Mindfulness
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ORIGINAL PAPER

Mindfulness: A Way of Cultivating Deep Respect for Emotions

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Abstract The practice of mindfulness affords individuals a way of cultivating deep respect for, rather than avoiding, emotions. Cultivating a deep respect for emotions means appreciating and honoring what is unfolding moment by moment. When one nourishes whatever emotion arises, one greets it as an honored guest with an important message to deliver, rather than an enemy to contend with. In embracing and befriending whatever arises, mindfulness makes it possible for the individual to savor and realize more refined emotions. A case study—Katy's experience with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—is discussed to demonstrate how mindfulness enabled her to develop deep respect for the range of emotions she experienced as a result of her trauma and to make space for them. Specific mindfulness practices and other complementary psychological approaches adapted to her concerns helped her "override" her body memory, an important feature of PTSD, of the experience. The processes involved in the mindfulness practice enabled Katy to understand her motivations for her actions and fully realize her more refined emotions of compassion and sense of responsibility. Incorporating mindfulness in her treatment plan helped Katy cope with PTSD more effectively while she also acquired a life skill beyond learning to cope with the trauma.

Keywords Mindfulness · Emotions · Post-traumatic stress disorder · Deep respect · Honored guest

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Introduction

Emotions are complex. As noted by Ekman (2008), "emotions unite and divide the worlds in which we live, both personal and global, motivating the best and worst of our actions" (p.xii). While emotions may divide our worlds, we have a propensity to divide emotions—into positive and negative ones. Our habitual tendency is to avoid negative emotions, wishing them to go away, and attach ourselves to positive ones, hoping they will linger. Generally, psychology is geared towards helping people understand and cope with emotions, especially negative ones. Mindfulness grounded in Buddhist concepts and practices aims to help people tolerate and accept all emotions, positive and negative. In addition to understanding, coping with, tolerating, and accepting our emotions, we need to cultivate a more refined and gracious way of relating to them—one that allows us to befriend and embrace all emotions and appreciate their full impact and meaning. As therapists, we could facilitate our clients with this process by helping them to not only understand and accept their emotions, but also to cultivate a deep respect for them.

Today, the use of mindfulness with mental health and health issues has become well known through a range of mindfulness-based approaches such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (Kabat- Zinn 1996); Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (Segal et al. 2002); Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Hayes & Smith 2005); and Dialectical Behavior Therapy (Dimeff & Linehan, 2001). Mindfulness practice has also gained worldwide acceptance and recognition through the works of many prominent researchers including Davidson et al. (2003) and Siegel (2007), and research that has emerged from the ongoing dialog between his Holiness, the Dalai Lama and neuroscientists organized by the *Mind and Life* Institute.

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Numerous studies relating to mindfulness have been published, attesting to the efficacy of using mindfulness in the mental health area (Khong & Mruk 2009).

Understanding Mindfulness

What is mindfulness? Kabat-Zinn (2005) describes mindfulness "as moment-to-moment, non-judgmental awareness cultivated by paying attention in a specific way, that is in the present moment, and as non-reactively, as non-judgmentally and as open-heartedly as possible" (p.108). Mindfulness is a way of being rather than doing (Khong 2009). The aim of mindfulness is to be become continually aware of our thoughts, feelings, and emotions; label them objectively; and accept them for what they are without needing to change or justify them (Gunaratana 1991). In this sense, mindfulness is emotion-friendly, as being mindful makes it possible for individuals to fully realize a range of emotions and feelings in a non-confrontational, neutral manner (Khong 2004) and to learn to respond to them authentically and whole heartedly.

Although, for the most part, Western psychology tends to relate to the mind, brain, and body (and heart) as discrete entities, this is not the case in most Asian philosophies and cultures. In fact, the Chinese character for mindfulness incorporates the word *heart* and *mind* with the word *now*, so mindfulness means to be present now with one's heart (body)—mind, the heart–mind being one integrated whole. If we relate to emotions primarily with the mind, there is a tendency to think about emotions and appraise them cognitively ("I think that I am angry"). This can trigger a lot of internal dialog, often unrelated to the feeling of anger itself ("I don't have friends"). On the other hand, if we relate to emotions with the heart–mind and are aware when we sense anger arising in us ("I am feeling angry"), we can learn to be present with this feeling (e.g., *pulse racing, tightening of the stomach*) without automatically triggering thoughts unrelated to anger. The ability to be mindful of and befriend the bodily sensations associated with emotions is an important initial step in learning to cultivate deep respect for emotions.

Being mindful involves maintaining meta-awareness of what we are experiencing in the body (heart)–mind moment-by-moment. This sense of meta-awareness itself is neutral—it is not infected with what is being experienced. For example, the awareness of anxiety itself does not produce anxiety. Mindfulness helps individuals become aware of what is happening, thus reducing the tendency to get involved in or ponder what may happen in the unfolding story. Instead, individuals experience what is happening within themselves. In short, mindfulness enables individuals to cultivate a neutral, objective, and open attitude toward their present reality, instead of infusing this reality with emotions and discursive thinking.

Cultivating a Deep Respect for Emotions

According to *The Collins Dictionary* (Gilmour et al. 1995), respect for one's feelings means adopting "an attitude of deference or esteem," "appreciation, honour," and "pay [ing] proper attention or consideration to" those feelings (p. 822). Cultivating deep respect for emotions involves learning to pay attention to, embrace, and respect what unfolds, so that we are able to discover hidden qualities and meanings in these emotions, giving rise to greater opportunities for self-reflection and self-knowledge. An analogy for this way of relating to emotions is the experience of diving into a lake or sea. Although not apparent from the surface, the deep waters may be still and calm, containing complex subterranean life that is full of richness, beauty, and promise, or fraught with danger.

The attitude that we can adopt toward our emotions is captured well in the poem, *The Guest House* (Rumi, 1994) by Rumi, an eighteenth century Persian poet and Sufi mystic. According to Rumi, each day, human beings, like a guest house, are confronted with new arrivals—"joy, depression, meanness" (p. 41). He recommends we welcome each arrival as an honored guest "the dark thought, the shame, the malice, meet them at the door laughing and invite them in" (p. 41) so that we remain open to the subtle message each guest may bring. This poem highlights the idea that, like uninvited visitors, emotions occasionally come upon us unexpectedly. Thus, trying to prevent emotions from arising is futile and stressful—like trying to control the waves from running over the sand. Instead, we should focus on our attitude and response to these unsolicited guests. By cultivating deep respect for our emotions, we can learn to welcome each emotion as it arises—as an honored guest with an important message to deliver, rather than an enemy to contend with.

The concept of savoring (Frija & Sundararajan 2007) provides a good theoretical framework for, and points to the role of mindfulness in, cultivating this attitude of deep respect. According to Frija and Sundararajan, the term "savoring" (a Chinese concept) emphasizes "the self-reflexive awareness in which the intentional object of emotion is the experience rather than the experienced object" (p. 229). The idea of savoring involves the experience of dwelling on the flavor, appreciating it as a whole as well as for the individual characteristics it contains. For example, savoring is akin to tasting food instead of just eating it.

Savoring one's emotions helps develop "experientially engaged detachment," that is "detachment born of contem-

plation" (Frija & Sundararajan 2007, p. 231), which enables individuals to realize refined emotions. According to the authors, savoring can help transform coarse emotions into more refined ones. Coarse emotions are characterized by "distinct bodily upset, overt behavior manifestations … relatively simple event–emotion relationships" (p. 227). In contrast, refined emotions are felt more deeply and do not tend to manifest themselves in overt behaviors. They may be imbued with meanings beyond the immediate implications of the occurring event. For example, coarse emotions tend to result in simple outcomes such as to avoid, attack, or flee, etc. The experience of refined emotions are generally multifaceted, allowing an individual to expand one's appraisal, experience meanings to the full, forestall impulsive responding, exercise restraint, or take responsive actions (Frija & Sundararajan 2007). In my view, coarse and refined emotions are not superior or inferior relative to each other. However, refined emotions are generally more subtle and less accessible, unless we learn to be mindful of them.

To cultivate deep appreciation and engaged detachment, we need to quiet our minds and tolerate being with each emotion fully in order to grasp its wider meanings. In this regard, honoring, savoring, and mindfulness play complementary roles in cultivating deep respect for emotions. Honoring encourages us to welcome the emotions; savoring invites us to engage with them in a meaningful way; and mindfulness provides us with the practice, self-discipline, and skills for doing so.

Case Study

Practical applications of the concepts and practices discussed in the previous sections are illustrated by Katy and her experience with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This case study demonstrates how various mindfulness practices, along with complementary psychological approaches adapted to Katy's concerns, helped her manage and overcome PTSD.

At the time of the incident, Katy was a maternity nurse at a postnatal ward of a Sydney hospital. She was finishing her evening round, checking on the mothers and babies and ensuring all visitors had left the ward. Fatimah, a young mother, had given birth a few days earlier and was being discharged the next day. She was the victim of domestic violence from Ali, her boyfriend and the baby's father. The Department of Children Services had recommended that Fatimah and the baby live with the child's grandmother after their discharge.

Ali, a young man of Middle Eastern descent, was visiting that evening and had refused to leave when visiting hours ended. Katy noticed Fatimah walking out of the ward with Ali towards the elevator. Suddenly, the baby's grandmother ran in shouting, "He is going to take the baby." Katy realized that the couple was planning to take the baby from the hospital and saw that Fatimah appeared to be a reluctant participant.

Intuitively, Katy hurriedly tried to position herself between Fatimah and Ali and advised them that they could not take the baby out of the hospital. Ali grabbed Katy and tried to push her away. A security guard rushed in to intervene, shouting, "He's got a gun!" Ali pointed the gun at Katy and Fatimah. Fatimah was very frightened and allowed Katy to take her and her baby back to the ward. Ali ran. The police were called, and the hospital went into a lockdown while they hunted for Ali. He was caught and later jailed. Over the next few days, Katy became increasingly anxious and agitated and was unable to return to work. She received short-term medical leave.

When she returned to work, she described herself as being on "speed dial," that is, constantly scrutinizing her environment and being hypervigilant. During one of her shifts, she was confronted by a man of Mediterranean origin who angrily demanded attention for his wife. This incident brought back flashbacks of the situation with Fatimah and Ali. Thereafter, she became increasingly panicky; she could not sleep or leave the house. Katy was diagnosed with PTSD and received long-term medical leave.

When she was first referred to me for therapy, Katy was highly anxious and unable to discuss the incident without crying. Although normally a quietly spoken person, she was experiencing significant anger about Ali's behavior. She explained that, since the incident, she was fearful of going to supermarkets and public places and that loud voices triggered her fears of possible confrontations. Encountering men of Middle Eastern appearance made her hypervigilant and highly agitated. She experienced frequent panic attacks and flashbacks and avoided entering the hospital grounds. Her dreams were punctuated with memories of the incident, and she worried whether she could marry her fiancée and lead a normal family life. She also lacked interest in activities she used to enjoy. Katy's symptoms, including recurrent and distressing recollections of the event, persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma, a numbing of general responsiveness, persistent symptoms of increased arousal, and hypervigilance, match those associated with PTSD (*DSM-IV*, Kaplan & Sadock 1998, p. 619).

Initially, I used a crisis treatment approach to Katy's therapy, including supportive counseling; cognitive-behavior therapy; engaging ongoing support from her partner and family; stress management and relaxation techniques; and psycho-education to help her to understand her experiences. Katy employed meditation and mindfulness

practices to help her calm down and to break the circuit before negative thoughts and anxiety became too distressing. A plan of graded exposure was also implemented, including systematic desensitization and exposure to similar natal settings in other hospitals. She was encouraged to visit the ward where the incident took place for short periods, gradually extending the duration of these visits.

Katy found these strategies helpful and was able to better manage her symptoms on a day-to-day basis. However, she was still experiencing significant residual symptoms of PTSD. For example, she would tremble when she recalled being held at gunpoint and acting as a shield for Fatimah and the baby and was unable to control her agitation. Her internal dialog highlighted her sense of helplessness and an overwhelming desire to leave the situation even though she realized there was no longer any danger. She appeared to be unable to integrate the way her mind processed her feelings and how her body was responding to the emotions. As Katy had found meditation and mindfulness practices useful in managing her symptoms, we agreed on an approach incorporating mindfulness to help her integrate her mind and body memory holistically.

For this part of the exercise, Katy was asked to select a piece of music from a meditation CD. Katy chose an instrumental piece with the sound of running water, which was played during the practice. She explained that she liked the idea of water cleansing her body of negativity. I suggested that she let her body and mind be present with the sound of water, rather than the sound of her words. Each time, Katy was aware of any emotions, feelings or thoughts, she was encouraged to bring her focus back to her breath and to allow the music to "wash" over her body. Once she felt more grounded and relaxed, we discussed the incident again. This time she was able to talk about the gunpoint episode without her previous negative somatic reactions. She explained that the mindfulness practice and music made her feel somewhat "cleansed." Katy continued using this calming exercise at home, and, as a result, was subsequently able to overcome her body memory of the incident.

Another difficulty for Katy was the continuing disquiet she felt from the realization that she could have been killed by acting as a shield for Fatimah and the baby, and she was distressed by what she perceived to be her naivety. To address these concerns, in the second half of the exercise, when Katy was feeling calmer, I encouraged her to visualize an analogous meditation image that could help her understand and appreciate the type of person that she is, in responding so courageously. The idea was to encourage Katy, through mindfulness, to cultivate a deep respect for the emotions associated with her action by practicing what Frija and Sundararajan (2007) describe as "experientially engaged detachment." I hoped that she would be able to realize the more subtle implications of her action and transform the coarse emotions of agitation and distress into more refined ones.

Katy selected from Kabat-Zinn's *Guided Mindfulness Meditation Practice CDs,* (Kabat-Zinn, Cds, Series 2) a meditation practice using the image of a mountain as an object of focus. As Katy meditated, visualizing herself as a mountain—grounded and centered, and not easily buffeted by external factors—she gained the insight that her act of shielding Fatimah and the baby was motivated by compassion and a sense of responsibility for their welfare. She understood that she was responding spontaneously to what the situation required of her as a nurse. Katy also realized that had she failed to act to protect the mother and the baby, she would have felt guilty about failing in her duty.

His Holiness, The Dalai Lama (cited in Ekman, 2008) emphasized the importance of understanding motivations that drive our actions. Accordingly to the Dalai Lama, "… without considering the … motivational level, you cannot judge right or wrong purely on the basis of physical or emotional actions" (p. 74). The Dalai Lama explained that, while a person whose actions are motivated by a sense of compassion may still experience anxiety, "deep down there is a strength" because "he or she chooses to be in that state." (p. 144). This explanation suggests that despite some negative physiological effects, emotions inspired by positive motivation can have a positive psychological impact on the individual. This elucidation helps account for why Katy's insights into her own nature proved to be so liberating and therapeutic, thus significantly contributing to her recovery. In being mindful of her inner strength brought forth by visualizing herself as a mountain, Katy was able to understand and appreciate the positive emotions that motivated her behavior.

In addition, by learning to savor and honor her negative emotions rather than avoid them, Katy developed a different understanding of her actions and feelings. Instead of chastising herself for her naivety and being in "the wrong place at the wrong time," she was able to acknowledge her actions as an expression of her authentic nature as a compassionate, responsible person. These insights had a remarkable impact on Katy. As she puts it, "It helped me to understand that I took responsibility because she was my patient. It is just me. Part of my nature and it is ok."

Katy continued to gain significant insights by using mindfulness to deal with other aspects of the incident. For example, instead of feeling anxious and hypervigilant whenever she encountered people of Middle Eastern descent, Katy realized that Ali's nationality was unrelated to his actions and that his ethnicity, although an understandable trigger for her anxiety, should not color her perspective of all Middle Eastern people. This understand-

ing of her emotions allowed her to differentiate between Middle Eastern people in general and the offender.

Katy explained, "I still react when encountering people of Middle Eastern descent but not as severely. Previously, I would move aside if I saw people like that. Not anymore. I realized that there are a lot of people of that origin, and I have to differentiate individuals not based on their race but what they do." In fact, her ability to manage her feelings of hypervigilance enabled her to interact with a Middle Eastern family sightseeing near her home.

Discussion

According to Phillips (2007), while the biological flight or fight response is natural and instinctual, when this response is blocked—as happens in trauma—the organism constricts. Phillips noted that if the constriction from the trauma continues, rage, terror, and helplessness can build up, "triggering immobility and inward collapse "and "emotional numbing, and other forms of psychological disassociation" (p.13). This is an apt description of Katy's situation. In order to counteract these affects, Katy learned mindfulness practices, which are well-suited to the process of mind–body healing, especially in relation to trauma.

According to Siegel, mindfulness practice is appropriate for this kind of integration. The human cortex, Siegel (2007, 2009) explained, comprises six layers. Layers 1–3 which he referred to as "top-down" (2009, p. 153) are responsible for the matching of current experience with prior learning. Layers 6–4, which he termed "bottom-up" (p. 153) are responsible for the awareness of sensory input from our experiences. Mindfulness practice attempts to dissolve the top-down constraints (layers 1–3) and strengthens the input from the bottom layers (layers 6–4), allowing awareness to be shaped by the flow of information merged from the two layers. Siegel notes that "when this bottom-up input is strengthened, it has the capacity to stand up to prior learning that so often constrains us. We are not imprisoned by our prior judgments and come to experience the world with fresh eyes" (p. 154).

Mindfulness and meditation practice gave Katy the internal calmness to self-regulate her emotions cognitively and somatically. In addition, she was able to detach and observe her emotions. Although she was aware of her anxiety and terror, she was not overwhelmed by these emotions. Focusing on the breath and the sound of running water helped Katy overcome her negative body memory of the trauma. By remaining still, yet mindful, Katy was able to accept and tolerate her emotional "guests" during recall of the incident. The stillness and awareness sustained through her mindfulness practice enabled her to listen quietly and remain open to the message these guests were bringing—that her body needed to accept and integrate what her mind had endured. In addition, Katy's ability to integrate her experiences and to acknowledge that acting as a shield was motivated by her sense of responsibility enabled her to accept her actions. It would appear that Katy was able, as Siegel puts it, to experience the world with fresh eyes.

While a more standard treatment plan for PTSD may have helped Katy in the longer term to deal with the trauma, incorporating mindfulness into her treatment approach gave her a life skill and a way of being that went beyond learning to cope and managing the effects of the trauma. In adopting a more refined and respectful way of dealing with her emotions through mindfulness, Katy felt empowered and has gained a greater sense of self-confidence and self-reliance in her ability to manage negative situations, feelings, and emotions, as well as life in general.

"I don't get images of the incident anymore. My anxiety is not paralyzing. I don't try and control life and my feelings as much. I just accept my anxiety will come up from time to time, and I just learn to manage them as I am experiencing them. I don't intend to change my life because of the incident. The trauma is not in the forefront of my mind. It doesn't define who I am. *I don't see myself as a victim"* [italics added].

After overcoming PTSD, Katy married her fiancée and is now the mother of a healthy baby boy. In acknowledging the major role that mindfulness played and continues to play in her life, Katy was happy to share her story. When I asked her for permission to discuss her experiences, she was forthcoming and said that, "Mindfulness has helped me to cope with PTSD and with life. I hope that it will help others as well."

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