

MINDING YOURSELF WITH MINDFULNESS

This article is a simple introduction to the potential use of Mindfulness in your work as a guidance counsellor, with all the challenges and rewards that it brings. It is my hope that it may encourage you to support yourself so that in turn your job of caring for others becomes a daily pleasure. Mindfulness is very experiential and though based on theory it needs to be experienced and embodied before it can usefully be passed on to others. If you can start to feel the benefits of being more mindful, moving through the day with less tension, less agitation and stress, those around you will feel the fruits of your efforts.

Aim

In this short piece I would like to introduce you to Mindfulness in the hope that it will encourage you to:

- Practice some simple Mindfulness exercises
- Live with more ease in your body and peace in your mind
- Manage life's stresses with more ease
Find new ways of relating to problems
- Investigate the benefits of Mindfulness in your work
- Explore ways of using Mindfulness with those that you counsel.

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness can be explained in many ways and Jon Kabat Zinn, who has very much exposed the benefits of mindfulness, describes it as, '*Paying attention, on purpose to the present moment in a non judgemental way.*'

It is a movement away from living in auto – pilot to a more conscious way of being. Mindfulness encourages us to turn towards experience with interest and

curiosity – it is like being an impartial witness to what is going on for us.

Mindfulness is not just another thing to have to do, in time it becomes a way of being – being with things as they are in this moment with less reactivity. Mindfulness has a quality of kindness to it – kindness and gentleness.

Mindfulness is not paying more attention, but paying attention differently.

History of Mindfulness

The practice of Mindfulness goes back 2500 years to its roots in Buddhist philosophy. It has been practiced by people for thousands of years and its value has been well documented. Today Mindfulness is being introduced into many areas of healthcare and education.

There are specific applications of Mindfulness that have been researched and developed by leading specialists - Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) being the most widely researched. The practice of mindfulness is increasingly being incorporated into areas of education, health and psychotherapy.

Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction was developed over 30 years ago by Dr Jon Kabat Zinn in the University of Massachusetts in USA. The MBSR programme was originally designed to help people suffering from stress and stress related disorders, and it is now seen to be equally useful for a range of disorders including anxiety, fear, pain, cancer, depression and eating disorders.

MBCT was more recently developed through the research and work of Zindel Segal, Mark Williams and John Teasdale. All three work in the field of Clinical Psychology/ Brain Science/ Cognitive Behaviour, and have developed the programme specifically to help people with depression. The research available is very encouraging and the use of MBCT in the treatment of depression is now available in many centres.

MBCT courses have been adapted for other groups for example for people with cancer, chronic pain, eating disorders, insomnia and general anxiety disorder.

Why bother being Mindful?

Mindfulness allows us to see with more clarity the things that cause our stress and dissatisfaction. By paying attention we can begin to see that much of our stress and difficulty arises from wishing that things were other than they are, and not allowing things to be as they are. We constantly try to tweak life to make it better, and this becomes an

endless project that in itself brings further stress. Moving towards a greater acceptance for life as it is, in fact, brings more peace to the mind and ease to the body. Mindfulness helps us to see our challenges and to learn to relate differently to them rather than feeling we have to change things in order to be happier. With greater awareness we develop confidence to turn towards difficulties with an interest in what is going on, rather than the usual avoidance of anything unpleasant that arises in our experience. Then without effort things change.

When we have a diminished awareness of the present moment with the body doing one thing and the mind off somewhere different, it creates problems for us through automatic reactions and behaviours often driven by fears and insecurities. When we operate without awareness, the mind has the chance to run down well-worn tracks, often of negativity, without being noticed. One criticism, a memory, a sad song, can trigger something in our mind, and very quickly the thoughts start to embellish this, reinforce it, and before long, we experience states like anxiety, worry, stress or depression. Fragments of negative thinking are less likely to be noticed when in auto-pilot.

Exercise

PAUSE AND RELAX

Any time we pause we interrupt movement – mental (thoughts), physical (the body) and emotional. It helps us to step out of our automatic rushing forward.

Pausing helps to stop the urge to be “doing” and allows us to drop into the place of “being” – just for a moment. It encourages us to meet experience, not through how we think things are, but through feeling what is actually happening. Pausing can be created in the midst of turmoil.

It takes a lot of effort to stop the habitual forward push of the body and mind. It takes energy to steer ourselves out of deeply worn ruts of habit – mental, physical and emotional.

When taking the time to pause, many things may be revealed to us – joy, happiness, sorrow, anger and more. By remembering to pause we are not continuing to add to old habits but instead undermining them.

Pausing is not about time, it is about mindfulness.

Relax is an invitation to calm down, to notice our stress and to choose ease.

It is a chance to see what is tense, what is contracted and to soften, and open to the tension, the holding, the discomfort. It is simply allowing things to be as they are, adding nothing extra, just letting go into this moment, gently and kindly. No grasping, no backing away, no clinging - simply staying in this unfolding moment.

When we meet our experience with acceptance, strong emotions and thoughts lose their power as they are not acted upon out of reflex.

You might choose to pause and relax at specific times, for example before:

- Meals
- Reading emails
- Washing up
- Going outside
- Starting the car
- A session with a student.

Or you might choose to pause at any time that you notice that you feel speedy, anxious, stressed, or irritable.

Experiment by choosing one task you do every day and make a commitment this week to pause before beginning this activity.

Instructions for Pausing

PAUSE – Simply stop what you are doing right now.

Check to see what it feels like to let go of the forward momentum.

What does your body feel like at this moment?

How does your jaw feel? What are the sensations like in your shoulders? How is your chest? Is your belly soft or hard?

Is your mind still buzzing?

Can you experience any sense of lightness having let go of the forward push?

Simply observing. No criticism.

Now that the rush of habit has been interrupted, something fresh can arise.

A SURPRISE!

Mindfulness Training

Most Mindfulness courses are delivered to groups. This makes it very cost effective.

Courses are taught over an 8 week period. Each week there is a 2 hour class which is a mixture of didactic and experiential material. Essential to participation in the weekly class is a commitment to daily home practice. CD's are provided for this and are based on the core mindfulness practices of a body scan (a relaxed awareness exercise), a mindful movement routine (simple yoga style movements) and a sitting meditation. All take about 40 minutes.

Some of the topics covered in a standard Mindfulness course are:

Automatic pilot – breaking the habit of living life in auto pilot.

Moving from the busyness of “doing” to the stillness of “being”.

How to face, with greater ease, the challenges that arise in daily life.

Identifying and remedying habitual thoughts and behavioural patterns that keep us stuck in dissatisfaction.

The important connection between thoughts, sensations in the body and emotions.

Learning to respond to situations rather than automatically reacting to them
Meditation techniques

Ways to work with negative moods, emotions and thoughts

Turning towards the difficulties rather than ignoring them.

Use of Mindfulness in Schools

Mindfulness can most successfully be introduced into schools by someone that embodies the practice. Stress, depression, anxiety, low self esteem and worry are all features of both students and staff alike. Mindfulness helps to improve concentration, lower anxiety and encourages better emotional, physical and mental awareness. By learning to tune into present moment experience regularly we can start to see the warning signs of speeding up, rumination starting, fear arising, anxiety setting in and moods shifting. With early information it is possible to prevent emotional, physical and mental states from escalating into something that becomes out of control.

By paying attention to the physical sensations in the body (tension, contraction, holding, butterflies) emotional states (fear, sadness, worry, anxiety, guilt) and mental activity (negative thoughts, rumination, mind racing, self criticism) we can see moment by moment the effect our inner and outer environment have on our well being. We can see more clearly what is contributing to our well being and what is undermining it. It is often small things that assume great status if not attended to. Mindfulness helps us to become more familiar with what makes us feel alive and what pulls us down.

We can learn to see thoughts and emotions as passing events rather than identifying with them as accurate readouts of reality and it then becomes easier to break habitual thought patterns and emotional reactivity.

Some simple questions such as: “Is this supporting my well being? Or “Is this undermining my well being?” can help us to see more clearly what is helping and what is harming us.

Mindful awareness can be used both as a prevention and an intervention.

Exercise

EATING AN APPLE MEDITATION

Sitting down to do this exercise and eating the apple as though you had never seen or tasted an apple before.

Start by holding the apple in your hand and looking at it, noticing all its features – the colour, the size, the texture and the weight. Doing this with the idea that you are really curious about the entire experience.

Then gently and slowly bring the apple up to your mouth and start to eat it carefully, paying attention to the first bite, being aware of the taste, the saliva being produced in your mouth, the sensation of chewing, of swallowing. Then lowering your arm and exploring the apple again with your eyes. Allowing a pause before the next bite and noticing what happens in this pause. Do you want to hurry up? Do you think this is pointless? Is your mind flitting off to other things or is it right here with this

apple? Simply noticing the whole show – thoughts about the experience, the commentary, the sensations in your body and the emotional tone of your being. Continuing bite by bite until the apple is finished.

Did you stay totally connected to the experience of eating or did your mind wander a lot? Were you wondering if you were doing it right, or wishing you could speed up, or thinking about where you bought it or what you should be doing instead of this exercise?

This short exercise gives you a snapshot of what goes on in your mind in a short period of time!

Exercise

BREATHING MEDITATION

Find a quiet place at home and turn off your phone and make sure you will not be disturbed for 10 minutes.

Sitting quietly on a chair with your spine straight and eyes gently closed, dropping your shoulders, relaxing your face and softening your belly.

Bringing your awareness to the physical sensations in the body by noticing where your body is in contact with the chair, your feet in contact with the floor. Spending a couple of minutes exploring where your body makes contact with things.

Then becoming aware of the fact that you are breathing. Just noticing the gentle rhythm of the breath as it enters and leaves the body. Feeling how your chest gently rises as you inhale, and falls as you exhale. Allowing the rhythm to

continue without effort. Noticing any sensations associated with the rising and falling of the chest as you breathe. Simply allowing the breath to come and go as it will.

You will notice that after a while your mind will wander away from the breath. See if you can make a mental note that your mind has wandered, and then gently and kindly bring your attention back to the breath. Each time you notice that you have wandered away from the breath is a moment of mindfulness - you have been aware of where your mind was in that moment.

Trying not to judge your experience - how well or not well you are getting on. The important thing is to continue for 10 minutes, simply watching the breath and the activity of the mind with an open, kind curiosity.

Exercise

MEDITATION ON YOUR HANDS

Sitting in a quiet place and resting your hands on your thighs. Closing over your eyes and allowing your body to soften into the chair. Allowing your breath to flow in a gentle rhythm and relaxing any tense muscles, dropping your shoulders and softening your belly.

Then bringing all your all attention to your hands resting on your thighs.

Noticing the temperature, the very gentle touch of your hands resting on your legs and simply being aware of the details of the sensations in your palms and fingers. Noticing any throbbing, tingling or blood flow. Staying with the sensations of touch, with interest. Simply being curious about your hands in this moment. Right now there is nothing else to do and nowhere else to be.

USEFUL CONTACT

There is ongoing research in the area of Mindfulness and Education but to date the main research has focused on Mindfulness as a therapeutic intervention for physical, emotional and mental health problems.

Websites

Mindfulness for Schools Programme in UK www.oxfordmindfulness.org

Mindful Awareness Research Centre (MARC) www.marc.ucla.edu

The Mindful School Programme www.mindfulschools.org

Mindfulness to Transition Year students see www.ananda.ie

Two education and research centres are www.bangor.ac.uk/mindfulness and www.umassmed.edu/cfm

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AUTHOR

Catherine Sutton has been working in the health care/ education field for over 30 years. She originally trained as a nurse and midwife and spent a number of years working in Papua New Guinea, running a small bush hospital. While there she became interested in preventive health care.

She studied Shiatsu in London and worked as a Shiatsu therapist for many years and co- founded the Irish School of Shiatsu in 1991. She is also co-founder of Slainte Pobal – an organisation bringing health education to women in communities of disadvantage.

Catherine has had a keen interest in meditation for 25 years and has done many retreats in silence, both with groups and alone. She has gained great experience from these.

A number of years ago she recognised the value of integrating her personal meditation/mindfulness practice into her work and with this in mind she completed an MA programme in the University of Wales in Bangor studying Mindfulness Based Approaches to Healthcare and Education.

For many years Catherine has been facilitating Mindfulness courses – Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction and Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy - for groups and individuals.

Her main interest is in bringing Mindfulness into the area of mental health, de stigmatising mental / emotional health problems (depression, anxiety, fears, phobias, psychosis, and bi-polar disorder) and encouraging those under pressure to include self-care and self- compassion in their daily life through basic mindfulness training.