

# Mindfulness and Self-Compassion

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### **ABSTRACT:**

Mindfulness is a core aspect in most spiritual teachings, and scientific research of the last 30 years gives strong evidence that practising mindfulness is of great value for people in a variety of clinical settings as well as in everyday life. Several benefits of a mindfulness practice are outlined. An additional quality which is often further needed when we have to deal with severe disturbing emotions is described: self compassion. Its flavour might be felt in a poem by Mary Oliver and in a concluding meditation.

Mindfulness means intentionally being aware of what is happening right now without wishing it were different. Scientific studies of the past 3 decades including recent neurobiological findings have proved that practising mindfulness is of great benefit in various clinical settings - mindfulness based stress reduction is only one example - as well as in everyday life (Germer 2005; Hanson 2009, 2011; Hölzel et al 2011a,b; Kabat-Zinn 1994, 2005; Nath Hanh 1975; Shapiro & Carlson 2009; Siegel 2007, 2010 a,b). Generally speaking, mindfulness has the quality to strengthen healthy states of mind and to weaken unwholesome states. Following Baraz and Bays I would like to outline some beneficial properties of mindfulness (Baraz 2010, 2013; Bays 2011):

### **Mindfulness - a Way to Ground Ourselves**

Mindfulness helps us to calm our mind when we are confused by grounding us in our actual experience. Coming back to the present moment and allowing ourselves to be right where we are now interrupts our ruminations about the past or future or our thoughts of what might be wrong about the present. When our mind is caught in a troubling self created movie, it can be beneficial to stop, bring the awareness to our body, take a few mindful breaths or feel the soles of our feet on the ground. This will help to wake us from negative thinking and prevents us from getting lost in judgements of how our experience should be. Thoughts filled with judgements and expectations can lead to a lot of suffering. When we can't do anything to change the facts we could try to accept the situation and respond as wisely as we can, corresponding to the so-called serenity prayer: *"God grant me the serenity to accept things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference"*.

### **Mindfulness - a Way to Feel Complete in this very Moment**

When we are mindful we do not expect our present experience to be different. We are with this moment just as it is in an open and accepting way instead of awaiting the next moment to be better. By slowing down and developing an interest in what is happening right now we are able to recognize that the present moment is complete without anything needed to be added or taken away. We can honour every moment of life as being worthy of our attention, and we can learn from the difficult ones as well

as enjoying the lovely ones. So every moment becomes an opportunity for waking up to life. When we realize that the present moment has everything we need, we might feel content, happy, and complete.

### **Mindfulness - Activating our Sense of Wonder**

By paying attention to this very moment our inborn natural curiosity is activated, a sense of wonder and awe like a child might feel it. With a "beginners mind" (Suzuki 1990) we can discover magic all around us if we take the time to notice it. How is it possible to read the word "green" and see a colour or hear the word "chocolate" and have the full taste in our mind? The problem is that we are often too much in a hurry to notice the wonders of life around us. So much of the richness in our lives often does not reach our mind. But when we slow down we increase our ability to open our field of awareness and appreciate what we experience. Then everything becomes more alive and our sense of well-being will be increased.

### **Mindfulness - Weakening the Power of our Demons**

Mindfulness purifies our negative mental tendencies and strengthens our wholesome thought patterns. When we are mindful we can recognize the demons that usually tend to contract our minds. We learn from many myths that the hero or heroine could conquer the demon or monster by calling it by its name, and we can do the same with our emotions and/or destructive thought patterns. By naming our disturbing mind states like "this is shame" or "this is hatred" we can take an important step to weaken their power. When we do not react to our troublesome mindstates with judgement or fear we stop giving them more strength. Seeing clearly the demons in our minds is a helpful tool in working with difficult emotions and in freeing our minds from suffering.

### **Mindfulness - Strengthening what is Wholesome**

With mindfulness we are more able to notice healthy thoughts and feelings of well-being when they arise. By doing so we give them more life and when we mindfully notice the energy in our limbs, the sensations in our heart and the expansive feelings throughout our being we incline our mind in that direction even more. We can find glimpses of well-being in the most quite ordinary events, and giving us permission to be aware of and enjoy

wholesome states feels freeing and relaxing.

### **Mindfulness - Acknowledging the Impermanence of all Phenomena**

When we pay attention we notice that the present moment is constantly changing. No matter how good or bad it is – it will always change. When things get rough, for instance, knowing they will pass gives us courage to be with them and learn from this experience.

### **Mindfulness - Enriching our Spiritual Life**

Mindfulness is an invitation to meet everything our life offers us with respect. In practicing mindfulness we direct our attention to this body, this situation, this moment, this place, and this is exactly where we could feel the eternal presence which we call the Divine. Being in a mindful mode enables us to honour every moment of this unique life we received, to express our gratitude for this precious gift, and to recognize the Divine in everything we perceive with the help of our senses. The Swiss author Lorenz Marti puts it this way: “Spirituality is a love declaration to the things of everyday life” (Marti 2005)

At this point let us be aware of a possible danger: trying hard to be mindful all day long could become a serious effort which might lead to a kind of “spiritual athletics”. This could narrow our mind, and diminish our state of well-being. That is why I would like to add another quality to the list of the benefits of mindfulness mentioned above: humour (cf. Metzner 2012, Wild 2011):

### **“Mindfulness” - Looking at Life with Ease**

Humour in general and especially the ability to laugh at ourselves can help a lot to keep us in a light-hearted state even when we are in trouble. A quip from the American poet Robert Frost may illustrate a humorous attitude toward life: “Forgive, O Lord, my little jokes on Thee, and I’ll forgive Thy great big jokes on me”.

The foolish mind feels free to recognize and express the truth despite all hierarchies, conventions, and limitations set up by our super ego.

Coming back to mindfulness again : A helpful device which could support us in practicing mindfulness in our everyday lives is the RAIN Model. The

word RAIN is an acronym which is composed of the first letters of the following steps (cf. Brach 2012, Baraz 2010):

R: Recognize what is happening

A: Allow life to be just as it is

I: Investigate with kindness

N: Non identification

Recognize what is happening: The first step in this process starts with asking myself: "What is happening inside or outside me right now? What am I aware of in this very moment?" and to direct my attention to the momentary thoughts, feelings, and body sensations I recognize. That helps to focus my attention in a natural, curious way and to put aside my well established concepts.

Allow life to be just as it is: To allow means to give all my thoughts, feelings or sensations a right to exist. I ask myself: "Can I keep company with my momentary experience? Can I let it be there just as it is?" Perhaps it might be possible to say something like "I agree" to myself. If I am able to give up my resistance a space could be opened which might smoothe my pain and diminish my suffering a bit according to the formula: *suffering = pain x resistance*. In a way I say "yes" to my "no", I say yes to this very moment and, in a broader sense, to life.

Investigate with kindness: Sometimes a more thorough exploration of what I am experiencing right now is needed, for instance when I am deeply hurt. Then I can ask myself in a kind and loving way: "How do I feel my pain and my suffering inside my body right now?" I encounter myself in a similar way as I would treat my own child when it is bodily or emotionally hurt and needs my understanding and compassion. In the same empathic and heartfelt way I would treat my psychotherapy client when he or she suffers to create a safe space in which disturbing emotions and mind states can be investigated, felt, transformed, and healed.

Nonidentification: To realize nonidentification means that my sensing of who I am is free from limiting assumptions or distorting emotions.

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When I say to myself, for instance, “there is something in me that feels ashamed right now” instead of saying “I am ashamed” I am not identified with my shame and don’t get lost in it. By being disidentified I can let my momentary feeling be there without denying it. When I look at it from a little distance, it’s easier to investigate it without being overwhelmed by it.

When we have to deal with difficult mind states or disturbing emotions like shame, hatred, guilt etc. the emotional attitude inherent in mindfulness - a quality of heart - is especially required which has the capacity to warm up our inner situation: we need self-compassion (Germer 2009, 2012; Neff 2003, 2010, 2012). In psychotherapy it is up to the therapist to create a field of acceptance, empathy, and warmth. But what can clients do in the time between when they are confronted with severe pain, grief, hatred or other demons, when the next therapy session is far away, medication is not working, and nobody is there to give them support? Then the person who suffers needs a lot of self compassion. According to Neff (2012) self compassion has 3 components: mindfulness, common humanity, and self kindness.

Mindfulness: When we have difficulties to face we often step into a problem solving mode very soon without recognizing our need to comfort ourselves in our suffering first. We tend to identify with negative thoughts and feelings and our aversive reactions which often lead to contraction and a narrowed view. A mindful approach to our difficult feelings on the other hand opens a broader mental perspective and allows for greater clarity and emotional equanimity.

Common humanity: Harsh self criticism usually tends to make us feel isolated. To focus on our inadequacies provides a tunnel vision: We think it’s only me who is inadequate while everyone else is perfect. Self compassion recognizes that personal failures are part of being human, and that suffering unites all human beings. That helps us to feel less ashamed and isolated when we are experiencing suffering.

Self kindness: Self kindness means an attitude of warm, empathic understanding towards ourselves when we suffer, fail, or feel inadequate

rather than punishing ourselves with severe self-criticism. It recognizes that being imperfect and experiencing life difficulties are inevitable. We nurture and comfort ourselves when we are suffering rather than getting annoyed. We acknowledge our shortcomings without judging them, knowing that we can't always keep up with our ideals. Accepting this reality helps us to generate positive emotions of kindness and care and to cope with our difficulties.

### Self compassion phrases

In moments of suffering it can be very helpful to have a set of nourishing phrases to say to ourselves at hand. These phrases bring to our mind to be compassionate to ourselves in the given moment. We can take a deep breath, put a hand over our heart or give us a hug, and repeat the following phrases:

*This is a moment of suffering  
Suffering is a part of live  
May I be kind to myself  
May I give myself the compassion I need  
May I learn to accept myself just as I am.*

These phrases capture the essence of the 3 components of self compassion: mindfulness, common humanity, and self kindness, and can be used in everyday life as a kind of portable psychotherapy.

In her poem *Wild Geese* Mary Oliver beautifully describes what self compassion means to her:

*You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert, repending.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.  
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,*

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*over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clear blue air,  
are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.*

Finally let me invite the reader to take part in a loving kindness and self compassion meditation:

“Take a comfortable seat and close your eyes....Feel the soles of your feet.... Direct your attention to the flow of your breath in order to be present in your body and in this very moment.... Give yourself a gesture of self compassion by putting one hand or both hands over your heart.... Perhaps you might notice - while you direct your attention inwards - any tensions, or some pain, or any other difficult inner state like worrying about the future or regretting something from the past....Be kind and loving to yourself and your momentary thoughts and feelings....Now let the following sentences gently roll through your mind:

*May I feel safe  
May I be peaceful  
May I be kind to myself  
May I learn to accept myself just as I am.*

As you say each phrase gently to yourself, if possible find an image inside you that corresponds to the phrase....When your thoughts begin to wander around lead your attention gently back to the movements of your breath.... Stay with the bodily felt resonances which are triggered by the sentences and the corresponding images full of loving kindness....Now, in your own rhythm, open your eyes again and bring your attention softly back to the world outside you.”

Thank you! May you feel the love inside you and share it well.



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