

## DOES MINDFULNESS MAKE YOU ILL?

An article in the Guardian on 22 January 2016<sup>1</sup> asked whether mindfulness can make you ill. It is by no means the first article to question the current popularity of mindfulness – critiques of ‘McMindfulness’ come to mind. There is some resonance here with a familiar pattern in management – what Furnham<sup>2</sup> has called the ‘life story of a management fad’. This has seven stages:

- 1. Academic discovery** – often first found in papers that “are not only dry and complicated but also cautious.”
- 2. Description of the study** – involving summaries produced by others. “With every repetition, the findings become stronger and the complexity weaker. Selective memory ensures that the crucial findings are recorded and embellished. At this stage it is unlikely that the researcher would recognise the findings as his or her own.”
- 3. Popularisation in a best seller.** “The next stage is the big one. A business writer or guru hears about the finding and gives it a catchy title. Before you know it, one single, simple idea has become a book. It is at this stage that the fad becomes a buzzword.”
- 4. Consultant hype and universalisation.** “Because the concepts are easy to understand and said to have wide application, the consultants seek to apply them everywhere. The word spreads like wildfire.”
- 5. Total commitment by true believers.** “At this point, the evangelists move from the consultants to the managers. For a small number of companies the technique seems to have brought quick, massive benefits. They become willing product champions.”
- 6. Doubt, scepticism, cynicism and defection.** “After a few years of heavy product selling, the appetite for the fad diminishes. The market is saturated. “New and improved” versions are introduced. But the enthusiasm has gone. Then management journalists smell blood. It is easy to find disaffected managers happy to squeal. They point to the hundreds of thousands spent for little reward. “
- 7. New discoveries.** “The end of one fad is an ideal time for trainers, writers and consultants to spot a gap in the market. They know there is an unslakable thirst for magic solutions.”

We have reached stage six with mindfulness, and this is now running alongside the earlier stages, which are still much in evidence. But this does not mean that stage seven is inevitable. Rather, it is worth addressing doubt, scepticism and cynicism seriously, and considering the implications of such critiques. There is, after all, at least one important difference between mindfulness and management fads. The latter have life cycles which rarely run beyond a decade. Mindfulness has been around for 2,500 years.

Foster describes mindfulness as “the practice of sitting still and focusing on your breath and thoughts”. This is a not uncommon characterisation of mindfulness, yet it is a very limited description, covering just one type of meditation. It therefore excludes many other forms of meditation taught in mindfulness courses, but also mindful movement and, crucially, informal mindfulness. Mindfulness is also seen in the article as relaxation: “It’s the relaxation technique of choice, popular with employers and even the NHS. But some have found it can have unexpected effects ... Internet forums abound with people seeking advice

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<sup>1</sup> Dawn Foster: Is mindfulness making us ill? Available at [http://gu.com/p/4gxq3?CMP=Share\\_iOSApp\\_Other](http://gu.com/p/4gxq3?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other)

<sup>2</sup> Financial Times on 5<sup>th</sup> October 2001. Adrian Furnham, Professor of Psychology, University College, London

after experiencing panic attacks, hearing voices or finding that meditation has deepened their depression after some initial respite.”

We can usefully contrast this characterisation of mindfulness, as relaxation while sitting still, with an alternative view of mindfulness which is arguably richer and more representative of what is best in the practice. This alternative view is here developed in six stages, drawing on the experience of Mindfulness Based Life Enhancement [MBLE], a non-therapeutic approach to mindfulness which has been running now for five years.

**The first stage is to recognise that mindfulness is not about relaxation.** It can be a disquieting and unsettling process, and on MBL we warn people of this before they are accepted on the course. Our advance material states that “Doing a course such as this gives you a chance to become more familiar with day-to-day experiences, and these can include difficult experiences. This can be challenging at times. The teacher’s role is to support your learning in this context. However, course participants are also encouraged to have their own support system. This will enable you to get the best out of the course, while taking good care of yourself at the same time. Teachers of Mindfulness know that for a few people, difficult experiences can sometimes feel overwhelming.” And we also advise that we “may recommend you do not start the course if you have suffered a recent traumatic event in your life, or request that you have counselling support if you are going through a difficult period.” In the first session we reinforce this and give the general advice “If it hurts, don’t do it”.

**The second stage is to recognise that mindfulness is about more than the mind.** The Buddha argued for four ‘foundations of mindfulness’ – of the mind, the body, feelings, and experience. All these need to be addressed, and we do this in MBL. Thus, we devote time in every session to mindful movement, and encourage participants to make this a regular part of their lives, by practising yoga, tai chi, qigong or Pilates.

**The third stage is to argue that mindfulness is about both formal and informal practice** – indeed mindfulness of feelings and experience often involves the latter. Foster argues that “there are alternative relaxation methods that can keep you grounded: reading, carving out more time to spend with friends, and simply knowing when to take a break from the frenetic pace of life.” We have already argued that mindfulness is not a relaxation method. But it is also important to recognise that these methods are not ‘alternatives’. It is not either/or, but both/and. In MBL an important – and very popular – aspect of the course is to encourage people to savour, and this can include reading, friendships, and much more, such as seeing, listening, tasting [mindful eating]. All this can be enhanced with mindfulness – for example mindful listening is a good way to relate to friends. And experiencing life with the ‘beginner’s mind’ is an informal, and pleasurable, practice of informal mindfulness. This can include walking through a park, or looking at a flower, as if for the very first time.

This wider aspect of mindfulness can be compared to physical practice. Formal practice – such as sitting meditation – strengthens the ‘mental muscle’, in the way that exercise in a gym strengthens the physical muscles. And just as we strengthen the physical muscles for its benefits in everyday life, so we can see the formal practice of mindfulness extending its benefits into everyday life<sup>3</sup>.

**The fourth stage is to recognise that mindfulness is best seen in an even wider context, crucially one that involves also the Four Immeasurables** – loving kindness, compassion, empathetic joy and equanimity. The argument for this is given in the book on MBL<sup>4</sup>, in which examples of the dangers involved in mindfulness

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<sup>3</sup> Recent developments in neuroplasticity make this analogy even more apt

<sup>4</sup> Darwin, J. [2014] *Mindfulness Based Life Enhancement* Aberdeen: Inspired by Learning

without this wider framework are identified. The MBLE course involves all four, individually and collectively.

This wider canvas allows us to address another issue raised in the Guardian article, the role of mindfulness in organisations. Foster argues that “mental health has become a money-making opportunity. ... businesses are increasingly aware of the financial costs that stress, depression and anxiety saddle them with. Rather than removing the source of stress, whether that's unfeasible workloads, poor management or low morale, some employers encourage their staff to meditate: a quick fix that's much cheaper, at least in the short term. ... The whole agenda is so fraught with contradictions, between its economic goals and its supposedly spiritual methods.”

In the Centre for Mindful Life Enhancement [CMLE] we have taken a simple approach to the first point – we take no money individually for teaching mindfulness: all revenues received are used to further the objectives of the Centre, including research on mindfulness in organisations, and mindful ageing. The second point is more central – there is indeed the danger that organisations can misuse mindfulness<sup>5</sup> as a means of helping people ‘tolerate the intolerable’.

When first developing MBLE I was advised by someone experienced in teaching mindfulness in organisations not to refer to such ideas as loving kindness and compassion, on the grounds that they would alienate people. Yet this concern expressed by Foster is precisely why they should be raised explicitly, to clarify the purpose of an organisation in introducing mindfulness. If the organisation, or the senior management within it, find these ideas alien, then this is not an organisation in which mindfulness should be taught – and CMLE would refuse to do so. If however an organisation genuinely espouses compassion, kindness and fairness [equanimity] then mindfulness courses can help further these objectives<sup>6</sup>. Even so, we make it very clear to organisations that we run the courses primarily for the benefit of the individual participants – the benefit to the organisation itself is secondary.

**The fifth stage is to emphasise that mindfulness and the four immeasurables are not a novelty for people.** In our courses we emphasise to participants that we are not introducing them to something they have never experienced – we can all think of times when we have been mindful, or shown compassion, or experienced joy. The purpose of the course is to provide participants with ways of enhancing these existing qualities in their lives.

**The sixth and final stage is to draw fully from the insights of western thinking as much as eastern.** Thus in MBLE we draw on research in positive psychology, and address optimism, hope, gratitude, and forgiveness, as well as savouring as discussed earlier. A gratitude walk, for example, can be an excellent way to identify the positive aspects of your life, and to acknowledge those who help make them possible.

None of this makes it impossible for participants to have negative effects. The article quotes Ruth: “People don't talk about the fact that when you exercise, you are at a natural risk of injuring yourself.” For most people, this is not a deterrent to exercise<sup>7</sup>: the same applies to mindfulness.

John Darwin February 2016

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<sup>5</sup> This is also discussed further in *Mindfulness Based Life Enhancement* [op.cit].

<sup>6</sup> While empathetic joy is not mentioned here, it is worth noting the link this can have to an approach popular in many organisations – the Fish Philosophy, with its four principles of Play, Be There, Make their Day, and Choose your Attitude. ‘Play’ is bringing joy into one’s own life; Make their Day is bringing joy into the lives of others. For more on the Fish Philosophy see <http://www.fishphilosophy.com/fish-philosophy-story/#four-practices>

<sup>7</sup> I speak as one who has broken his Achilles tendon twice, once playing squash, once while running. I still go the gym regularly and practice yoga as often as I can.