

Evaluation Report: Veterans Meditation Retreat
Hosted by Life Transition Meditation Center
September 20-23, 2024



Abstract: Meditation Retreat for veterans was a successful event. The retreat, for most, provided the opportunity to continue a meditation practice

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Veterans Meditation Retreat

On September 20-23, 2024, a total of 40 veterans attended Life Transition Meditation Center's (LTMC) Veteran Meditation Retreat (VMR). A total of 34 (85%) participants took pre-test and 39 (98%) took post-test participated in Life Transition Meditation Center's (LTMC). SBS Evaluation & Program Development Specialists (SBS Evaluation) reviewed and analyzed pre- and post-event surveys from the retreat, and the results are summarized herein.

Participation

In 2024, there were close to double the number of participants compared to 2023. This was due to a modification in recruitment methods by the Life Transition Meditation Center. Due to the nature, complexities, and barriers encountered by veterans, recruitment included a variety of methods from ads in the paper to phone calls and mailings. Trust and building relationships are key when it comes to continued contact with veterans. Sindy Sacoman, of SBS Evaluation, attended the first day of the retreat and introduced the evaluation process.

Participant Needs

Most participants (88%) already used some form of meditation or mindfulness practices prior to the retreat; although, half of them indicated that their engagement was limited to "a little bit." A similar pattern emerges when participants were asked whether they were able to respond rather than react when triggered, recognize current feelings, talk themselves down in a crisis, and pause when they experience distress – up to 97% of participants believe they are able to respond appropriately in these circumstances; however, under one-third responded that they can only do this "a little bit." Thus, in future meditation retreats, it is suggested that topics such as recognizing feelings, de-escalating from a crisis, and responding vs reacting are further explored. SBS Evaluation will conduct a delayed posttest in December where more data will be obtained on continued meditation practices post retreat.



Most participants reported moderate to extreme levels of mental health distress symptoms such as: strong negative emotions (82%), loss of interest in activities (68%), and feeling distant or cut off from other people (74%), difficulty concentrating (85%), and trouble sleeping (74%).

Retreat Experience

Almost all participants reported great satisfaction with the event – over 90% of participants were satisfied with the event’s location (92%), duration (97%), flow (92%), instructor (97%), and relevance to managing their well-being (92%). Overall, satisfaction with this year’s retreat was higher by 20% compared to the 2023 retreat where most satisfaction responses ranged between 74-78%. Commonalities in responses to favorite things about the event included connecting with fellow veterans, appreciation for the instructor’s knowledge base, learning new techniques, and the great food provided. One participant shared “Comradery, I rarely get to hang out around vets and never in a healing space- lovely! Connecting with women and PoC vets specifically.” Another participant shared that one of the top three things they liked about the retreat was “the structured learning i.e. what is meditation, benefits of meditation, things to look for in practicing meditations.” All participants both felt confident in using and planned on practicing walking/moving (100%) and sitting/standing meditation (100%). Similar to the previous retreat, participants felt confident in using walking and sitting meditations. Almost all participants expressed similar thoughts regarding yoga and stretching (97%). While still at a high level, the participants felt the least confident in using sound (84%) and lying (84%) meditation and reported slightly lower likelihoods than other methods of practicing these techniques following the retreat.

Suggestions for Improvement

Overall, veterans reported high levels of satisfaction with the event. Some participant suggestions for improvement included 1. Healthier desserts like fruit, 2. Encouragement of socialization with a wider variety of participants, 3. A section to express feelings of gratitude, 4. Gong sound bath or tuning rods or singing bowls, 5. A location out in nature, and 6. Discussion of Sīla (morality), Samadhi (concentration), panna (wisdom), and integrity/insight etc.



Any modification in sentiments regarding veterans' state of mind (i.e., loss of interest in activities, trouble experiencing happiness, strong feelings of fear, anger or guilt; trouble sleeping) will be assessed once the delayed posttest is completed. This data was not included in 2023, thus comparisons with prior retreat could not be assessed. Collecting this data before and after the retreat will speak to the effectiveness of the retreat in assisting veterans with coping abilities and alleviating symptoms of mental health distress. Additionally, collecting information regarding prior knowledge about each meditation technique could be helpful in future assessments. SBS suggests that the following question be added in next year's assessment "Do you feel that this retreat has successfully equipped you with the skills and knowledge you need to manage your mental health, health, and well-being?"

Conclusion

All but one participant reported that the retreat was a good overall learning experience, and all reported that they would recommend VMR to other veterans. The entire group reported that they plan on finding positive ways to address thoughts and feelings, with several participants citing improved abilities to cope with feelings of anxiety and grief and better sleep. The retreat helped participants overcome several challenges including: 1. Being rooted in a crowded room, 2. Sleeping alone in a hotel away from home, 3. Social anxiety, 4. Sticking to a schedule, 5. Trust issues, 6. Acceptance of grief for the loss of family and friends, 7. Ability to perform a body scan and assess extent of damage to body, 8. Ability to be less reactive, and 9. Having my back turned to others without experiencing hyper-vigilance. One participant shared that they "experienced a shift in perspective in life" and "feel comfortable about what direction to head...and [knowledge] of resources to move in that direction."

