

Effects of Centering Prayer on the Everyday Stress of Undergraduates

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Introduction

Centering prayer is a Christian contemplative practice that was rediscovered in the 1960s and which has steadily grown since then (Keating, 2006; Fox et. al, 2015; Fredrickson et. al, 2008; Ferguson 2010).

Everyday stress is a factor that impacts undergraduates (Burns et. al, 2011; Asbill, 2015).

This study hypothesized that the *practice* of centering prayer would reduce everyday stress among undergraduates.

"I think it can provide a 'temporary Sabbath' if that makes sense."

Method

This study had 26 participants (24 female (92.31%), 2 male (7.69%); ages 18-41 (M=21.31); 25 Christian (96.15%), 1 Buddhist (3.85%)) all enrolled in The King's University.

The Centering Prayer *practice* participants completed was undertaking Centering Prayer for 20 minutes twice each day, for 7 weeks. Each week, one of these sessions had to be facilitated by an experienced practitioner.*

This study was conducted with a pre- and post-test design. The measures of *everyday stress* were administered before the Centering Prayer *practice* and following the experiment period. Some qualitative data of participants' understanding and experience of catering prayer was obtained at this time.

Everyday stress was measured using the *Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)* (Cohen & Williamson, 2011) and the *State Trait Anxiety Inventory (Spielberger, 1983)*. The *State (SAI)* and *Trait (TAI)* portions were separated, as the *State Anxiety Inventory* measures anxiety in a more situational or immediate sense whereas *Trait Anxiety Inventory* measures anxiety as a more enduring aspect of the person.

"It is very difficult, very intentional sacrifice of time and energy that brings someone closer to an infinite God"

"It is very unique—like putting ourselves into a different mode of being."

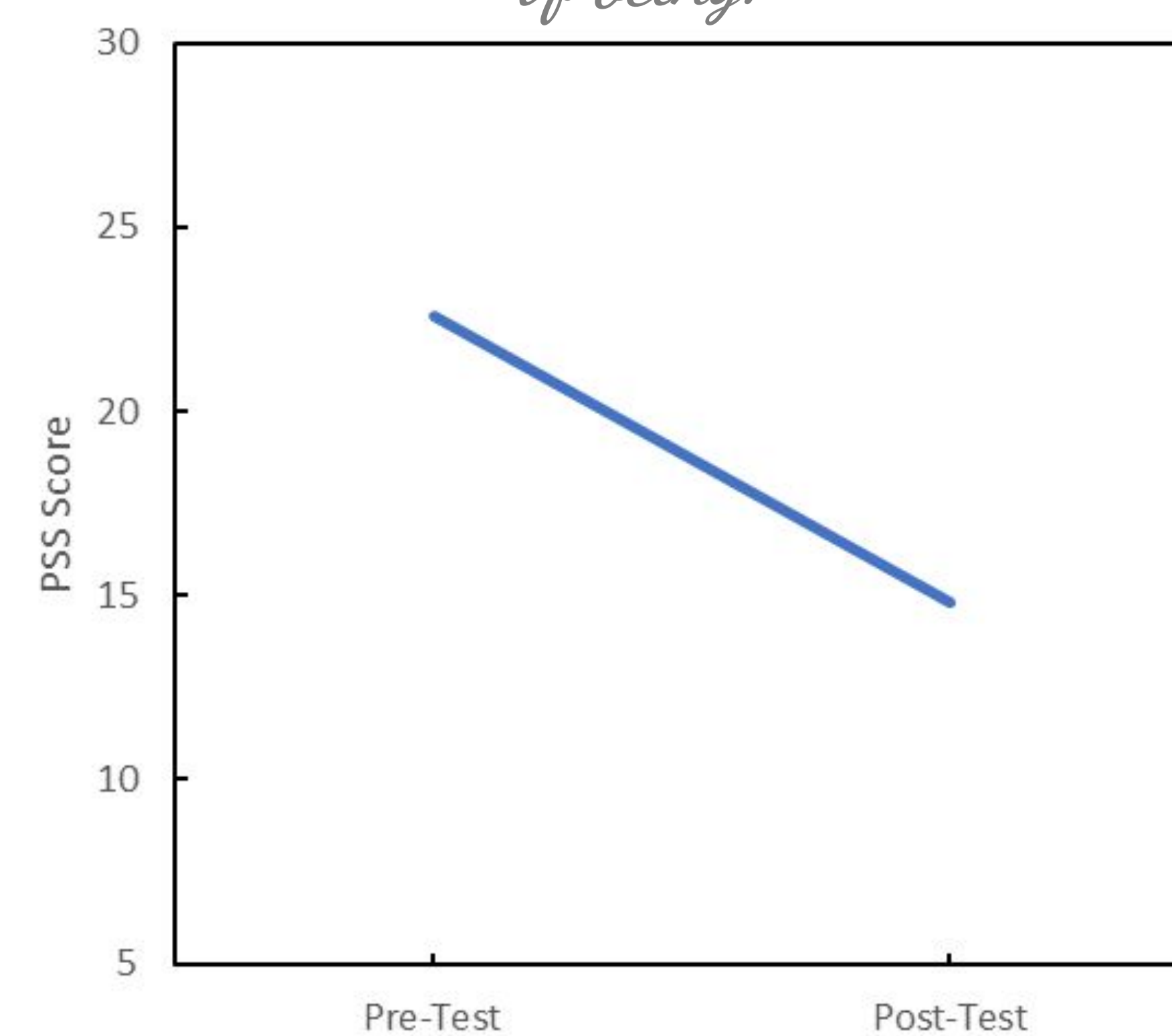


Figure 1. *Perceived Stress Scale*

"It gives me space to let it be!"

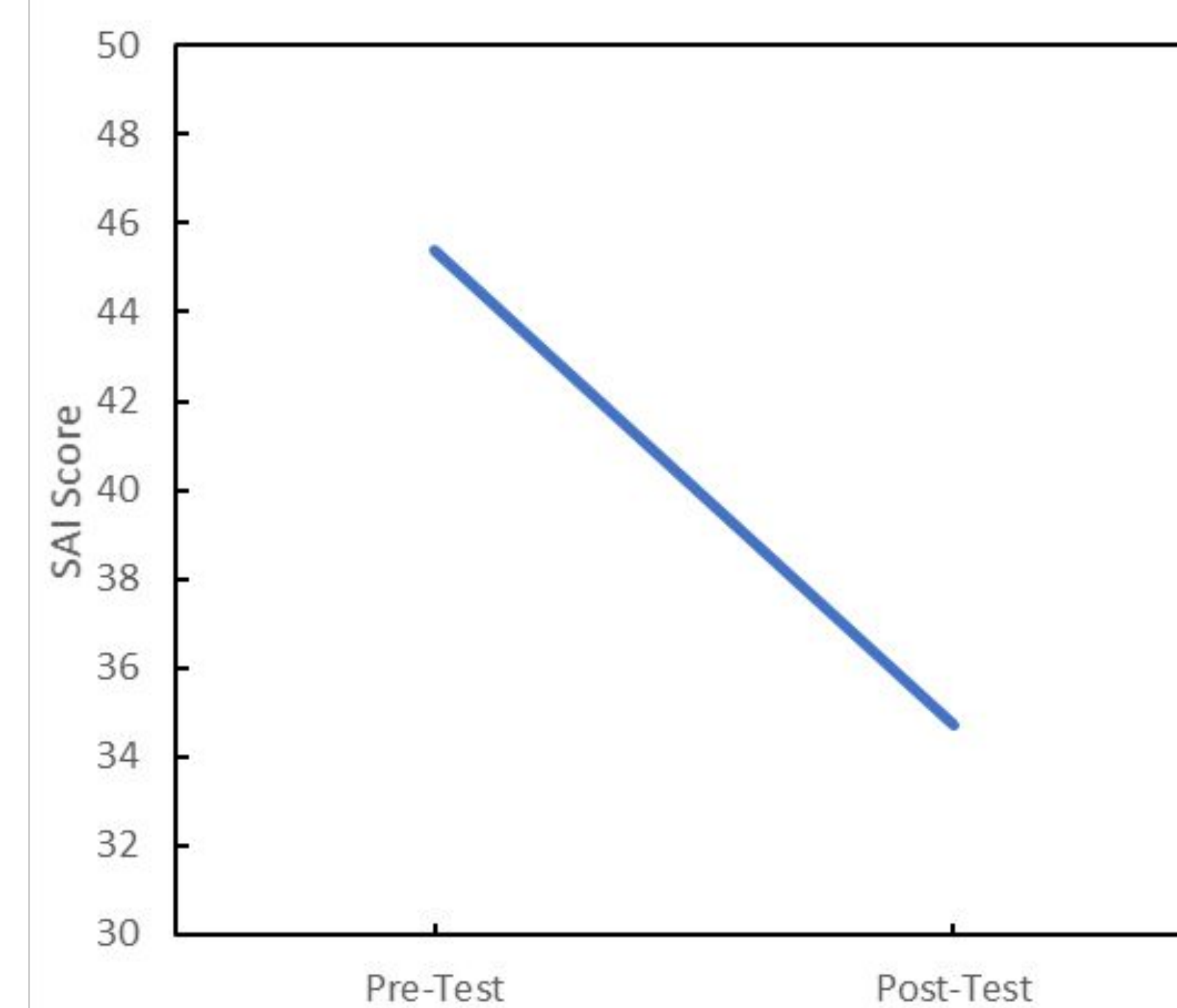


Figure 2. *State Anxiety Inventory*

"The 'stillness' stayed with me even after I was finished praying"

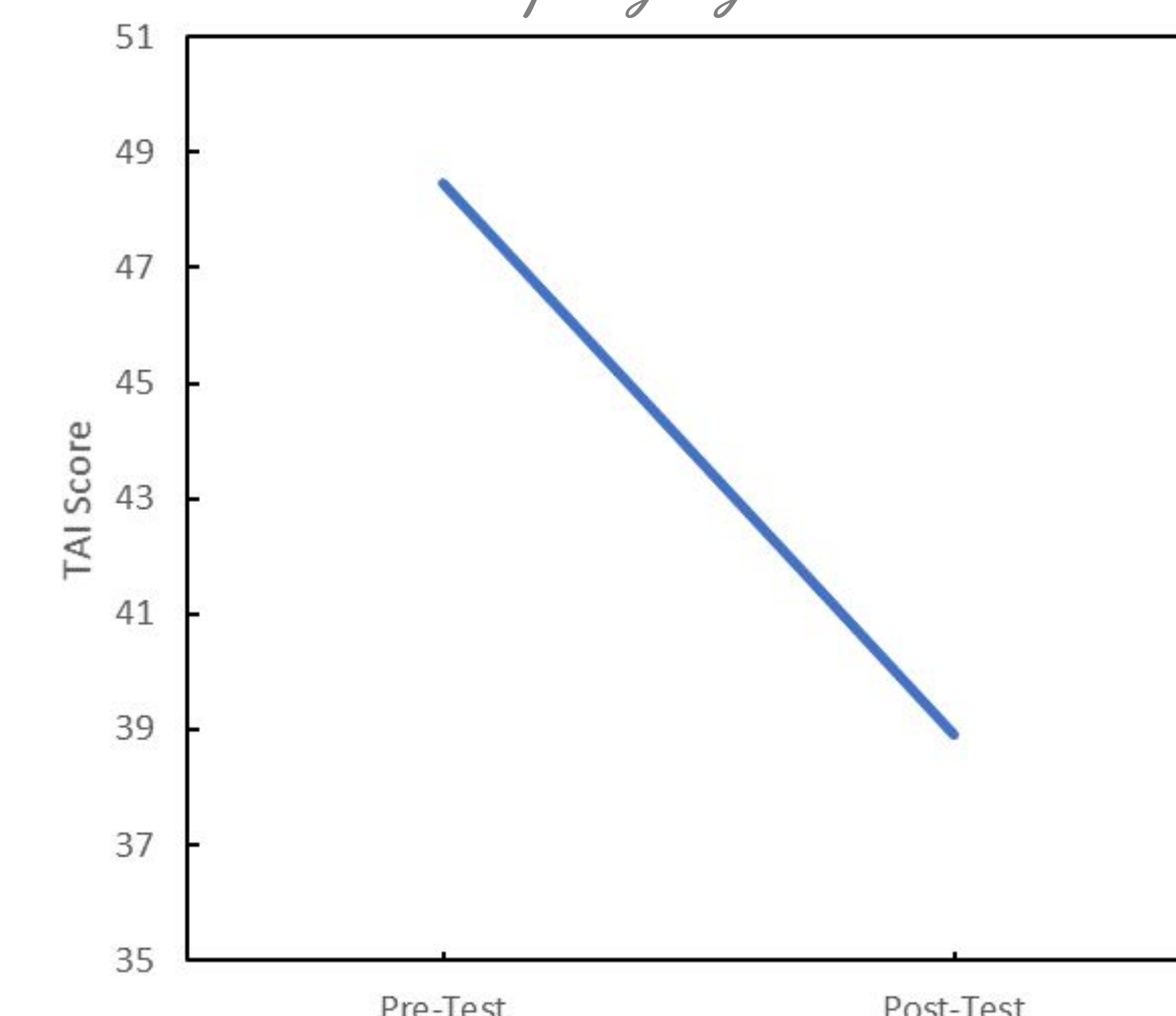


Figure 3. *Trait Anxiety Inventory*

"It gave me freedom from myself"

Results

All 3 measures of everyday stress showed significant differences following the 7 week centering prayer practice. PSS measures showed a significant difference ($t(df)=5.21, p<0.00$), and the size-effect was very large (Cohen's $d=1.02$). SAI measures also showed a significant difference ($t(df)=3.97, p<0.00$). The size-effect for the SAI was medium (Cohen's $d=0.74$). TAI measures showed a significant difference as well ($t(df)=4.36, p<0.00$), with a large size-effect (Cohen's $d=0.85$). Qualitative data obtained from the participants showed some interesting patterns. Only 11 participants (42.31%) reported having heard of centering prayer prior to enrolling in the study. At post-test 24 (92.31%) of students reported learning or being surprised by some aspect of centering prayer. Students had a positive experience of centering prayer, 18 (69.23%) participants said they wished to continue practicing centering prayer following the study.

"It forces me to stop trying to take control of a situation by thinking"

Discussion

Centering prayer reduced everyday stress following a 7 week centering prayer practice as hypothesized (Ferguson et. al, 2010; Waelde & Thompson, 2016; Asbill, 2015; Wacholtz & Pargament, 2005). Universities should consider encouraging contemplative practices—such as centering prayer—among students to help develop their resiliency. By comparison to mindfulness and Eastern meditation, which has recently seen an explosion of interest (Waelde & Thompson, 2016; West, 2016), Christian contemplative practices like centering prayer have received little attention. Further research needs to be done on centering prayer.

"The discipline of silence and expectancy in the presence of God is one I would like to continue to cultivate."