mindfulness

FOR LIFE

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Mindfulness as a foundation for cognitive therapies

Is mindfulness just about paying attention in a present-moment, non-judgmental way? Well, yes and no. Yes, it's that simple, but further than that, mindfulness helps us to pay attention to our own mind and that means that over time we come to understand a little more about how it works. Our mind isn't as different from other people's minds as we like to think, so coming to understand our own mind better helps us to understand other people better as well.

Psychotherapy means therapy for the mind; cognitive means the way the mind thinks (that is, cognitions are thoughts). As we practise mindfulness formally and informally over time we come to understand a little more clearly what thoughts are driving us and what effects these have, such as driving us to mindlessness. It's like when the lights go on we start to see things that were going on in the dark before.

One woman, for example, at about four weeks into a mindfulness course, started to notice how repetitive, angry and judgmental her internal conversations tended to be, whether directed at herself or others. She had never really seen it before, how repetitive it was, how unfair the judgments tended to be, nor how divisive an influence it was between herself and others. Because she noticed it in a mindful kind of way — as an interested observer and not by judging it — her thoughts from this stage on started to have a less significant influence on her.

One man working in a demanding professional position noticed how tense he tended to get over the things that were going on in his imagination. When something happened his mind would jump to a conclusion, his imagination would swing into overdrive and he would get worried, angry or apprehensive, depending on just what his imagination was doing. When he started to notice this, he created the opportunity to get back in touch with present-moment reality and respond to the situation, moment by moment, on its merits.

Another woman noticed, almost like a blinding flash one day, the thought going on in the background that had been the source of nearly all her stress and negativity: 'I'm not good enough.' She had never noticed it before but once she did she saw it popping up all over the place, causing tension and fear

where none was due. She didn't need to think, 'I am good enough'; trying to replace the positive for the negative can be a bit of an exhausting tug of war in itself. Although the thought was deeply rooted in her past and upbringing, all she needed to do was notice the thought when it arose and not keep reinforcing it by getting taken in by it now. The past was being healed automatically and naturally by her choice to give her attention to the present moment and not have to relive and re-suffer the past.

Jon Kabat-Zinn's MBSR (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction) was used as a foundation for MBCT (Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy) developed by the psychologists and researchers Mark Williams, John Teasdale and Zindal Segal under the guidance of Jon Kabat-Zinn. These two models for applying mindfulness are the two most widely taught and researched around the world. Other increasingly popular forms of psychotherapy such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) are very much based on mindfulness principles.

Basically, mindfulness teaches us to think differently. In the following sections we will summarise some of the key principles in the change of thought and perspective that mindfulness offers us. This is abridged from the complete *Stress Release Program* written by one of the authors back in 1991, when developing meditation as a basis for stress management for GPs, through Monash University and the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners.[3]

Perception — seeing what's really there

Our 'stressors' are the people, situations, events or circumstances that trigger our stress — our fight-or-flight response. If a venomous snake is just about to strike us and we get ready to run away then that seems like a pretty useful activation of our fight-or-flight response, but even an imaginary stressor will activate this response if we take our imagination to be real. Consider, for example, that the peak period for heart attacks is early Monday morning, around wake-up time. The day hasn't even begun and the biggest demand so far is to throw off the blankets. Generally no stressors in the form of venomous snakes have slid out of the wardrobe, and yet we start reacting to all the stuff our mind starts projecting, about what might or might not happen in our

imagined day at work. If there's a heart attack waiting to happen then this is a pretty good trigger for it.

Reducing stress mindfully isn't so much a matter of replacing a stress-laden perception with a falsely positive one, such as looking at life through rose-coloured glasses or trying to pretend that that venomous snake isn't really there, or that it really loves us (at least enough to not bite us). If we're looking at a snake then hopefully we'll see it as a snake and respond accordingly before we get bitten. But if we see that the snake only exists in our imagination then there's no need to run or hide, or even to worry.

So, taking imagination to be real is the first distortion of perception that comes with unmindfulness. Reality is a piece of cake to deal with compared to our imagination taken to be real. We can always respond appropriately to reality, but responding to our imagination is like fighting a phantom that never gives up.

Sometimes what we're reacting to really is there, but we may perceive it to be bigger or more threatening than it is. A mouse, for example, is just a mouse, despite the fact that we may perceive it as a man-eating monster and scream and panic. The physical discomfort that we actually experience in the dentist's chair is generally minor compared to the level of intense suffering we produce for ourselves. In fact, we have probably had that root-canal mentally a thousand times before we ever get to the chair. If pain isn't amplified through the lens of fear and anticipation, or if it's experienced as a part of something we willingly participated in like a sporting or other voluntary recreational activity, then it would barely raise an eyebrow, let alone our pulse. The remedy to all this unnecessary suffering is to simply pay attention to what's actually being experienced, rather than blindly react to what we project on to situations.

When we are unmindful our thoughts unconsciously colour the way we see the world and its events. A simple comment from someone can be turned into a major criticism if it's distorted and exaggerated by our insecurities and self-criticisms. Vanity can be equally unmindful and blinding and can stop us from seeing the fairness of someone's criticism or the deceptiveness of someone's flattery. The most unfortunate thing is that, being on automatic pilot as we often are, we may be totally unaware of this whole process. From the perspective of mindfulness, pleasant misperceptions, expectations and

mental projections are just as distracting and problematic as unpleasant ones are. In mindfulness, all we ask is to see things as they are — no more and no less.

Letting go — freedom through non-attachment

There's an old story about how monkeys are caught. Pots with narrow necks are buried in the ground and inside them hunters place something tasty to eat. Then they wait. The monkeys soon discover the tasty treats and slip their hand into the pot, grasp the contents, and then try to extract their fist laden with goodies. Unfortunately for them the fist is now too wide to fit through the mouth of the pot so they scream, believing themselves to be trapped. Voila — a trapped monkey! Trapped by its mind. From our human position it seems obvious that if the monkey would just let go it would be free. Silly monkeys! But perhaps, for most of our life, we are like the monkeys, with the way we hold on to things and won't let go.

To relax, mentally or physically, we don't have to 'do' anything. We merely have to stop doing something — holding on. In this way mindfulness is about 'non-doing'. Not holding on could be called detachment or non-attachment. Non-attachment is often misunderstood: it's not about getting rid of, cutting-off from, or denying what's going on, it's about not being bound to it.

It is an understandable mistake to think that sensations, thoughts and feelings, particularly the ones we don't like, have a hold of us. Mindfulness may well show us that it's the other way around — *we* have a hold of *them* — because we identify ourselves so closely with them. The tension we experience, like the sense of being trapped and out of control experienced by the monkeys — is because we latch on to and pull against what is taking place. But all these experiences come and go if we let them. If we hold on then we feel imprisoned, influenced and even dominated by them. Control, on the other hand, naturally restores itself when we let go of attachment.

Experiences in the form of situations, sensations, thoughts and feelings come and go all the time, whether we want them to or not. This is the natural

and inevitable flow of life. If we forget that simple truth then we will soon be in for some problems. Some experiences we engage with, and others we don't, but being bound by our experiences is an unconscious habit, not a necessity. It feels like a great relief to let go, not because it's foreign to us but because it's natural. We become so habituated to tension that we have come to believe that tension is our natural state. We were not born anxious, preoccupied and distracted — we have managed to think our way into those states over a long period of time.

Some practical examples will help illustrate what's meant by 'holding on' and 'letting go'. Consider, for example, that, consciously or unconsciously, we have a self-image. It could be that we think of ourselves as being smart, kind or resilient. When that image is challenged — say we do something we see as stupid — we soon realise how attached to our ideas about ourselves we are. This will be experienced as tension and accompanied by emotional pain, mental agitation, embarrassment, fear and all the rest. If we're a little less attached we may acknowledge the stupidity and be thankful for the useful if uncomfortable lesson we've learned. To preserve our smart self-image in the face of evidence to the contrary, we may desire to cover up the blunder, or justify it, or try to win the argument whether we're right or wrong, rather than be thankful for being corrected.

The language we use is instructive. We don't tend to say that we *consider* an opinion, rather we *hold* an opinion. If we hold on to it tightly then we're much more likely to feel attacked if it is challenged, or deflated if it is proved wrong. This is fertile ground for conflict and loss of objectivity. Although this habit is common and happens to us all, if we are a little more mindful, we have the opportunity to choose whether or not we want to keep repeating it. If we really notice the effect we will likely choose a different way of relating to our thoughts.

We often hold on to desires whether they're useful or not. For example, we might find ourselves wanting to eat more than we should and then experience the pain that comes with over-indulgence. We might try to maintain a larger mortgage than we can comfortably afford and then find that our life gets dominated by it. We can cling to relationships even when they are toxic, possessions that just clutter the house and memories — to the extent that

we can't be content in the present moment. We might determinedly stick to a fixed plan about how an event should go, even when circumstances unfold in such a way that makes it impossible. Clinging to the pleasant stuff can be just as problematic as clinging to the unpleasant stuff.

There are some common misconceptions about letting go. First, that letting go is about not responding to life, even when a response is called for. Mindfulness helps us engage and respond when we need to, but by first having let go of the tension and resistance that often gets in the way of that response. Second, that letting go is about giving everything away. We don't have to literally give everything away, only our attachment to it. Mind you, if we give up the attachment then we might find that we do literally give a few things away as a result. Third, that letting go means getting rid of what we don't like; for example, 'If I let go of a depressive feeling then it will go away.' It might, but it might not, or at least it might not for a little while. If this assumption is working away in the background then we can get very frustrated when the thing we don't like is still there. Fourth, that letting go means becoming inert. On the contrary, in letting go we tend to become more able to respond freely and without the limiting effects of anxiety, worry or preconceived ideas. Like the monkey who learns to let go, we're free again.

Acceptance

There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.
William Shakespeare, Hamlet

An important principle related to letting go is acceptance. Whatever is happening is happening. There's no denying that. If at one moment there is comfort, peace, success or happiness then so be it. Enjoy it but remember that it will change. Equally, if there is an experience of pain, anxiety, failure or depression then so be it. Be patient in the presence of it and remember that it will change.

Life is constantly trying to teach us that experiences — pleasurable and painful — come and go whether we like them or not. As it says in 'the serenity

prayer' — 'God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference' (Reinhold Niebuhr) — we should try to change for the better what we can change, but wisdom lies in being able to recognise the things we can't change and therefore accept them. A crucial factor in how much impact an experience has on us is the attitude we bring to it. If we're mindful while drying the dishes then it might help us not to break them, but if through inattention we break a plate then non-acceptance will only make us feel worse — it won't change what's happened and it won't bring back the plate. It's wiser to use our time and energy repairing mistakes and then, because we're learning to be more mindful, resolve to pay more attention. Inattention costs.

Dealing with pain — or emotional discomfort for that matter — is another example. If our body has chronic pain then being at peace with it isn't easy but it will greatly reduce the suffering associated with it. In fact, our emotional reactivity to the pain merely makes us ever more vigilant for it and sensitises the brain's pain pathways to register more pain. Likewise with emotions: if a depressing thought or feeling comes to our awareness we may find that the non-acceptance of it leads to a cycle of rumination that merely imprisons our attention on it all the more.

Conversely, with acceptance and non-reactivity comes a growing ability for us to let the unpleasant physical or emotional experiences flow in and out while being less moved by them. This also allows our attention to gently come back to the present moment. One university student with a long background of depression found this to be the case after a few weeks of patient practice. The less reactive she was to these thoughts the easier it was to let them come and go. In one of those breakthrough moments it clicked that her thoughts had no grip on her. She said, 'I believed that because I had a depressing thought I had to think it. Now I realise I don't. I don't have to do anything about it, in fact the less I do the better. It's been very liberating for me.'

Presence of mind

The present moment is the only moment that's real — the past and future aren't. The past and future never actually exist. We may habitually think they

do, but they are actually always outside the reality of our actual experience, although in the present we may notice that the mind imagines and projects into what it imagines the future to be, or what it thinks the past was. Yes, the residual effects from past thoughts, feelings, actions and decisions may be with us now, but those effects are also only ever observable and experienced in the present moment, which is timeless, and therefore eternal.

One of the authors (the mindful one?) had an experience of being apprehensive about a significant public speaking engagement the following day. 'Will it go well or will it go badly?' While standing at the sink washing the dishes he thought to himself, 'I hope I'm in the present moment tomorrow.' All of a sudden, as if waking from a dream, it seemed ridiculous that practising absent-mindedness in the form of worrying about the future was going to be a good preparation for being present. 'If I want to have a chance of being present tomorrow I ought to practise being present now, which means paying attention to the dishes!' Life became simple again and a state of mind was being cultivated that might actually be useful if the speaking engagement actually eventuated the following day.

When we say that someone has 'presence of mind' we are describing a state of being focused, responsible, brave and capable. When we deal with a challenging situation with presence of mind we notice that a feeling of calm is a conspicuous part of that state. On the other hand, if we take time to investigate what's going on in our mind when we experience anxiety, fear, depression or worry we will notice that this involves the mind unconsciously slipping unseen into a future that hasn't happened, or a past that has already come and gone. In the meantime, our focus goes from what's happening here and now, so we don't enjoy the present moment and our experience of it is clouded by our mental projections. We take our imaginary world to be the real world, and the real world doesn't get a look in. When our attention is on the here and now, our thoughts of the past or future aren't in the picture and therefore can't cause the emotional upset that they often do. Absent-mindedness is the opposite of presence of mind. If we are absent with or without leave then we are not here, now.

In our re-created past we tend to replay old events like replaying old movies: often embellishing them, ruminating on regrets, re-experiencing old hurts and criticising ourselves for old mistakes. Have you ever had an argument

with a family member in your mind while you were driving home? There we are, outraged at all the things the person is saying to us (in our imagination, of course) and then in we go with all guns blazing. Then we wonder: 'Where did all that come from?' Maybe we've been on the receiving end of someone's fertile imagination? When we mistake imagination for reality we're merely arguing with ourselves and projecting our unreality on to others. If they have been unconsciously doing the same thing to us then we may find that when we arrive home we walk into a barrage of criticism and blame over which we feel unfairly accused. That's not a good recipe for successful communication!

In our imaginary future we tend to imagine problems that never happen. This is sometimes called 'catastrophising'. As Mark Twain said, 'I've had a lot of catastrophes in my life, and some of them actually happened.' We concoct anxiety and fear, dwell on rigid ideas about how things must turn out, and pre-judge situations and conversations long before they happen, if they ever happen. Then we often become anxious about how to get things to go the way we assume they must, and feel frustration or grief because they don't go according to those preconceived ideas. We prejudice events, which simply means that we judge them before they happen.

Mindfulness quickly teaches us how often the mind is distracted with thoughts about the past and future. In fact, if we have even a few moments in the present we should be very proud of ourselves — after a few weeks of practice we may realise that it's the exception rather than the rule. Realising more fully how much of the time we are not present is not a matter for concern — it's a sign of progress!

'What about planning and preparation?' you might ask. Planning and preparation can be as much present-moment activities as anything else can. If we plan or prepare then it's useful to do it with attention, and not with worry or rumination. Planning and preparation are present-moment activities, but when we notice ourselves worrying, and all of the physical effects that come with it, we can be confident that the mind has slipped out of the present moment into what it assumes the future will be, and it will be off-task to boot.

Being in the present is something we tend to avoid. Living in the 'here and now' doesn't mean becoming a hedonist who doesn't care about the results of actions, nor does it mean not caring about the future, or having no

plans or goals. It does mean that we let the future come to us moment-by-moment as we practise dealing with each moment on its merits, patiently directing our attention to what the moment requires.

A student of one of the authors had the experience of being so preoccupied about a future exam that he couldn't focus on the study required to prepare for it. Does that make sense? We can be so anxious about the outcome of an interview that we go into it tense and unfocused. Who knows, even if we get the job we want so much, time may reveal that we were better off without it. A sportsperson can be so concerned with the outcome of a match that they lose concentration on the game or behave in an unsportsmanlike way that they will later regret. We can be so preoccupied about all the work we have to do that we feel exhausted before we have struck the first blow. We can keep replaying a past unpleasant argument to the extent that we distort current interactions and relationships to the point where we can't move on.

When we're not present we're unable to clearly see and understand the thoughts and feelings that actually motivate our actions, and their consequences. The question is — are we going to keep living under the tyranny of our past or our imagination about our future, or are we going to live the life we are meant to be living, now?