

Sarah

Mindfulness has opened up a whole new world of possibilities; it woke me up to life. I came from a very poor and tragic place, I was in a women's refuge, isolated and very alone, with poor self-esteem. I found it difficult just to leave the refuge, felt very ashamed and saw no future in my life. I just felt doomed to failure, and expected life to be bleak and full of disasters.

Mindfulness connected me back with my emotions and thoughts, showed me why I felt the way I did and why I think the way I did. I stopped rejecting myself, started listening to needs, emotions, and myself, and started the walk back to being me again. It helped to ground me, to realize what was important in life, and helped with anxieties so that I could face people and the world again and stop being afraid of what 'might' be 'out there.' I learned to change my perceptions of life. Where once I would have left my home on a windy, rain-swept day thinking 'what a miserable day,' I now started to appreciate the rainy days, and could see these as beautiful in their own way and quite essential. This is a metaphor also for how I started seeing my emotions and thoughts. We often do not like having what we perceive as negative thoughts and emotions, and as such fight them or ignore them; this is what causes conflicts and blocks us from what we truly are, need, and can be in life. Mindfulness is about being quiet and paying attention to this voice within.

I have recently undergone training in counselling and psychotherapy techniques, and have also started work with a local mental health charity helping to support other people on their road to recovery. I am also training in art at university, perhaps combining art and counselling as a therapy.

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Mindfulness

I remember Sarah arriving for the first week of her programme; she portrayed both vulnerability and determination in those early moments. Arriving had obviously been a great effort and was subject to great deliberation. As she sat in her chair alongside eleven other participants, her fragility played out by lowering her eyes as if to explore in every detail the contours and patterns of the floor. To arrive at Week 1 of the Living Mindfully Programme had clearly been a difficult journey.

The words that Sarah uses to describe how mindfulness has impacted upon her life may perhaps hold the key to what mindfulness actually is. Phrases such as 'opening up a whole new world of possibilities', and 'mindfulness woke me up to life' signify some kind of transition or emergence from a state of unawareness, and a certain degree of hopelessness. In relation to Sarah's description, it is useful to reflect on Ellen Langer's (1989) evaluation that mindfulness could be depicted as the opposite of mindlessness, where attention is focused elsewhere and behaviour is automatic, without any awareness of one's actions, including a preoccupation with memories, plans, or worries.

The word mindfulness is an English translation of the Pali word *sati* meaning awareness or skilful attentiveness (Gair & Karunatilake, 1998). Over 2,500 years ago, Pali would have been the language used by the Buddha when he began to teach the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. If we study these teachings and familiarise ourselves with Buddhist psychology, we will find mindfulness as a core component. Within the Buddha's teachings there is a statement that is both wise and extremely thought-provoking: that assertion is that suffering is a natural part of human existence (Bodhi, 2010). If we look more closely at this we discover that some of our suffering is existential, we are all subject to birth, sickness, old age, and death. However, we often find that difficulties in life are more personal and self-imposed by nature, and can be influenced by past conditioning, present circumstances, or any number of

interweaving factors. If we learn through mindfulness to relate to positive, negative, or neutral experiences with less reactivity, we may then lessen the impact of those difficulties, especially those that are tinted with automated, judgemental, and critical thinking. Throughout the wealth of research, books, and articles relating to mindfulness the words 'awareness' and 'attention' are scattered like leaves on a blustery autumn day. Explanations of what mindfulness is are in abundance, but for the sake of argument the following has been chosen for its clarity, and simplicity:

Mindfulness is an open and receptive awareness of, and attention to, what is taking place in the present.

(Brown & Ryan, 2003)

This moment-by-moment awareness involves paying careful attention to our thoughts, feelings, emotions, and bodily sensations in an accepting and non-judgemental way. So many of our experiences can be viewed through the lens of reactivity, driven by conditioning and habitual patterns learned from previous experiences as we move through life. We can find ourselves living on autopilot, or lost in daydreaming as we resist the here and now, perhaps disengaging from reality to search for something deemed to be more interesting. Both can be said to be distractions from the actuality of the present moment, and are the opposite of mindfulness (Germer, Siegel, & Fulton, 2013).

Making a choice to cultivate the skill of mindfulness through regular practice is an option that is open to anyone; however, it does require an element of discipline and it can be challenging. The good news is that it is not something to acquire, but rather something to rekindle, it is already within us, and it is part of being human. There are moments in life when clarity and awareness arise naturally, a fleeting glimpse of what it is like to be fully conscious, completely aware of what is presenting itself in the moment. These moments unfortunately are short-lived and are soon replaced by daydreaming, stories, remembering, or imagining. Introducing mindfulness offers the prospect of learning to expand and sustain periods of awareness; the meditations that are practised regularly can promote a gentle exploration of what is actually happening in each moment, rather than what may be being projected as reality. This may facilitate the unravelling of familiar patterns and past conditioning that may have locked in unawareness, thus creating an ignorance of the present moment.

If practice is sustained then a wider perspective of what is actually happening can be established, including a realization that thoughts about the past or future are simply memories or projections, and the content of those thoughts are not manifesting in this moment. This stance of stepping back and observing can bring a more responsive approach when

attending to arising thoughts, sensations, and emotions; it can help to create choices, rather than the automatic reactions that sometimes trigger as experiences unfold.

The attitudes brought to mindfulness practice are of great importance. This is emphasized by Jon Kabat-Zinn, who suggests that the significance of the seven attitudinal factors of mindfulness constitute the pillars of mindfulness practice, and should not be underestimated (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). It is, therefore, worth taking a moment to reflect on these in more detail.

Non-judging

It is perhaps fitting that non-judging is listed here first, as navigating our way through the judging mind can be a real challenge.

How often do we find ourselves reacting harshly and judging our experience? It can feel like the actuality of the moment is being experienced through layers of ideas, opinions, likes, dislikes, good or bad, so that everything seems tainted, or snap decisions are made based on past experiences. The judgemental mind can sometimes dominate our thinking to the extent that we become anxious or struggle to cope, pushing away unwanted thoughts and feelings. To 'be with' our unfolding experience without judging requires a more compassionate and kindly attitude, a willingness to understand what is unfolding. Can we take the role of an impartial observer to our experience in each moment, whatever it happens to be? Not making a positive or negative evaluation of what we are seeing, feeling, thinking, but simply watching it. If non-judgemental awareness can be cultivated, then the arising of clarity and wisdom will hold the authenticity of the moment.

Patience

To be fully engaged in the present moment requires a great deal of patience, the moment cannot be hurried along to something more interesting, no matter how hard the goal is pursued. When the attention is focused on the breath in mindfulness practice the mind will naturally wander away, venturing into the past or future, or caught up in worries or planning, as if it has lost patience with the breath, and needs to find a more stimulating topic. Just as the attention is returned to the breath, time after time, so awareness of what is unfolding right now is returned again, and again. If the skill of patience is to be developed, it will require perseverance, curiosity, acceptance, and an arising

of wisdom, an understanding that everything must, and will, unfold and develop in its own time.

Beginner's Mind

Bringing beginner's mind to mindfulness practice requires that we view our experience as if for the very first time. Often in life we cloud our view of events by bringing our past experiences, beliefs, and habitual thinking to help us understand what is happening, rather than seeing things as they actually are. It is helpful to remind ourselves that every moment is a brand new moment that we have not witnessed before. Are we able to suspend judgements, opinions, and perceptions that arise, as well as our tendency to have a closed mind, in favour of exploring each moment with fresh eyes? Instead of 'knowing' and pre-empting the content of the moment, can we just allow the 'don't know' mind to take residence in the mystery that sits in each unfolding moment? In the mind of an expert there are limited possibilities, however, in beginners mind the possibilities are endless.

Trust

This is perhaps a difficult attitude to describe in words, as it is a very intuitive and a felt sense of trusting one's own experience. If the grip of judgemental thinking can be loosened, then a degree of autonomy, liberation, and resourcefulness may arise. Trusting that learning to be mindful is a process, and that the natural wisdom of the body and mind can be relied upon, just like the flow of the in-breath and the out-breath, can cultivate an attitude of trust in ourselves and in our abilities.

Non-striving

In meditation there is nothing to achieve, no end result, we are simply paying attention to the arising of our experience from one moment to the next. How different this attitude is to how we tend to function in today's result-driven society. We rarely do anything that does not have a purpose or is not aimed at achieving a goal or helping us to reach a destination. Letting go of striving and allowing things to be as they are without any expectations is both challenging and liberating. The attitude of non-striving or non-doing requires being with whatever is arising without the need to change or fix, not trying to get somewhere else, but rather being with the experience.

Acceptance

It is often said that to truly change you must first accept yourself as you are right now, so an attitude of kindness and compassion towards oneself would seem to be imperative if we are to bring acceptance to our mindfulness practice and daily lives. Bringing acceptance to one's experience is a very positive and potentially transformational act. It is not resignation, accepting things just as they are, even if that is contrary to how we would like them to be, is a wise course of action, an action that creates choices. There are many things in life that are very hard to accept, yet from a standpoint of acceptance can come the first steps of action, recovery, or moving on.

Letting Go

Our inclination to attach to pleasant experiences and push away unpleasant ones can be a very automatic reaction; the attitude of letting go is the opposite of this tendency of clinging or grasping. By allowing ourselves to let go of thoughts and feelings that arise, whether we experience them as pleasant or unpleasant, and endeavouring instead to observe them as they arrive and leave is a significant practice. It holds the potential for developing the ability to avoid being caught in attachment or aversion, and see clearly what is present.

Cultivating the seven attitudes of mindfulness in meditation practice and in daily life requires incorporating additional attitudes to help sustain motivation and commitment on this challenging journey of personal insight. There will be many setbacks and moments of despair and frustration along the way, and it is important to hold these experiences in a vessel filled with kindness and compassion, and realise that these too are simply an experience arising in this moment.

Mindfulness Interventions

Over the past five years more than three thousand people have attended the Living Mindfully Programme, all have been referred by a healthcare professional to help with a variety of psychological and physiological issues. However, without the pioneering work undertaken by Jon Kabat-Zinn it could be argued that the progress made in the mindfulness field would not be where it is today. Since the inception in 1979 of Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR), the availability and diversity of mindfulness programmes has expanded beyond all expectations. MBSR was originally used in a behavioural medicine setting for patients with chronic

pain and stress-related disorders, where the initial research into the effectiveness of the programme showed significant reductions in pain, anxiety, depression and self-reported medical symptoms (Kabat-Zinn, Lipworth, & Burney, 1985). The core curriculum of MBSR was later incorporated into Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) as an adaptation for preventing relapse in adults with previous episodes of depression (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). There are other therapeutic approaches that incorporate mindfulness training, notably Dialectical Behaviour Therapy, a treatment for borderline personality disorder (Linehan, 1993), and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, used predominantly for reducing anxiety (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999). It is important to note that although reference here predominantly concerns participants who have been referred by a healthcare professional, learning mindfulness skills is not purely the domain of healthcare. In recent years we have seen the evolution of mindfulness in the workplace, with Google's innovative (Kelly, 2012) 'search inside yourself' mindfulness programme perhaps leading the way. Conversely, if a list of companies now offering mindfulness for staff worldwide were to be compiled that list would be substantial. Leadership programmes, mindfulness coaching, and, more recently, education are all exciting areas of development that would not just benefit the individual, but perhaps hold the potential to influence society as a whole. It is not surprising given the plethora of research suggesting that mindfulness enhances focus, concentration, decision-making, memory, as well as overall mental and physical well-being, that both individuals and organizations should show an interest (Dunn, Hartigan, & Mikulas, 1999).

The importance of establishing research around mindfulness-based programmes is not in question; however, the experiential nature of these programmes and the unfolding journey that participants embark upon can be difficult to express in words or analysis. It is not uncommon for participants to describe their reason for continuing to practice mindfulness as purely intuitive, a feeling that it is important. They talk about making wiser choices in life, and creating space in which to respond skilfully to experiences. This is often referred to as using the 'wise mind' or, as described by Joseph Goldstein, practising mindfulness can be 'the gateway to wisdom' (Goldstein, 2013). This arising of wisdom and insightfulness is also evident in the comments made by participants on feedback forms at the end of a programme. Collecting information from the groups we work with allows us to understand the unfolding rationale and the experiential nature of this type of training. If we can gather both qualitative and quantitative data wherever possible this information can guide the development of existing and future interventions in this growing but embryonic field.

Emotion Regulation

The relationship between mindfulness and emotions and the regulation of emotions is an extensively researched area. It is generally acknowledged that mindfulness has an impact upon the awareness and labelling of emotions, on how we experience those emotions, and on the intensity of positive and negative emotions that are experienced (Roemer, Williston, & Rollins, 2015).

Attending a mindfulness programme and learning the associated skills that emanate from regular practice can provide a two-step pathway to enhancing the ability to regulate emotions. As thoughts and emotions have the capability to control our actions an increased awareness through mindfulness may be a beneficial aid to staying well. The two-step pathway is as follows:

- 1) competence at noticing when thoughts are spiralling in an unwanted (depressive, anxious, stress-based, etc.) direction; and
- 2) the ability to disconnect from the emotional 'weight' of thoughts and/or from the cognitive 'weight' of emotions and direct attention to a neutral accepting observation of the physical sensations of the body.

Developing the skill of 'sitting with' thoughts and feelings (and symptoms) in mindfulness practice is likely to broaden and expand the range of emotion-regulation strategies that one has (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002).

Mindfulness and its Effects upon Well-being

An ever increasing body of research continues to support the theory that attending a mindfulness programme can produce benefits in both physical and mental health, thereby improving overall well-being (Carmody & Baer, 2008). If we agree that psychology conceptualizes 'well-being' as autonomy, competence, self-acceptance, personal growth, and relationships, then it is therefore plausible that mindfulness may impact upon emotion regulation by increasing one's ability to observe and accept cognitive and affective events by learning to detach from them. If the attention is gently returned to the present state of the body and the breath, then the impact upon psychological well-being may well be positive. The results from this could include increased feelings of competence, and an ability to 'stay with' unpleasant mental events and sensations and reduce 'experiential avoidance'. If an awareness of recurring themes and images emerges, then this may lead to a degree of self-acceptance,

a self that endures beyond the temporary ‘weather’ of passing emotional states and thoughts (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002).

Incorporating mindfulness into daily life can unlock the complex nature of our conditioning and habitual thinking, and allow the discovery of a more authentic self. This may create a shift into what we perceive as motivating and rewarding, such as personal goals, values, self-improvement, career, and relationships. It may also instigate a new approach to what is actually important, based on authenticity, intuition, and compassion, rather than on necessity or need. It is this unfolding process that makes mindfulness and coaching such an intriguing proposition.

With this in mind, it is interesting to read the comments from participants who have completed the Living Mindfully Programme and have sustained a mindfulness practice for some time. The comments have been coded using the categories autonomy, competence, self-acceptance, personal growth, and relationships. The comments were collected as part of a research evaluation of the Living Mindfully Programme over a four-year period (Mitchell & Heads, 2015).

Autonomy

The comments in this section mirror to some degree the definition of autonomy, which is defined as independence or freedom, and an ability to self-govern. The individuals here appear to be exercising mindfulness as a way of managing symptoms, patterns of thinking, feelings, and behaving:

‘I make wiser choices as a result of my mindfulness practice.’

‘(I make a) conscious effort to slow down, live in the moment.’

‘I would just like to say that mindfulness has changed my life for the better. I am proof that this programme can be a healer for anyone suffering.’

‘I am more aware of the onset of anxiety and likely to do something about it. I prioritize my well being. I am more confident and relaxed and less likely to dwell on past events or fret over current ones. When I do become anxious I feel able to cope with it. I have had no further bouts of depression.’

Competence

The following observations relate to the ability to self-soothe using mindfulness and continued plans to practice as a means of effective, on-going self-care:

‘It seems to be helpful when I am in a downward slope.’

‘My practice is part of my daily life. It is important to me as it helps me slow down which cultivates awareness and presence.’

‘I believe I have survived a rather painful transition in my life, and the mindfulness programme came along at just the right time. I am a happier functioning human being, and feel more at ease with my body and myself.’

‘The programme saved me when I was feeling desperate. I am more focused and can relate to my mindfulness practice in stressful situations.’

Self-acceptance

‘Sitting with’ and being present with experiences, just as they are, can create a growing sense of ‘self’ that endures beyond thoughts, emotions, and sensations. Participants often report a process of getting to know oneself, exploring preferences, and intuitive reactions to people, situations, and experiences. This may well lead to developing more confidence in life choices, a positive outlook, and a general feeling of being able to cope with life in a more efficient way.

‘I am more aware of things that may be affecting my mood such as unhelpful thoughts.’

‘I am more likely to reflect and then respond to a difficult situation rather than a sharp reaction that I would regret later.’

Personal Growth

Responses in this category are frequently related to developing compassion not only towards oneself, but also towards others. A sense of gratitude, values, and a positive approach to personal goals is also evident:

‘Mindfulness enabled me to recover from a very stressful working life. It demonstrated to me that practising mindfulness could bring balance into my life.’

‘It has been a very positive experience, attending the programme has enabled me to cope and manage my life with a solid sense of self-awareness.’

‘I have found attending the programme and learning mindfulness to be extremely beneficial, my practice is now an integral part of my life.’

‘When I first started my mindfulness course I was in a very difficult place, I was depressed, and had very low self-esteem. I could not sit still as my mind was constantly racing, causing me distress and anxiety. Learning how to be still and paying attention to my breath has allowed me to slow down. Eventually I began to see positive elements of my life, and accept myself. This was my starting point for self-development.’

Personal Relationships

‘I incorporate mindfulness into my daily life, its my first task in the morning. I feel very good, positive, optimistic, relaxed most of the time, and happy in my relationship.’

The participant’s comments suggest that mindfulness practice has a positive impact upon well-being, and also seems to have a life-enhancing effect regardless of the psychological or physiological issues the individual may have. It could perhaps be described as a deeper understanding of the authentic self, a more intuitive approach to life’s choices. It is not uncommon for participants to make major transitions in their lives after a period of mindfulness practice. These have included a change in direction around career, sometimes returning to a profession or following a vocation previously discarded. It could be a change of environment, or a more positive approach to health, relationships, or just life in general. It might be that by bringing acceptance and kindness to oneself, and to wherever we happen to be in our lives brings a new-found sense of optimism, and a willingness to move forward with curiosity and a degree of confidence. However it may also produce an intuitive sense that it is time to make changes, to begin a journey that is a truer reflection of who we are. Sometimes those changes are not immediately obvious; the first steps have been taken but the path is unclear. It is precisely this situation that suggests that the integration of mindfulness and coaching holds great promise.

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