

Research

Exploring the Psychosocial Impact of a Mindfulness Workforce Development Program on Instructors of Color: A Qualitative Descriptive Study

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Abstract

A growing body of literature supports the use of mindfulness-based practices to increase resilience and reduce emotional and behavioral problems of low-income youth of color who are exposed to chronic trauma. The current study, the first of its kind, addresses existing gaps in the literature by examining the social and emotional effects of mindfulness on instructors of color, a largely understudied population. All trainees ($n = 25$) in a year-long, mindfulness-based workforce development program in Baltimore were invited to participate in this qualitative descriptive study that involved semistructured interviews regarding the personal emotional impact of participating in the program, as well as possible changes in the subjects' perceptions of yoga and the potential role of yoga in their communities. We applied a transcript-based analysis approach to the data from the individual interviews and derived themes using the constant comparative method. Twenty-one trainees (84%) participated in semistructured interviews. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 29 and were predominantly male (71.4%) and African-American (85.7%). We identified four key themes related to participating in the program: (1) changes in emotional functioning and self-perception, (2) changes in interactions with others, (3) changes in perception of yoga and mindfulness, and (4) perceived real-world application of yoga and mindfulness. The current study adds to the literature by exploring the public health implications of mindfulness, particularly in addressing effects of chronic trauma in low-income communities of color. The workforce development program also merits further evaluation as a potential model for enabling local and national nonprofit organizations to offer low-income youth

and youth of color employment options that enhance resources in trauma-affected communities. *Damian et al. Int J Yoga Therapy 2021(31). doi: 10.17761/2021-D-19-00059.*

Keywords: urban, workforce development program, yoga instructors, public health

A growing body of literature supports the use of yoga and mindfulness practices to increase resilience and reduce emotional and behavioral problems of low-income youth of color who are chronically exposed to structural traumatic stressors such as racism, poverty, violence, and systematic oppression.¹⁻³ Mindful practices such as meditation and yoga promote enhanced awareness and acceptance of the present moment, including challenging emotional and physical circumstances.⁴⁻⁸ Prior studies have reported improved psychological functioning of youth of color participating in mindfulness-based interventions.^{3,9,10} Few studies, however, have examined the effects that mindfulness practices can have on instructors.

Conboy et al.¹¹ examined changes in psychosocial health and human flourishing associated with participation in a 4-week residential yoga teacher training program and found significant improvements in participants' self-reported optimism and human flourishing factors, specifically the mindfulness subscales of observation, awareness, and non-reactivity. Another study found that participants' self-reported compassion, religious orientation, positive mood (lightheartedness/relief), and mindfulness increased significantly after completion of a 2-year training.¹² However, these studies were both conducted with middle-aged, White women and do not provide insight into training experiences

Procedures

A convenience sampling approach was used. HLF’s program developers described the study to the eligible trainees during the announcements section of several training sessions. Interested trainees provided their names and contact information on a signup sheet, which the HLF program developers subsequently provided to the principal investigator (AJD) of the study. A member of the research team (AJD or CM) contacted each trainee interested in learning more about the study by phone and scheduled an in-person meeting at the HLF office. During the meeting, the research team member explained the study and obtained informed consent from individuals who wanted to participate.

Each participant was interviewed once, directly after providing consent. All interviews with both new and recent trainees took place 2–3 months after recent trainees completed the training. The interviews were conducted by female research team members (AJD, CM) with formal training in qualitative methods and prior experience conducting interviews with disadvantaged communities. Neither interviewer was previously known to the participants; both interviewers were entirely independent of the organization. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes on average, and each participant received a \$20 gift card honorarium. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, with any identifying information removed in the transcription process. The Institutional Review Board at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health approved all study procedures.

Data Analyses

All transcripts from the interviews were broad coded to identify themes in participants’ responses and to develop a strong theoretical understanding of participants’ explanatory model of the Workforce Development Program as well as of yoga and mindfulness more generally. An inductive approach was applied wherein both coders (CM, SY), supervised by the principal investigator (AJD), first independently reviewed the raw data using the constant-comparative method. Originally developed for use in the grounded-theory method, this strategy involves taking one piece of data and comparing it with all others to develop conceptualizations of the possible relationships between various pieces of data.^{14,15} The coders first engaged in open coding by independently reading through all transcripts several times and creating tentative labels for chunks of data based on what was emerging. The coders then conducted axial coding and identified relationships among the open codes, particularly causal relationships and conditions among phenomena mentioned. Axial coding was followed by selective coding, in which the coders identified emerging

themes in the narratives, then made inferences about the key themes in the participants’ responses.^{16,17} We conducted multiple readings of each transcript, searched for discrepant cases, and debriefed after coding. The principal investigator resolved any discrepancies between coders through discussion and review of the transcripts.

Results

Twenty-one out of a possible 25 eligible trainees (84%) enrolled in the study and participated in the semistructured interviews. With the exception of two trainees, all other HLF training program participants who were involved in this study were previous youth participants. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 29, and most participants were male (71.4%). All participants identified as racial/ethnic minorities, specifically African-American (85.7%), Hispanic/Latino (9.5%), and Asian/Pacific Islander (4.8%).

We identified four overarching themes related to perceived changes as a result of participating in the Workforce Development Program: (1) changes in emotional functioning and self-perception, (2) changes in interactions with others, (3) changes in perception of yoga and mindfulness, and (4) perceived real-world application of yoga and mindfulness (Table 1).

Table 1. Key Themes and Subthemes from Interviews (*n* = 21), in Order of Frequency

Theme	Common Subthemes
Changes in emotional functioning and self-perception	Increased emotional regulation and stress management Improved self-confidence
Changes in interactions with others	More patience with others Greater willingness to serve and support others Increased empathy
Changes in perception of yoga and mindfulness	Debunk race, class, and gender stereotypes about yoga and mindfulness Recognize yoga and mindfulness as accessible
Perceived real-world application of yoga and mindfulness	Address community and youth trauma and violence and enhance positive youth development Promote self-regulation and self-awareness Build empathy and openness to differences

Changes in Emotional Functioning

All participants reported one or more changes in emotional functioning, such as increased emotional regulation and stress management, as well as improved self-confidence. The majority of participants reported increased emotional regulation and stress management. One trainee explained how yoga helped her to address anger and let go of perfectionistic standards:

I learned that just because you practice yoga, it doesn't mean that you're a perfect human being. If anything, yoga helps you just with being a human being, and dealing with anger . . . even how you treat and respect people and value humans. [Participant 005]

Similarly, another participant noted how the practice allowed him to better manage his emotions and improve mental clarity:

There are concepts of yoga that have taught me how to deal with things on an emotional level. Emotions can sometimes cloud the judgment. For me, dealing with anger was a big thing, so just finding the tools within the practice to help me properly deal with anger . . . [Participant 002]

Other participants reported improvements in attention and anxiety. One participated stated:

I have ADHD. I noticed that the breathing helps a lot. I do have some anxiety, and the breathing helps a lot. It's a different breath that we were introduced to. It's very relaxing for me and has been very helpful, I've noticed. [Participant 017]

Another participant noted improvement in her capacity to manage her thoughts and emotions, particularly anxiety: "I'm just not getting mad or upset or taking things personal. Just keeping my mind in the moment rather than also thinking into the future or the past, which causes anxiety" [Participant 019].

A few participants highlighted how the program helped them better manage stress. One trainee noted, "I know how to teach other people how to meditate, and that's helped me a lot with grief, with just stress during the day, like stress in my week, in every facet of my life" [Participant 011]. Similarly, another participant explained having a heightened sense of self-awareness when he experiences elevated stress levels and that he subsequently knows how to better deal with that stress:

The patience stuff allowed [me] to ease the stress. It used to be like a roller coaster. Not too many drops, but far as me just losing sight and feeding into stress, and then understanding I need to get myself together, which has been a tad bit easier. [Participant 003]

Several participants endorsed improved self-confidence as a result of participating in the program. For example, one participant said, "When you learn to tune into yourself more, it definitely [helps] your confidence because you become more comfortable in your own skin" [Participant 006]. Another participant explained how the increased level of self-confidence happened over time with more practice teaching and working in the schools:

After a while I got used to it, the kids got used to me. I got used to working with my coworkers. I noticed that I've grown more, gotten out of my shell, and [started] talking to the kids more. [Participant 026]

Changes in Interactions with Others

A second major thematic area in participants' responses included positive changes in their interactions with others, specifically more patience, greater willingness to serve and support others, and increased empathy. The most highly endorsed change in interpersonal interactions as a result of participating in the program was developing more patience with others. One trainee explained how she became a more engaged listener: "I'm more patient, I take my time, and I'm better at listening and actually absorbing information because before I would listen to respond—like listen and be ready with a response, and not really listen to the person" [Participant 011]. Another trainee noted being able to maintain a mental state of calm and composure when interacting with others: "I would say just being more openminded, being more patient. The word we use in mindfulness is 'equanimity' and being more present" [Participant 028].

The second most commonly endorsed subtheme was a greater willingness to serve and support others. One trainee applied yoga and mindfulness techniques to support her ailing family member:

I actually helped my grandmother pass by helping her to control her breathing. Through breathing, we all calmed her down and got her to gain control of her breathing and to really calm down and relax so that the transition wasn't so frenzied. [Participant 011]

Another participant described developing a greater sense of responsibility and willingness to be present for the youth she works with, most of whom come from challenging circumstances:

Being able to be around these children that are enduring different kinds of hardship and [are] still able to get up and come to school every day gives me a new incentive for me to get up and go to work every day. [Participant 023]

Several other participants endorsed increased empathy. One trainee explained developing a greater sense of compassion through working with kids in the programs and gaining a better understanding of their daily struggles:

My compassion has increased just knowing and hearing stories on a daily basis of what they have to deal with, and just imagining how hard that would be to live that life and then come out OK. That's a very difficult thing. [Participant 020]

Another participant explained how he's learned to be present for others and create the space for others to feel supported without being overbearing:

I guess it's because I'm allowing them to be them. You don't have to necessarily come and talk to me, but if you want, you come and tell me when you're ready to tell me. That allows them to at least acknowledge the fact that they need to get it out, versus them feeling like someone's forcing them to tell them what's wrong with them. [Participant 023]

Changes in Perceptions of Yoga and Mindfulness

Another overarching theme from participants' interviews was positive changes in perceptions of yoga and mindfulness. The most common subtheme endorsed by several trainees was that their participation in the program helped debunk (American) race, class, and gender stereotypes about yoga and mindfulness. One participant explained, "Every time I see somebody doing yoga, they're female, or every time you heard about it. I thought it was just for females. I didn't know that dudes could actually do it as well" [Participant 004]. Similarly, another participant explained that another image of who does yoga and mindfulness is more popularized in U.S. media:

I think it's the same stereotype that anybody would have. It's not us that's doing it. Very seldom do you see any African-Americans doing yoga or being mindful. That's [seldom] in the spotlight, I should say, or [seldom] publicized. You don't see that. That's not a norm. [Participant 017]

Another trainee elaborated on the point of the practice

of yoga and mindfulness not being the norm in his upbringing: "I'm from an inner-city background, and we didn't do a lot of thinking about yoga and mindfulness. It was more of a different type of culture" [Participant 018].

A number of participants also explained how through the Workforce Development Program, they came to recognize yoga and mindfulness as accessible. One trainee described in detail how his participation in the program helped him to understand that there are no individual attributes that should prevent one from being able to practice yoga and mindfulness: "My impression changed dramatically, because anyone can participate in yoga, no matter what you look like, or what you speak. It's available, and accessible, and can be tweaked for anyone, to match anyone's needs" [Participant 003]. Another participant explained that although he had seen yoga in U.S. media, it was only when he began practicing through the program that he became more aware of the benefits of the practice:

I didn't really know a lot about it. It was really just what I'd seen on TV. After I actually practiced it, I realized, "Oh, yeah. It actually does work." The way they taught me, it's more than just exercise. [Participant 029]

Perceived Real-World Applications of Yoga and Mindfulness

The fourth theme that emerged from participants' responses was real-world applications of yoga and mindfulness. The most highly endorsed real-world applications of yoga and mindfulness were addressing community and youth trauma and violence, and enhancing positive youth development. One participant explained how yoga and mindfulness can help to promote community building and connections among Baltimoreans, especially in the midst of tragedy:

With the violence that's going on in Baltimore, I'd say the main [thing is to] have the people more mindful of what's going on and how we can actually get better. Instead of having an uproar when a tragic event happens, we can actually make some progress and start to depend on one another. [Participant 003]

Another participant described his own experience of growing up in challenging circumstances in Baltimore. He explained how the program not only helped him to process his own traumatic past but also to share that healing with other young people from his community:

I am a young man that comes from the worst of what Baltimore can produce, and it's bad. Now that I have evolved and got deeper into my manhood and selfhood, and embracing responsibility, I still know deep down

inside that not any job can be easily turned into an opportunity to serve as a healer or a solution for young, Black men in an urban city like Baltimore . . . So to have a yoga job where not only is it my responsibility to daily heal and stretch out myself, but it's my responsibility to daily heal and stretch out the youth, mentally and physically, is very fulfilling. [Participant 021]

Similarly, another trainee elaborated on the idea of creating a safe space through yoga and mindfulness rather than subjecting oneself to negative pressures:

There's a huge pressure to join in some circles, which some people might consider unforgivable. The holistic program gives you a place to say, "Hey, I already have an area or a place where I can go where people won't try and make me do things that I may or may not agree with, or do things that are questionable. Let me go to Holistic Life so I can try to find some peace." [Participant 029]

Several participants noted that an important real-world application of yoga and mindfulness that would benefit society, particularly in Baltimore, is promoting self-regulation and self-awareness. One participant noted how through the practice, people can develop a greater awareness of what they are feeling and learn to deal with their emotions in a healthier way:

I definitely think that yoga can help people tune into themselves and understand what it is that they're feeling. Certainly, with the political environment right now, there's a lot of heightened sensitivity. Having tools to turn to, knowing that you can breathe or move or stretch or do something to move that energy around is very helpful. If you're able to really infuse that into a community overall, I think it could have a larger impact, certainly on a city like Baltimore. [Participant 006]

Similarly, another trainee noted how the practice can help others not succumb to their circumstances, instead having a greater sense of agency and feeling empowered to deal with their challenges in a constructive manner:

I feel as though if you can get it within the communities, it would help people to realize that whatever problems or whatever struggles they have, they can calm themselves, and handle their own internal problems by doing a simple breathing technique. [Participant 027]

Some participants noted how yoga and mindfulness can help to build empathy and openness to differences. One participant highlighted the human connection that is cultivated through the practice:

I would say that yoga can teach us that human beings at our core are all the same and are all love. Just the small steps of developing empathy and developing love for yourself . . . as [occur as] our kids grow and mature. [Participant 005]

Another trainee based his comments on his observations in the classroom and how yoga and mindfulness have helped the kids he teaches to be more aware of how they affect their peers, a lesson that can be shared with Baltimore more broadly through yoga and mindfulness:

Just in hearing how they respond now and I know how they would have responded before, it's amazing because they can see how [things change] just being mindful, or keeping in mind that your actions affect other people, or remembering that other people have things going on in life, too. [Participant 017]

Discussion and Conclusions

This qualitative study examined the psychosocial impact of a yoga and mindfulness training program on participants of color. More specifically, the study explored changes in workforce development trainees' emotional functioning and self-perception, interactions with others, and perception of yoga and mindfulness, including perceived real-world applications of the practice. Our findings indicate that participants perceived that the yoga and mindfulness Workforce Development Program improved their emotional functioning. All trainees reported at least one benefit from participating in the program, and none reported adverse effects. More than half of the participants described how the program helped them better manage their anger, anxiety, and stress. Participants also reported greater patience, empathy, and willingness to support others as a result of participating in the program.

Whereas most studies have focused on how yoga and mindfulness promote enhanced emotional regulation in practitioners,^{1,4-9} the current study's findings suggest that the same benefits can be experienced by individuals who teach yoga and mindfulness practices.^{11,12} Our findings are consistent with previous research on White instructors,^{11,12} which also found significant perceived benefits in participants' ability to attend to their inner experience, including emotional well-being. In addition, our finding of positive effects

of the training on participants' interactions with others, specifically increased compassion and patience, is similar to previously reported results.¹²

The current study adds to the literature not only by exploring trainees' self-reported emotional and interpersonal changes, as in the two prior studies referenced above,^{11,12} but also by assessing the potential impact of the training on instructors' perception of the practice. The majority of participants expressed that the program enabled them to reconsider previously held assumptions about yoga and mindfulness. Participants described how U.S. media generally portray yoga and mindfulness as activities for females and/or White populations. Many young Black male participants, in particular, disclosed that they had initially viewed yoga and mindfulness as feminine or as alien to African-American culture but no longer held those stereotypes.

Having males and people of color teaching yoga and mindfulness in underserved schools and, more informally, sharing practices with friends and family may be a way to shift perceptions more broadly about who can engage in these practices. This finding is unique to the current study, as prior studies^{11,12} predominantly comprised middle-aged, White women and focused more on the implications of engaging in yoga and mindfulness for the physical and psychological health of the individual practitioner and did not examine perceptions about the practices' possible broader communal and societal benefits. Moreover, multiple studies have pointed to the ongoing lack of teachers of color in the United States.^{18–20} A strong body of research in education in general shows that students of color learn better from teachers of color than from White teachers in traditional education environments.^{21–27} Thus, efforts to improve the racial/ethnic diversity of instructors in yoga and mindfulness and in the education field more broadly may enhance the learning experience of students of color in the United States.

This study also examined the role instructors felt yoga and mindfulness can play in addressing societal and public health challenges, particularly in low-income communities of color. Most participants perceived that mindfulness and yoga can positively affect communities, particularly in addressing effects of chronic trauma. Several participants shared personal experiences of early exposure to traumatic stressors and how yoga and mindfulness in their schools had helped them to envision a life beyond their circumstances. These observations should be situated in time and place, as the study was conducted shortly after Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old, Black Baltimore male, died in the hands of police custody. This event was traumatic for Baltimore residents, particularly Black communities. While acknowledging the longstanding challenges of structural violence against Black

and Brown communities and the sociopolitical divisions caused by racism, many instructors felt that the increased emotional regulation, awareness of self and others, increased empathy, and openness to differences that mindfulness and yoga can develop could help to bridge societal divisions.

Consistent with these observations, other studies have examined the potential role of yoga and mindfulness in addressing longstanding societal challenges including discrimination. Emerging literature suggests that brief, daily mindfulness practices may decrease both racial bias and stereotyping.^{28–31} Thus, findings from the present study support the notion that yoga and mindfulness practices may represent one tool for enhancing resilience and healthy coping among trauma-affected individuals and communities. Of course, this sort of teaching must ultimately be coupled with policy changes that address the root causes of trauma and violence experienced by systemically oppressed communities.

This study has certain limitations. First, some trainees had participated in HLF programming before starting the Workforce Development Program, and the prior experiences of these more seasoned participants might have influenced their perspectives on the Workforce Development Program. We did not have enough participants in this study to explore possible differences in perspectives between those with and without prior HLF experience. Second, narratives may have been affected by recall bias, as we were only able to interview participants at a single time point during or following participation rather than conducting interviews before and after exposure to the Workforce Development Program. Third, there was potential for self-selection bias, as the study relied on a convenience sample. Fourth, there was a lack of blinding of the interviewers and data collectors/coders.

This study has several implications for future research. Although the literature on yoga and mindfulness is growing, few studies have examined the impact of yoga and mindfulness training on instructors themselves, particularly instructors of color and those teaching in low-income communities of color. Future studies on the HLF Workforce Development Program and other yoga and mindfulness training programs should consider incorporating randomized designs and control conditions, such as waitlist-control designs or active-control conditions involving other types of training experiences, to enable causal assumptions regarding the effects of mindfulness and yoga training. Additionally, the use of other methodologies, including mixed methods and multiple informants, may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the HLF Workforce Development Program and other yoga and mindfulness training programs not otherwise captured by a qualitative study focused solely

on trainees. Lastly, future studies that gather data at multiple time points may capture both the sustainability of initial self-reported changes as well as changes over time.

Our study also has implications for practice. A robust body of evidence indicates persistent racial and ethnic disparities in health and health outcomes, especially chronic health conditions, driven by structural racism and associated with increased disease risk for U.S. communities of color.^{32–34} Improving access to yoga and mindfulness for communities of color may be one strategy for improving disease management and overall health outcomes in these communities. Similarly, chronic community-level trauma in impoverished neighborhoods has been well-documented.³⁵ McDonald and Richmond³⁶ estimated that more than 85% of youth from disadvantaged communities witness some form of violence in their lifetimes, and as many as 69% endorse direct victimization. Structural barriers to improving socioeconomic status and achieving gainful employment persist for Black communities, particularly for young Black men.³⁷ There is a critical need for interventions or initiatives with potential to reduce negative effects of personal and community trauma and to promote economic and professional success for young people of color. The Workforce Development Program merits further evaluation as a potential model for enabling local and national non-profit organizations to offer young people of color employment options that enhance resources in trauma-affected communities.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Ali Smith, Atman Smith, Andres Gonzalez, and the entire staff at Holistic Life Foundation, Inc., for their partnership and contributions to this project.

This study was funded by the Johns Hopkins Urban Health Institute Student-Community Partnership Small Grants Program.

All procedures were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Conflict-of-Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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Appendix A. Introduction/Oral Consent and Interview Guide

Hi, my name is _____. I'm from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. If you remember back to when you first learned about this study, one part of the study is an interview to ask about your experience in the HLF Workforce Development Program. That's what we'll be doing now.

I'll ask you to tell me about your experiences in the program, any changes that you may have experienced, and any suggestions you have for making the program better. The interview should last about 45 to 60 minutes depending on how much you have to say.

I'll audiorecord the interview and then have the audio typed up so that we will remember what you say. There is a risk that someone may access the information you give me. To try to prevent this, I won't put your name on the recording or the written transcript; we'll use a study ID. We'll destroy the audio recording after it is transcribed and will store the transcript in a password-protected computer that is only accessible to the study team. Any findings we share from this study will not identify you by name.

There is also a risk that some of my questions may make you uncomfortable or distressed. You are free to skip any questions you do not want to answer. You can also stop the interview at any time.

You'll receive a \$20 gift card to thank you for your time today.

Do you have any questions?

Would you like to begin?

Can you tell me about your experience in the Workforce Development Program?

[Probe regarding what prompted the trainee to participate in the program and how often trainee attended Workforce Development Program trainings and other activities.]

Did you notice any changes in yourself after participating in the program? Tell me about that.

[Probe regarding emotional changes; changes in interactions with a partner, family members, or HLF staff and fellow trainees; changes in handling stress; changes in life satisfaction; and changes in self-confidence. Continue to probe until the participant has described any changes in detail.]

What kinds of challenges did you experience during the program?

[Probe regarding confusion, boredom, distress, and other challenges.]

Tell me about anything unexpected that may have occurred while you were in the program.

[Probe regarding feelings, sensations, and thoughts that may have felt new or surprising to the participant.]

Did you find that you preferred any of the program trainings or activities over any others? Tell me more about that.

[Probe regarding which program components the participant preferred and why, or whether different program components were preferred at different times.]

How ready do you feel to lead a yoga/mindfulness class?

[Probe regarding whether participant was able to practice leading a class, if applicable, and how often, and whether particular program components were more helpful in preparing the participant to lead a class than others.]

Now I'd like to walk through your experience with this program step by step and get your feedback on things you liked and things you wished had been different.

How was your introduction to the program by HLF staff?

Tell me about your impression of the program at the beginning.

Did you feel you were given enough information about the program at the beginning? What else might you have liked to be told?

Tell me about the support you got while participating in the program.

How did you feel about the amount and type of support you got? What changes would you suggest?

Tell me your thoughts about the length of the program and the content of the program.

Tell me your thoughts about the likelihood of you teaching yoga/mindfulness to your family, friends, and community. Are there any supports, resources, or information you would like to help you continue to apply what you learned during the program even beyond your participation in the program?

What was your impression of yoga/mindfulness before participating in the program? What role do you see for yoga/mindfulness in addressing the challenges facing Baltimore, and society as a whole?

Are there other things you'd like to share about your experience with the program?

Are there other things you'd like to share in terms of how the program could be improved?

Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Thank you for your time.