foundation and the ongoing support and partnership with the Compassion Project of Catholic Health Corporation of Manitoba (CHCM). Thank you to the program facilitators for your dedication and passion, to the Bravestone Centre staff for your support, and to everyone who contributed to the design and analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data and contributed to the writing and editing of this report.

Most importantly of all, we are both grateful and inspired by the women residents of Bravestone Centre. These women bravely and authentically engaged with the MSC program – something new and kind of weird at first – and listened to their inner wisdom about how to engage in the way that was best for them. They also took the time and energy to share their thoughts and experiences with the MSC program and in completing the pre- and post-program questionnaires.

### **Author Contributions**

Rebecca Martin completed the qualitative data analysis. She conducted and transcribed semi-structured interviews, performed the thematic analysis, and wrote up the qualitative results and conclusions. She amalgamated the quantitative and qualitative summaries to create the final report.

Michael McIntyre was the Principal Investigator for this project. He had principal responsibility for the design, management, and completion of the project. Michael McIntyre and Erin Buckels performed the quantitative data analysis, from data entry and hand checking the data set for possible sources of invalidity, to analysis and providing written summaries. Erin also provided thorough and thoughtful edits to the final report.

## **Executive Summary**

### **Purpose of the Project**

For many of the women coming to Bravestone Centre, they are not only fleeing an abusive intimate relationship, they are dealing with long-term complex health issues and unresolved trauma. In recognition of these experiences, we saw the addition of mindfulness and self-compassion training as key elements to help enhance their current therapy and aid in their general functioning and mental health.

The Mindful Self-Compassion Project can be a powerful adjunct to the trauma healing process. It solidifies the intensive ongoing work that the women are partaking in during their individual and group therapy sessions. It aids in helping with private logic issues, especially those related to when a person has believed negative things about their role in the trauma. Self-compassion and mindfulness directly aid a person's growing, healthier perspective. This project gave participants additional tools and skills to enhance the trauma narrative to not only survive but to thrive.

Bravestone Centre is dedicated to providing quality programming to its clients and has sought to utilize evidence-based programs as part of its services. Thus, part of this project was also devoted to evaluating the effectiveness of the Mindful Self-Compassion Project as beneficial for women while in the Bravestone Centre year-long program.

### **Evaluation of the Mindfulness Self-Compassion Project**

The aim of this program evaluation was to assess the efficacy, fit, accessibility, and feasibility of a Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) program offered as part of the ongoing services

for the women residents (clients) at Bravestone Centre. The MSC program was piloted three times between January 2018 and March 2019. Some clients participated once and others participated twice. To evaluate program efficacy, clients completed reliable and valid questionnaires assessing self-compassion, mindfulness, positive emotions, anxiety, perceived stress, depressive symptoms, internal locus of control, and fears of compassion (i.e., fear of self-compassion, fear of responding to compassion from others, and fear of expressing compassion to others) both pre- and post-program. To assess fit, accessibility, and feasibility, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with clients, MSC program facilitators, and Bravestone staff<sup>1</sup>. The interviews also provided an opportunity to enrich the quantitative findings on program efficacy.

Paired samples *t*-tests conducted on the questionnaire data revealed that scores on several measures changed<sup>2</sup> from pre- to post-program in the anticipated direction. Specifically, mindfulness, self-compassion, and positive emotions increased, whereas depression, perceived stress, and all three fears of compassion decreased, from pre- to post-program. This pattern of results provides strong support for program efficacy, particularly given these effects were observed even with very small sample sizes<sup>3</sup>.

With respect to the interview data, a thematic analysis was performed. Five themes were identified: 1) Challenges, Solutions, and Opportunities related to Client Engagement, 2) Client Changes since starting the MSC Program, 3) MSC Practice goes Beyond the MSC Program, 4)

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<sup>1</sup> Two Bravestone staff members who provide individual counselling and facilitate some of the ongoing Bravestone programs were interviewed after the first MSC group.

<sup>2</sup>  $p < .05$

<sup>3</sup> Ten or eleven clients, depending on the specific measure.

MSC Program Fit, Accessibility, and Feasibility, and 5) Perceived Value of Continuing to Run the MSC Program at Bravestone Centre.

*Theme 1 highlights:* As with any program, challenges were present – such as small group size, varied readiness of clients to engage with MSC program material, and difficulties of the group setting, for example. All challenges related directly or indirectly to client engagement with program material. However, there were solutions to each challenge. These included modifications that the facilitators made to the program, as well as fundamental aspects of the program that mitigated challenges. It was essential to offer clients a range of exercises and support clients' choice of how to engage. The 'open-door policy', for example, provided space for clients to engage in the way that was right for them. It also helped maintain group numbers by allowing clients to attend sessions even if they were late. Potential opportunities to further support client engagement were suggested, such as changing the start time and offering even more art-based activities. Some challenges were equally seen as opportunities and strengths of the MSC program at Bravestone Centre. For example, some clients felt uncomfortable in the group setting yet valued hearing other women's stories and felt less alone in their hardships. That program challenges were able to be alleviated, most opportunities for change are doable, and some challenges also represent benefits of the program, provides support for program feasibility.

*Theme 2 highlights:* Nearly all<sup>4</sup> clients experienced shifts in their lives, even in small ways, since taking the MSC program. Specific changes included: increased mindfulness; increased

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<sup>4</sup> One woman said she did not gain anything from the MSC program since she has already been practicing mindful self-compassion for a long time. However, she does think that mindful self-compassion is important to learn, the MSC program is worth continuing to offer, and that practicing MSC in general has been personally meaningful and valuable.

positivity, gratitude, and happiness; letting go of feelings of guilt and what other people think; learning and using strategies for reducing stress and anxiety; increased self-compassion and compassion for others; and coping and managing in helpful and healthier ways. Staff and facilitators did not notice big changes among clients but did see glimpses of change and engagement with the MSC material. These findings corroborate the quantitative results, strengthening the evidence for program efficacy.

*Theme 3 highlights:* Several clients said they were continuing to practice mindful self-compassion independently since the program had ended. Clients who did not currently have a personal MSC practice felt confident that they could adopt one if they wanted. Many clients thought that MSC practice is challenging and requires hard work, dedication, an openness to trying new things, and time/patience, but that it is worth the commitment. These findings provide support for a desired outcome of the MSC program: That clients are able to independently practice the techniques learned in the program.

*Theme 4 highlights:* Some clients thought the MSC program was a bit of an awkward fit or redundant with other Bravestone programming. The majority of clients, however, thought the MSC program was a good fit at the Centre, reinforcing what they were learning in other programming yet offering something uniquely valuable. Clients, facilitators, and staff thought the MSC program was feasible, financially and physically accessible, and the presentation of program material made sense<sup>5</sup> and was cognitively accessible. One of the facilitators emphasized the importance of continuing to fund the MSC program so it can be offered free of

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<sup>5</sup> If something was confusing, clients felt comfortable asking clarification questions. For the most part, they thought the facilitators did a good job re-wording and clarifying.

charge to women who might otherwise be unable to access the program. A staff member suggested offering MSC to past Bravestone clients to make it accessible for even more women.

Staff and facilitators thought that having trauma-informed and experienced facilitators who were able to adapt the presentation of program material to fit the needs of each group was key for program fit and accessibility of program content. Strong and supportive relationships between facilitators and Bravestone staff/the director, and caring facilitators who nurtured clients' journeys, also fostered program fit and feasibility.

Program logistics, such as the physical space, supplies, timing of sessions, and group size, were perceived as being good or adequate. Modifications to some of these aspects were suggested to enhance feasibility, accessibility, and client engagement. Specific suggestions included changing the start time to 9:30 a.m. or sometime in the afternoon; having a larger space for program sessions; switching out the couches in the room for a table and chairs; and holding the 'retreat day' in nature, if possible. The recommended minimum number of clients enrolled for the program to be feasible was five. Given all three groups had at least five clients, but that small group sizes were a challenge overall, there is tenuous evidence that the MSC program would be consistently feasible to run with respect to program numbers. On the other hand, a small group size can help with program feasibility in that only one facilitator is required, thus reducing the cost of running the MSC program at Bravestone Centre.

*Theme 5 highlights:* Clients, facilitators, and staff think that MSC is a worthwhile program to continue to run at Bravestone Centre. They believe that MSC is particularly well-suited and valuable for the clients at Bravestone Centre because mothers and women who have experienced intimate partner violence may be especially self-judgmental or accustomed to neglecting their own needs out of necessity for personal safety and/or taking care of their children. Most clients

found the MSC program was personally meaningful and helpful. When asked if they would recommend that the program be offered again at Bravestone, all clients said “yes”.

In conclusion, the evaluation findings paint an overall picture of MSC as an effective, accessible, and feasible program that complements the ongoing services offered at Bravestone Centre. The MSC program is valuable for women residents – especially those women who are open and ready to engage with the course material – and is worth continuing to offer.

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