

KORSA : An ACT-based intervention developed to help university students live better with their stress

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1 CONTEXT

- In Canada, an increasing number of students at higher education struggle with difficulties related to stress, anxiety and burnout (Dyrbye, Thomas, & Shanafelt, 2006).
- Such difficulties undermine not only their wellbeing and quality of life (Brackney & Karabenick, 1995), but can also significantly jeopardize their learning and lead to dropout (Bouffard, Grégoire, & Vezeau, 2011).
- Previous studies have shown the efficacy of ACT-based workshops to reduce symptoms associated with stress, anxiety and depression among students (Muto, Hayes & Jeffcoat, 2011).
- The goal of this study was to measure the effects of the KORSA workshops (www.korsa.uqam.ca) on psychological well-being and school engagement and see whether or not these effects were mediated by psychological flexibility.

2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Do university students randomly assigned to the KORSA workshops program show greater psychological flexibility (H1), mental health (H2) and school engagement (H3) at post-program than those in a waitlist-control group? Do gains in psychological flexibility mediate the effect of the KORSA workshops on mental health and school engagement at post-program (H4)?

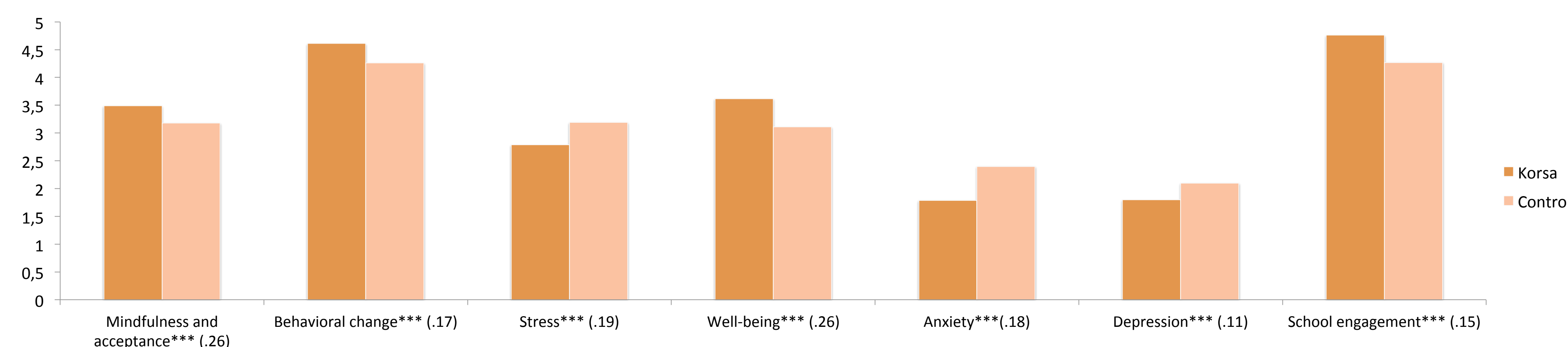
3 METHOD

- Participants:** One hundred and sixty (N=160) students drawn from four universities in Montreal, Canada.
- Intervention:** Four 2.5 hours long workshops based on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy were offered to students during the fall semester of 2014 and the winter semester of 2015. Participants taking part in the KORSA workshops were led to :
 - ✓ Explore what really matters to them, that is to say the goals and values that give meaning to their lives;
 - ✓ Engage in actions allowing them to achieve their goals and live their values more fully;
 - ✓ Identify pitfalls that increase their stress and anxiety and implement effective strategies to sidestep these pitfalls;
 - ✓ Develop their mindfulness.
- Research design:** A randomized controlled study design was used at each semester. It was based on a 2 (intervention vs waitlist control group) x 2 (pre, post-program) format, thereby allowing between-groups comparisons.
- Measures:**
 - ✓ **Psychological flexibility:** Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (Baer et al., 2008; Bohlmeijer, Ten Klooster, Fledderus, Veehof, & Baer, 2011), Multidimensional Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire; MEAQ (Gámez, Chmielewski, Kotov, Ruggero, & Watson, 2011) and a questionnaire created for this study to evaluate the clarity of values and the coherence between actions and values
 - ✓ **Stress:** *Mesure du stress psychologique*; MSP-9 (Lemyre & Lalande-Markon, 2009; Lemyre & Tessier, 1990)
 - ✓ **Psychological well-being:** *Échelle de mesure des manifestations du bien-être psychologique*; ÉMMBP (Massé et al., 1998)
 - ✓ **Anxiety:** Generalized Anxiety Disorder; GAD-7 (Spitzer, Kroenke, Williams, & Lowe, 2006)
 - ✓ **Depression:** Patient Health Questionnaire; PHQ-9 (Spitzer, Kroenke, & Williams, 1999)
 - ✓ **School Engagement:** *Échelle d'engagement académique* (Labbé & Dubé, 2008)

4 RESULTS

- In order to test hypotheses 1,2 and 3, we ran analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) in which we examined the effect of randomization on mean levels of psychological flexibility, mental health and school engagement indicators, controlling for baseline measures of each indicator.

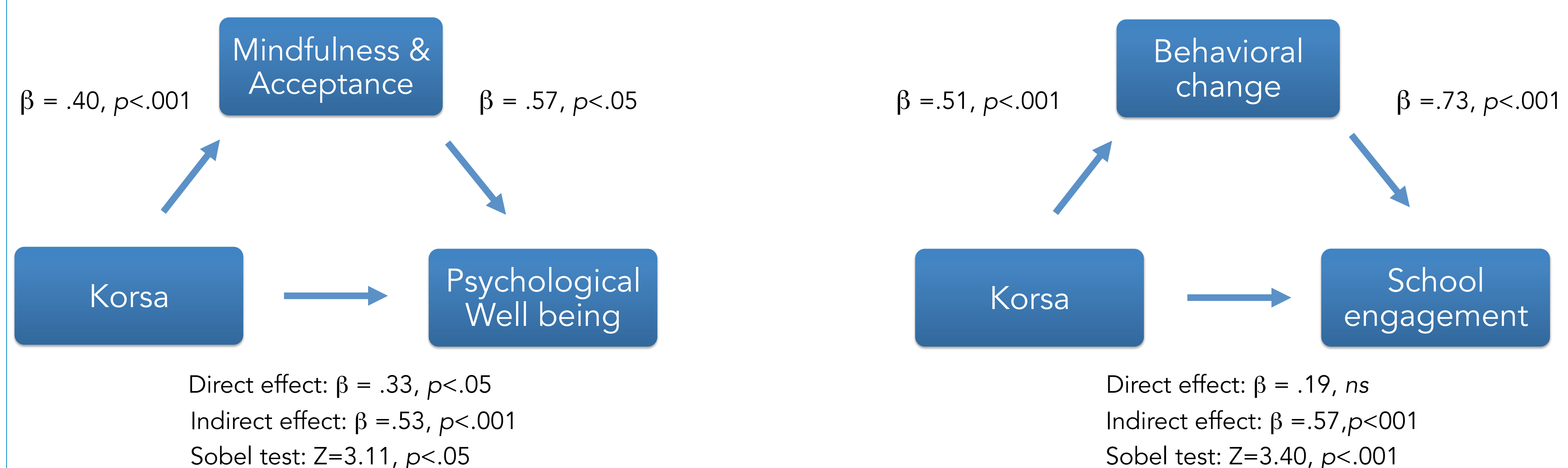
Figure 1. Effects of randomization on psychological flexibility, mental health and school engagement.



Notes: *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001. Partial eta square given in parenthesis.

- The fourth hypothesis was tested using ANCOVA models with the PROCESS program (Hayes, 2013).

Figure 2. Results of the mediation analysis.



5 DISCUSSION

Conclusions :

- Students randomized to the intervention group reported greater psychological flexibility, well-being, school engagement, and lower stress, anxiety and depression symptoms at post-program compared to the control condition.
- Mediational analyses showed that student's well-being at post-program was mediated by mindfulness and acceptance indicators while school engagement was mediated by behavioral change indicators.

Limits :

- The extent to which participants completed the exercises at home was not assessed.
- No follow-up was done to evaluate the long-term effects of the workshops.