

SIGNIFICANT RESOLUTIONS

RESEARCH PILOT STUDY
PRELIMINARY REPORT

AUTHORS

Dr. Alex Fradera Phd

Alan Chapman

CONTACT

alexfradera@wiserbydesign.com

WISER MASTER CLASS

wiserbydesign.com

PURPOSE

To investigate whether the meditation practices developed within Wiser are effective in helping people make sense of persistent problems they faced within their life, and whether or not they are explicitly guided towards dealing with these problems.

METHOD

13 participants undertook an intervention, the Wiser Research Group, which involved meditation techniques, reflection and discussion. Before and afterward, they were surveyed on persistent problems, examining the degree to which they understood these and expected them to shape their future lives.

KEY FINDINGS

Participants showed a shift towards greater understanding of the two predefined major problems, most convincingly ($p=0.0006$) for understanding the origin of their problems, and believed ($p=0.0018$) these problems would be less likely to return.

On average, participants report fully resolving three problems that had been negatively affecting their lives, and making progress on a further three. Almost one third resolved five problems as well as making progress on others.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results are suggestive of a positive impact of the research intervention upon insight into and resolution of personal problems. More work needs to be done in a) development of an understanding construct, b) investigating the hypothesis using measures other than explicit self-report, and c) closer investigation of the notion of a providential focus towards problems.

BACKGROUND IN BRIEF

From 7th May to 6th August 2017, Wiser ran a 13-week pilot research group to measure the efficacy of the Wiser Master Class (Parts 1–3). This Master Class will be described in more detail in forthcoming releases, but involved a combination of daily meditative sitting practice, and a variable schedule of dialectic meditation practice, a method of using words and images to explore obstacles faced in life, focused primarily during the class on obstacles to effective meditation.

Before and immediately after the research group, participants completed a range of surveys. One element of the study was investigating how participants made sense of enduring problems that they experienced in their lives.

METHOD

WHAT PROBLEMS?

In the pre-intervention (T1) survey, participants were asked to identify two separate problems that “you struggle with in your life, creating difficulties in achieving the goals that matter most to you.” Participants were given free rein in their choice of what to focus on. The sorts of problems identified included procrastination, issues with self-esteem, behaviour around the opposite sex, and experiencing panic attacks.

MEASUREMENT OF PROBLEM FEATURES

At T1, after identifying and briefly labelling these problems, participants were asked to rate aspects of their relationship to these problems on a range of items. In the post-intervention survey (T2), participants were asked to provide fresh ratings for these items. The brief labels for each problem were presented so participants could ensure that they were referring to the same problem as they did at T1.

Participants responded to each item using a *Likert scale*, measuring degree of understanding from “not at all” to “fully”.

PROBLEM UNDERSTANDING

We identified a number of generic features of problems that an individual could feel they had more or less understanding of. These were:

Do you understand why this problem comes up? (Problem Trigger)

Do you understand the origin of this problem? (Problem Origin)

Is this problem easy to resolve? (Ease of Resolution)

Does resolving the problem depend on finding a new solution or strategy? (Need for Strategy)

Additionally, we asked a meta-question tapping confidence in these judgments:

Are you certain that your current understanding of this problem is correct? (Confidence in understanding)

FUTURE REOCCURRENCE

We asked one further question of each problem:

Is it likely that this problem will reoccur in the future? (Forecasting Repetition)

We have set this apart as it differs from the other items in terms of the implications of a shift in rating. For the other items, a shift entails that the past understanding was incorrect, e.g., that a strategy was falsely felt to be very necessary before, but seen to be less necessary now. A change in response to this forecasting item could instead entirely reflect a new reality - before, it was genuinely likely the problem would reoccur, but after this process, it no longer will.

UNDERSTANDING OF PROBLEMS IN GENERAL

In addition to items dealing specifically with the two priority items, we asked participants to report their levels of understanding of problems in general, with two items, using the same *Likert scale*:

To what extent are you certain about the nature of your problems?

To what extent are you certain about the origin of your problems?

These items were presented at T1 and T2.

RESOLUTION OF PROBLEMS

Because we wanted to account for progress in understanding and resolving any problems, not only those two most salient at the start of the study, at T2 we asked a pair of questions to capture any kinds of progress for questions, phrased as follows:

Looking across all the personal problems that you ended up exploring in the Research Group:

How many problems did you resolve?

Aside from resolved problems, for how many problems did you make some progress in understanding?

A NOTE ON THE INTERVENTION: HOW ARE PROBLEMS ADDRESSED?

After the pre-survey, the research intervention does not reference these identified problems until the follow-up survey at study end. The facilitator of the process had no access to these, and participants were not encouraged to share information about their problems, nor did the computerised tasks ask individuals to refer back to these problems. Rather, individuals address what spontaneously comes up during their practice - for example, a distracting song lyric playing through their mind during meditation, or a frustrating encounter that week.

One of the premises of the meditation method is that the practices used will draw the attention of a participant towards the specific obstacles to flourishing that they face, without any additional effort. If the research group as structured had no effect upon understanding of these problems, this would be modest evidence against this premise, suggesting that deliberate, mindful focus upon priority problems is necessary to explore them.

RESULTS

ITEM PROPERTIES

Because data from the two questions showed similar properties the data for each item was averaged across the two problems.

In terms of the five items designed to tap problem understanding, although the dataset from this pilot is too small to conduct a factor analysis, an investigation of the data suggests that Manifestation Trigger is quite related to Problem Origin (correlating at .65), with other relationships being more modest or absent. As it seems likely that the items are tapping two or more different measures, they were analysed separately for the purposes of this study.

	Problem Trigger	Problem Origin	Easy of Resolution	Need for Strategy	Conf. Understanding	Will reoccur
Problem Trigger	-	.65	.15	-.55	.07	.03
Problem Origin	-	-	.33	-.25	.16	-.03
Easy of Resolution	-	-	-	-.33	-.57	.00
Need for Strategy	-	-	-	-	.43	-.07
Conf. Understanding	-	-	-	-	-	.03

Table 1. Correlations between five problem understanding items, and additionally the Will reoccur item.

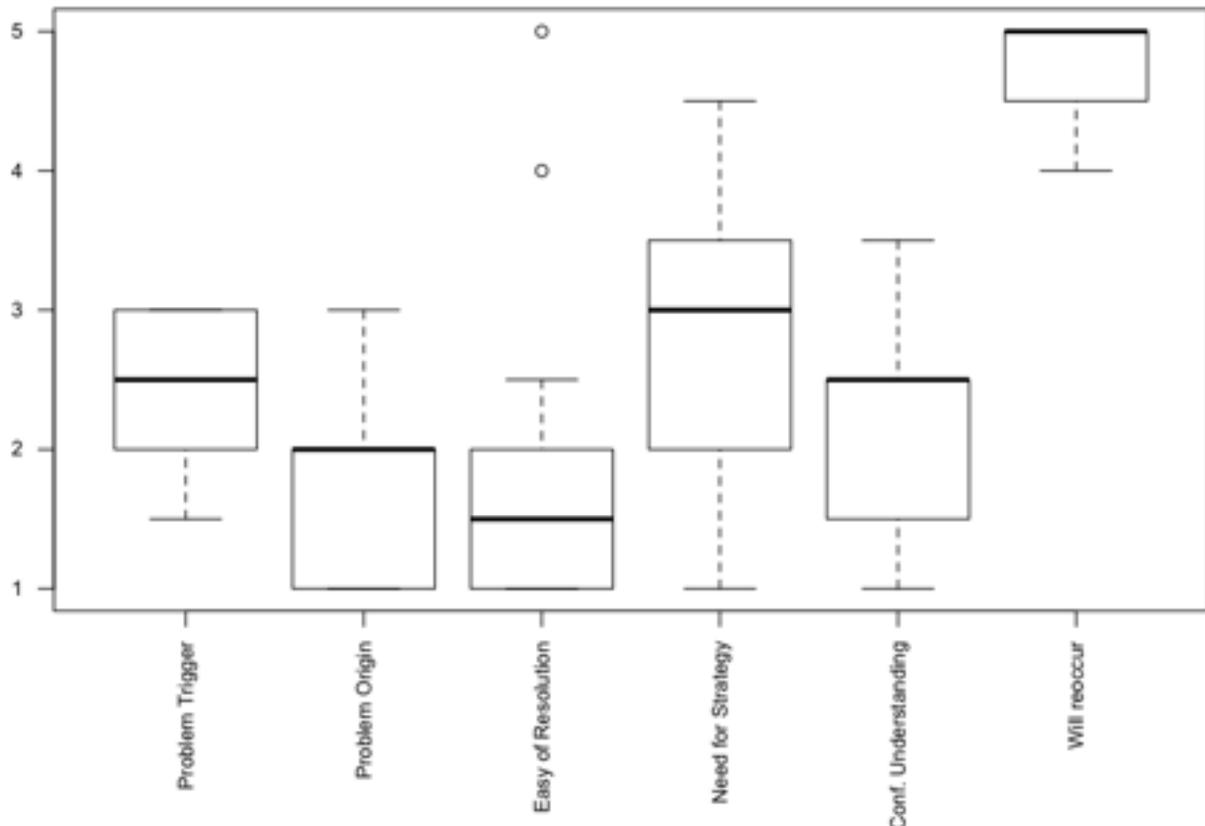


Figure 1. Pre-intervention distributions of understanding items and Will occur item. Figure shows averaged scores across the two problems.

EFFECT OF INTERVENTION

For each item, we measured pre- and post- ratings by each participant. Because of the number of tests run, we set the p-value for considering a result notable at .01. The degrees of freedom is 12 in all below cases.

UNDERSTANDING OF ITEMS

Ease of resolution did not reach our significance cut-off ($t = -2.05$, $p = 0.031$). Problem Trigger approached but did not reach our significance cut-off (-2.62 , $p = 0.011$). The same was true for Certainty of Understanding $t = -2.64$, $p = 0.011$). Dependence on Strategy just fell within our cut-off $t = 2.69$, $p = 0.0098$). Meanwhile, one area clearly met levels of significance, Problem Origin: ($t = -4.2426$, $p = 0.0006$).

So in this small data-set, the intervention effect we have highest confidence for is a self-perceived increase in understanding of the origin of problems. There is some evidence for a decrease in belief that dealing with problems depends on finding a strategy, a better understanding of what triggers problems, and an increase in confidence about these insights. Evidence for considering the resolution of problems to be easier, while meeting conventional .05 standards, did not meet our stated threshold of significance.

REOCCURRENCE OF PROBLEMS

Post-study, participants expressed less confidence that their problems would reoccur, at a level meeting our confidence cut-off ($t = 3.5966$, $p = 0.0018$).

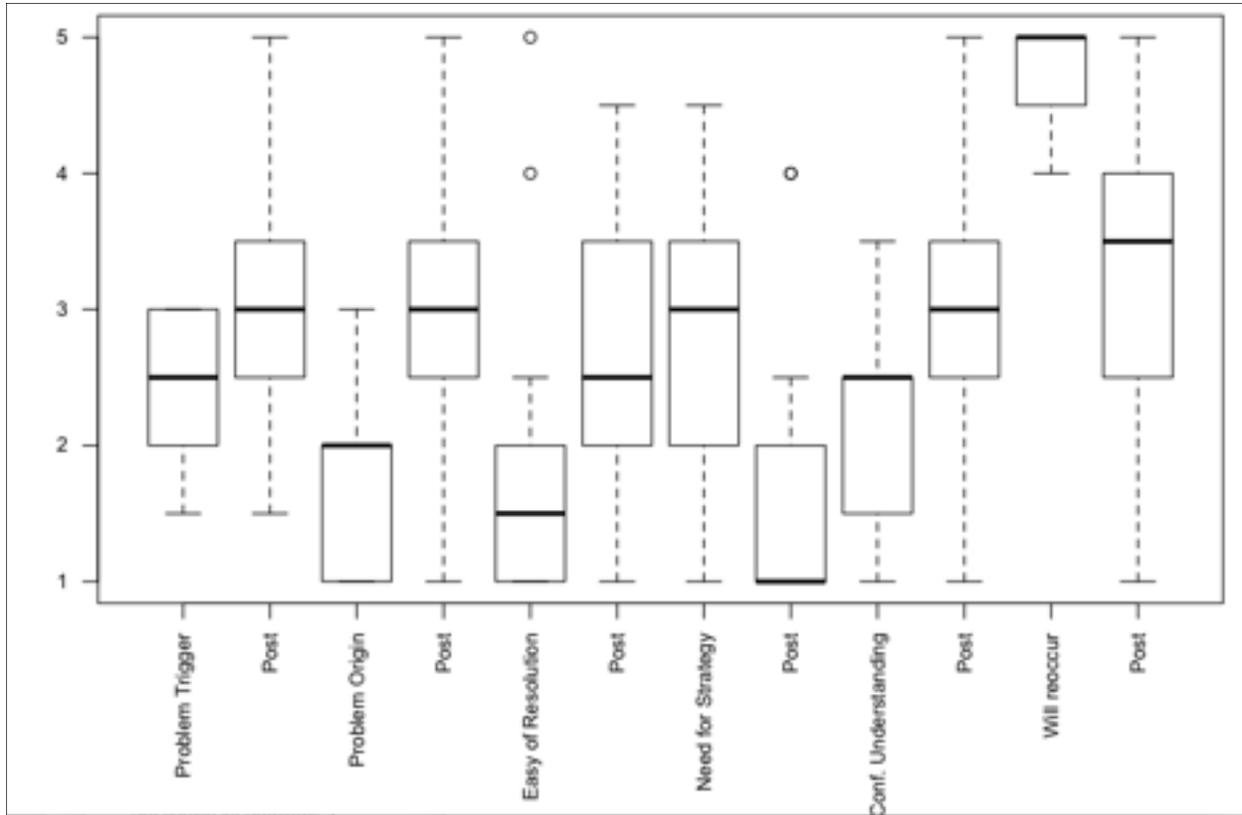


Figure 2. Pre- intervention distributions of understanding items and Will occur item, followed by their post-intervention scores in each case.

SUCCESS IN UNDERSTANDING AND DEALING WITH PROBLEMS IN GENERAL

We asked two questions about the participant's understanding of problems in their life in general. We found that post-study, participants believed they had a better understanding in general of the nature of their problems ($t = -3.2071$, $p = 0.0038$), and more certainty in the origin of their problems, $t = -6.6968$, $p = .00001$).

In terms of resolution of problems, participants reported an average of 2.8 problems resolved through participating in the study, and making progress on a further 3.4. Almost one third stated that they had resolved five problems.

DISCUSSION

After the research group, participants had different views on their understanding of their problems than they did before. They perceived an improvement in understanding of the nature and origin of their problems in general, and a better understanding of particular, named problems, particularly in terms of understanding its origin. Participants also reported a belief that these named problems were less likely to reoccur. This is despite the fact that no particular attention was given to these problems during the course. This suggests that without particular influence or guidance, participants using this meditation approach gravitate towards greater understanding of the problems that plague them most.

In addition, participants felt that they had fully resolved problems through participating in the process.

LIMITATIONS - SELF-REPORT

This study comes with the attendant risks involved in research that depends on self-report measures of improvement. We attempted to limit social desirability concerns by asking for ratings on two occasions separated by a substantial time period, rather than requesting individuals to explicitly report a degree of improvement (or lack of). However, such measures can nonetheless reflect expectations or hopes, and may not be rooted in objective transformations. The fact that participants did not indiscriminately rate all items as higher, but showed some selectiveness in terms of reporting benefit, provides some indirect confidence that this reflects their true views. Nonetheless, follow-up research will need to focus on other measures to tap into the construct of problem resolution.

UNDERSTANDING OF PROBLEMS - TOWARDS A CONSTRUCT

It's clear even within this small data-set that the features of understanding of a persistent life problem are variable. Pre-intervention, some understanding features are rated near floor, whereas the belief in recurrence is near ceiling. This does make sense as these items are describing something which an individual by definition wants rid of but is unable to. Other features, such as belief in the necessity of a strategy, are more variable in the response patterns - possibly reflecting lack of clarity in the item wording, or that these features are of a different kind to the others. The question remains as to whether these items represent a single meaningful construct. Further investigation will require larger data sets and explicit investigation of the ease of completion of the items, in order to move towards the development of one or more constructs.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS - TESTING THE PROVIDENTIAL HYPOTHESIS

As the platform allows it, a next step will be to investigate more directly the premise that the Wiser meditation methods will lead to insight on precisely those problems that are the biggest obstacle, without any need to deliberately focus on them. This premise, the *Providential Nature of the Human Psyche*, would suggest that even innocuous events (for example, a distracting thought that interrupts practice) are a route to lead back to examining the core problems that individuals wish to be rid of.

We can investigate this more directly by identifying problems as we have, but then examining specific dialectical topics, such as daydreams or dreams, that are not deliberately selected nor self-evidently a rumination originating in a recurring problem. If following a dialectic practice, a participant verifies that the surface issue turned out to be deeply connected with a fundamental problem, despite it seemingly lacking such connections at the outset, this would be further, more compelling evidence, that this premise is well-founded.