

Service, Support and Success

The Direct Support Workers Newsletter

Mindfulness: Making Moments Matter



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Let's Get Started

Many people have heard about the concept of mindfulness, but are unsure what it means, and why it might be helpful in their lives and/or the lives of the people they support. Technically speaking, mindfulness is defined as paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment to whatever is going on and not judging it – in fact, actively accepting it – no matter what. Mindfulness-based practices have become increasingly popular, not to mention effective, in increasing happiness and compassion, helping manage chronic physical conditions, and helping manage and treat chronic mental health conditions. In essence, when people talk about “living in the moment,” mindfulness is the concept to which they are referring.

Formal mindfulness practice, or exercises, typically involve having the participant get into a comfortable position – either sitting, lying down, or even standing and walking (there is such a thing as walking mindfulness practice) and then traditionally starting the practice with the ring of a bell. The bell alerts the participant to the present moment and is intended to awaken them from the regular waking slumber that most people experience on a day to day basis (otherwise known as autopilot). Then the person pays attention to something – one thing – often the breath coming in and out of the body, wherever that is most noticeable.

As the participant maintains mere awareness of the breath, he or she notices that thoughts, feelings, and urges begin to impinge on the experience of simple awareness of one thing. When that happens, the participant patiently notices that their mind has drifted to one of these other phenomena of the mind and body, then purposely redirects the attention back to the breath. Over the course of 5, 20, 40 minutes (however long the practice is intended) a person's mind will wander innumerable times. That is the nature of our minds – seeking out more “interesting” things to occupy itself. Buddhists refer to this as the “monkey mind” which is always chattering away. Bringing attention back to the breath with determination and patience is part and parcel to mindfulness practice – catching oneself as one drifts and bringing attention back.

At the end of the practice, a bell will ring again (I use a timer) and the practitioner commits him or herself to trying to maintain that frame of mind as they meet their day to day activities. During the exercise, one can maintain focus on a variety of things – the breath, the mind, the body, sounds, etc... There are more complex yet powerful forms of mindfulness meditation geared towards increasing compassion for oneself and others and cultivating equanimity.

I have been teaching and practicing mindfulness meditation off and on for the past 15 years or so (on a daily basis for the past year) and wanted to share my experiences so those who are interested might gain a better understanding of a concept that can be difficult to describe, let alone understand. Here's what my experience with mindfulness has been, in a nutshell...

It All Starts with the Bell

The bell rings and I think “now what?”

I sit and pay attention to my breathing like the recording says. I find that I can do that for around five seconds before my mind starts chattering at me – everything from “am I a Buddhist now?” to “cool – I'm meditating” to “this is kind of boring.” Finally my mind throws me the curve ball... “what's the point of this?”

That was approximately 15 years ago when I first heard about the idea of mindfulness. It was packaged in a therapeutic approach to helping people diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder (a very serious psychiatric condition characterized by extreme difficulty controlling emotions resulting in extreme behaviours, such as self-injury arising out of extreme emotional reactions or as a direct result of those emotions). At that point in my life, I was working as a clinical psychologist in a hospital-based mental health program and working with people who experienced great suffering. The idea was to help these people accept the suffering they were experiencing through this idea of mindfulness so that they could then do something about changing it.

I thought I kind of understood what mindfulness was then. It took me a few more years to really get it.

Maybe the answer was right in front of me all along if I just opened my eyes.

Mindfulness and Suffering in the Developmental Sector

Nonetheless, approximately a decade later I found myself working with people who have developmental disabilities with mental health difficulties and difficulties controlling their behaviour. They often experience suffering (did I say suffering is an unavoidable human condition) and, to make matters worse, they often can't make sense of why they are suffering or that it is related to a mental health condition. In the absolute worst case scenario – their suffering might be caused by an environment that has them secluded, bored, without meaningful relationships or interesting and enjoyable activities that make their lives fulfilling. At the same time, professional support staff too often feel frustrated by the competing demands and limited resources at their disposal, and may label the people they support as “noncompliant” when they may be in fact experiencing the same frustrations.

I figure that the suffering of these people – the support staff as well as the people they support – is just as valid as anyone else's suffering and is made worse by the feeling that they aren't being taken seriously and aren't able to do what they would really like to do - and that it isn't fair and things shouldn't be happening the way they are.

The Bloom of the Present Moment

Once again, I thought back: you've got to accept what's happening now before you can do anything to change it. In fact, sometimes simply accepting things as they are *in this moment and every subsequent moment as the moments unfold* can be enough to find more happiness and even joy. This means experiencing life as it unfolds – the relationships, the suffering, the happiness, the sometimes inane and inexplicable... or as Jon Kabat-Zinn referred to it – the full catastrophe of living.

Clinical Applications of Mindfulness in the Developmental Sector

I discovered I wasn't alone in these thoughts. In fact, once again, I discovered that I was behind the curve. I found out that there was a researcher and clinical psychologist named Nerbay Singh who, along with his family of mental health professionals (seriously – he has many of his family members working with him doing research and clinical work with people who have an intellectual disability) were helping people learn to control their behaviour using mindfulness techniques, as well as helping the people who were supporting them.

I was blown away.

I did a little more reading and discovered that he had been teaching mindfulness techniques – meditation focused on paying attention in the present moment to one's experiences, taking an accepting stance, no matter what one's experiences were – to family members and support staff of people with intellectual disability who had difficulty controlling their behaviour. Singh's course involved a five-day workshop where he taught the basics of mindfulness to the participants, showed them mindfulness meditation exercises such as the one described above on a daily basis for at least 20 minutes, and an exercise to calm the mind which was to be used whenever the participants of their service were about to engage in aggressive behaviours (see "Mindful Staff Increase Learning and Reduce Aggression in Adults with Developmental Disabilities," Singh et. al. 2005 from *Research in Developmental Disabilities*).

This research demonstrated that in those residential settings (family homes, group homes, etc.) where the caregivers were regularly practicing mindfulness techniques, the incidence of challenging behaviours *exhibited by the people they were supporting with severe/profound levels of intellectual disability* decreased as their caregivers were more able to adopt an attitude of acceptance of reality as it unfolded moment by moment without judging it. The caregivers reported that they felt that they were able to maintain a state of calmness and resilience in the face of the "full catastrophe of living" that they were faced with daily – both at home and at work.

Singh also demonstrated in a number of articles how people with intellectual disability were able to learn to adopt this mindset whenever they noticed themselves beginning to get distressed, leading up to when they would normally behave in a way that interfered with their lives and their happiness. If they practiced imagining the times that they felt that way – the urge to act in a way that interfered in their lives – and then practiced a simple mindfulness technique (paying attention to the sensations in the soles of their feet), then over time they were able to do it automatically when they started becoming distressed. The specific protocol for this technique was described in the November 2007 edition of *Behaviour Modification* and was entitled, "Mindfulness Training Assists Individuals ... Maintain Their Community Placements." It perhaps didn't change what upset them in the first place,

but it helped them be more resilient and not make matters worse by behaving aggressively towards self or others, or doing some other impulsive behaviour that they felt bad about after.

The findings by Singh and his group have been repeatedly replicated, though with small samples of participants. However, these studies demonstrate how both care providers and participants of service can benefit from mindfulness practice.

Accept What Can't Be Changed Right Away?

There have been a lot of things that have bugged me over the past six years of trying to help people with developmental disabilities, their caregivers, and the professionals who try to help them when challenging behaviours occur. I have seen a lot of situations that made me frustrated because I thought we could all do better and that, to some extent, at some times, we have moved from one type of institutional care to another. On the other hand, I have seen people have opportunities, freedom, choices, and happiness that they might not have otherwise enjoyed had our system not evolved. I also realized, having worked in the developmental sector back in the 80's, that there were happy people then as well.

We are pretty resilient as a species – developmental disabilities or not – and we can make lemonade out of lemons under some of the most atrocious conditions. People find ways of dealing with suffering all over the world. Amidst squalor and poverty in war-torn regions of the world, children still play and families still enjoy each other's company around the evening meal. I think that acceptance that things are *as they are* - realizing that moments of suffering come and go like the tides - allows people to find joy, peace, and meaning even in some of the worst conditions.

Present Moment Awareness: In the Midst of Suffering, a Ray of Sunshine

A couple of years ago my daughter was diagnosed with Stage IIB Hodgkin's Lymphoma. It hit her, and us, like a ton of bricks when the diagnosis was first made, but reality being what it is – we quickly accepted it and dedicated ourselves to getting all the treatments recommended by her excellent care providers at the Toronto Hospital for Sick Children. In the midst of her second round of marathon chemotherapy, we took the ferry to Toronto Island just before sunset - just for the heck of it. None of us had ever taken a ferry ride. My daughter was feeling pretty gross from the chemo that day, but was fully present in those moments (doing something new like travelling on a ferry has a way of waking us up from our normal slumber of automatic wakefulness). As the sun was setting behind the buildings which were reflected off of Lake Ontario on our return trip from the island, my daughter observed that were it not for the cancer, we would never have had the opportunity to experience that moment – together... as a family.

In the midst of suffering, when the present moment is noticed, more often than not (whether that moment involves suffering or not) a door can open to all sorts of wonders. Suffering is then tempered like salve on a wound.

So... What is Mindfulness?

In my travels as a psychologist, as well as a father, husband, son, someone with their eyes not always fully open, unsuccessful wannabe-comedian, and in all the other roles I have played throughout my life, I finally get what mindfulness is – down in my gut where we learn things and don't forget them. I wish I could put it into words for you, but I think you need to discover it for yourself. It's not about the outcome; it's about the journey of discovering for yourself.

How to Find the Answer for Yourself

I can tell you that you may want to start by taking some time, every day if you can, just to stop what you are doing. What you are doing normally may involve buzzing about in automatic pilot wishing that things were different than they are right now or thinking about how, if you just had a little more money, you could buy that thing that would make you happier or make your life easier. Automatic pilot is often characterized by ruminating about moments passed or worrying about moments yet to unfold.

Just take a seat (or lie down, or stand – whatever body position you can maintain for a few minutes without fidgeting around). A bell ringing can awaken you enough to ask “now what?” You can then start being aware of what is happening *right now* and this is often facilitated by paying attention to something that happens in every moment of your life (literally): your breathing. Become aware of your breathing as it naturally unfolds – one breath right after another – in the same way that each moment unfolds with each breath. Keep your awareness on this unfolding of your breathing, riding the waves of your breath. You don't need to worry that you are doing it right – you've been breathing your whole life. You also don't need to think about your breathing – it happens automatically (if you didn't already notice).

After a while (often a very short while), your mind will start chattering about all sorts of interesting or trivial things. It may even throw you that curve ball: “what's the point of this?” When that happens, don't give up. Just bring your attention back to the unfolding of every breath as your awareness of your breathing shepherds you from one moment to the next.

So What's the Point of This?

If you practice taking the time to do this frequently enough, you'll find that you can get into this state of mind during your typical day when you catch yourself in that automatic pilot mode (you may need some reminders). Instead of your breathing, you'll be more aware of your life unfolding from moment to moment. If you don't give up, you might even find yourself in this state of mind more often than not, and catching yourself when your mind gets carried away and you start telling yourself that your life would be better, or you would be happier, if... When that happens, you'll know, in your gut, that while that might be partially true, you would be missing a lot of your life unfolding, blemishes and all, being frustrated about that moment not arriving soon enough (if at all).

You might even find that life can be pretty good as it is and that you already may have missed a lot of it.

It took me around 15 years to start getting the hang of it. It wound up that to find the answer, all I ever really needed to do was open my eyes and see it in the moment. It was in front of my eyes all along.

Some Resources for the Beginner

The fact is we are all beginners. However, if you want a place to start learning about mindfulness, Jon Kabat-Zinn's "Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life" is a great place to start. It can be found at Amazon.ca or your favourite bookstore (or library). For guided meditation practice, Kabat-Zinn has a CD set entitled "Guided Mindfulness Meditation Series 3" which contains some short exercises. The best way of learning about it is starting to practice it.

Finally, Google can be a great source of information about mindfulness. There are literally thousands of articles related to mindfulness practice, including references to articles about the effectiveness of mindfulness practice in promoting physical, emotional, and psychological health. You could also drop me an email at swhite@handstfhn.ca and I'd be glad to give you some ideas.

About the Author

Stephen White has been licensed as a clinical psychologist since 1993 and has practiced in a variety of settings. Prior to that, he worked as a professional developmental support worker, then as a behaviour therapist in the developmental sector in Baltimore, Maryland. As a psychologist, he worked in private practice with families, children, and adults, in inpatient and outpatient mental health, at a chronic pain clinic, and now as a psychologist with the lead agency for the North Community Network of Specialized Care, Hands TheFamilyHelpNetwork.ca. He is also the team Psychologist for the Community Resource Team at OPTIONS northwest in Thunder Bay. He is the proud father of two adolescents and the husband to a loving wife of nineteen years who has inspired him when it comes to living in the moment with her patience and equanimity.

The newsletter can be accessed through the Hands TheFamilyHelpNetwork.ca website at:

<http://www.thefamilyhelpnetwork.ca/north-network-newsletter>

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