

Mindful COUNSELLING
and PSYCHOTHERAPY

PRACTISING MINDFULLY ACROSS APPROACHES & ISSUES

MEG BARKER



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Introduction

Aims

This chapter aims to:

- invite you into a mindful engagement with this book,
- introduce mindfulness, and the various ways in which it can be understood,
- begin our exploration of how counsellors and therapists might engage with mindful ideas and practices,
- give you a sense of where we'll be going in the rest of the book.

An invitation to mindfulness

Martine Batchelor (2001) tells the story of a friend of hers who, after years in a Zen monastery, decided to return to the world. He took a job in PR in New York City, which is about as far from the life of a monk as it is possible to get. When he got there, he put a sign up above his front door which said 'Zendo' (meditation hall) so that he would see it every morning as he left for work.

The point he was making is that life is our meditation hall. As we will see, mindfulness is not something to be practised on a cushion and left behind as soon as we stand up; rather it is a way of being which we attempt to bring to everything we do. As the author of the classic book *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, Thich Nhat Hanh ([1975] 1991: 27) puts it: 'every day and every hour, one should practice mindfulness' (he also goes on to say that this is by no means an easy task!).

This has implications for the way in which we approach this book, you and I.

For me, the challenge is to write mindfully. That means bringing my attention to the task in hand rather than drifting off into panics about

how many words I've written so far, or fantasies of seeing the completed book on the bookshelf. It is about a kind of focused attention: while I'm writing this sentence I attempt to be writing this sentence.

That attention operates within a wider, more spacious, awareness. I'm aware of the baggage I bring to this task: desires to make a book that is all things to all people, or fears of being exposed in the areas I'm less knowledgeable about. I'm aware of a tendency to distraction, perhaps in order to avoid these concerns: I could just check my email, or get another cup of coffee, or search for a reference to justify what I'm saying. Being mindful is about noticing when my attention drifts and gently bringing myself back to what I'm doing. Perhaps I notice tension in my shoulders, or the fact that I snap when I'm interrupted. I pause, take a breath, and remind myself of what it is that I'm doing here.

And what I am doing, fundamentally, is something social: I am communicating with you. Writing, like therapy, involves a constant awareness of the interconnections between us, rather than remaining stuck within myself and my own anxieties and cravings. For example, instead of trying to prove how much I know, I can imagine what you – as somebody who is perhaps new to this area – will want to find out about and how best to put this across. I am also in communication with all the authors, researchers and therapists whose work I am drawing upon in this book. How can I do them justice and interest you in further dialogue with others who are passionate about these ideas and practices?

For you, I invite you to read this book mindfully¹.

Pause for reflection

Before reading on, consider how you are approaching this book.

- What situations are you reading in? (e.g. Rushing to work? As part of a slow Sunday morning? Working towards a specific course or assignment?)
- What do you bring to the reading? (e.g. Your own therapeutic expertise? Certain associations with Buddhism or mindfulness therapy? Past experiences with meditation or similar practices?)
- What are you hoping for, and expecting from, the book? (To check it off your to-do list? To get a new technique to add to your toolkit? To help yourself with your own struggles? To make some new connections?)

¹This is an idea that I developed from Christina Richards's (2011) work on reader reflexivity.

You could attempt to be present to what you are reading (or to do it another time if that's not where you're at). You might consider, for example, how much you read at one go; whether you pause at all to reflect on what you're reading; whether you engage with the practices I suggest now, or later, or not at all; and whether you make notes as you go along to connect what you read with your own thoughts and experiences, and other ideas that you've come across.

Just as I try to be mindful of you as I write, you could attempt to be mindful of the human being behind this writing. I'm somebody who has been reading about Buddhism for the past decade, and who brings mindful ideas and practices into my work having trained in other forms of therapy. My background in psychology means that I have a pretty good understanding of the social and cognitive psychological research in this area. However, I am not a Buddhist scholar, nor am I a neuroscientist, nor have I done the '8-week course' in mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), which is often held up as the one legitimate approach to mindful counselling (NICE, 2000)².

It is my hope that the breadth of knowledge that I bring will be useful, particularly to a beginner in this area. I can give you a sense of where these mindful ideas come from and how they have influenced the various western therapeutic approaches (rather than focusing on one form of therapy, as many books do). I can give you my own thoughts on the aspects of mindful theory and practice which will be useful for the various forms of suffering that we encounter in the therapy room, drawing on research and writing in these areas.

As we will see, there is no one true version of mindfulness, and it has been understood in different ways by different people at different times. My own approach emphasises social, relational and ethical aspects, so there will be more on these than in some of the cognitive-behavioural therapy or neuroscientific books on the topic for example. However, like most western authors on this topic I will inevitably translate the original ideas around mindfulness into a form which makes sense in the world that I live in. And it will be a translation of a translation as I draw primarily on other authors and therapists who have already adapted these ideas into this context. I will attempt to be mindful myself of both the potentials and pitfalls of such adaptations (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011b).

For a deeper understanding of the theories, practices or research which I touch upon, I invite you to follow up on the Further Reading suggestions at the end of each chapter which resonate with you.

²The '8 week course' is the basis of all major university accredited mindfulness trainings in the UK, but is only one 'way in' which you may want to consider alongside the other possibilities covered in this book.

What is mindfulness?

Mindful experience

Before we get into the various ways in which mindfulness can be defined, let's turn to the experience of being mindful so that you can get a sense of what it feels like to you.

Practice: Mindful haiku

This activity is based on the work of Nugent, Moss, Barnes and Wilks (2011). They wanted to understand the experience of being mindful, so they got a group of healthcare practitioners to take part in mindful practice and to write a list of words and phrases associated with it, which they then turned into a haiku (see below). It is up to you whether you do one, two or all three parts of this activity. If expressing the experience in writing doesn't work for you, you could always try drawing or speaking about it instead.

1. Mindful practice³:

Find somewhere quiet and sit comfortably, either on a cushion or in a chair, with your back upright but not tense. Rest your hands in your lap or on your knees.

Close your eyes and check for any parts of your body that feel tense: your face, your shoulders, your back. Relax these. Breathe in and out three times.

Now for 10 minutes focus your attention on your breath. Don't try to control its rhythm but just notice it happening. Become aware of the various sensations that accompany it entering and leaving your body: the warmth or coolness of the air, the feeling of your body against the floor or chair, the shifting of your clothes against your skin. Let your mind settle on the ebb and flow of the breath like a boat which is anchored, gently rising and falling with the waves. If you find yourself distracted by thoughts or physical sensations, don't judge them or try to stop them, just notice them and gently bring your attention back to the breath.

³Adapted from Batchelor (1997: 23). This is a meditative method which dates back to the earliest Buddhist scriptures and is prominent in most recent Buddhist and therapy texts on mindfulness. The way Buddha put it was 'just mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out ... When a monk breathes in long, he knows "I breathe in long"; and when he breathes out long, he knows, "I breathe out long" ... When he breathes in short, he knows "I breathe in short"; and when he breathes out short, he knows, "I breathe out short"'.

2. Word list

After opening your eyes and stretching, write down a list of all the words and phrases that you can think of to describe the experience.

3. Haiku

Once you have this list, write a haiku based on any of these words or phrases to capture something of this experience. A haiku is a Japanese poem. In English they tend to be written on three lines with five syllables in the first line, seven in the second, and five in the third (although you don't have to stick rigidly to that here, just three linked phrases is fine). For example, something I came up with was:

Sat still, open arms
Thoughts rush in to fill the space
Still empty really.

Of course there might be many haiku you could write about the same experience, so don't worry about the task, just see what happens when you put your words and phrases into this form.

We'll come back to the specific value of therapists and counsellors practising mindfulness themselves in Chapter 2. For now, the kinds of things the practitioners in this study said about the experience were that mindfulness enabled space to pause in life; that it deepened their relationships with themselves (e.g. through tuning into how they felt); that it enabled them to observe things they wouldn't otherwise have noticed (such as how tense they were), opening up the potential of changing these things; and that it was a way of paying attention that they could bring to any experience (not just to specific meditations like this one).

Participants also said that being mindful often brought discomfort and uncertainty. This is something worth emphasising from the start, going back to what Thich Nhat Hanh said about mindfulness not being easy. Quietly attending to ourselves does not always bring peace. It can bring us face to face with things that we'd rather avoid. Also the ways in which being mindful invites us to engage with thoughts and feelings can be very challenging. For example, many practices suggest that we notice and let go of these, rather than avoiding them or following them and making stories out of them as we generally do.

Most autobiographical accounts of people's first attempts at mindful meditation include words like 'boredom', 'pain', 'frustration' and 'anger' more often than they do words like 'calm', 'peace' and 'wisdom' which we often associate with such practices. It is worth bearing this in mind

when we decide to engage ourselves, or our clients, with mindfulness. We should be aware of the expectations that people tend to have, and the reality that most people experience. We'll come back to this in more detail in Chapter 1 when we explore mindful practices in depth.

Defining mindfulness

If you haven't previously read anything about mindful therapies or Buddhism, your definition of 'mindful' might be something like 'remembering something' or 'taking heed whilst doing something'. As therapists we might say 'I'm mindful of the cultural pressures around body image' when we don't want to assume that it will be easy for our client to stop obsessing about their appearance, for example. Mindfulness is a reminder to keep something in mind.

There is something of this sense of remembering in the Buddhist idea of mindfulness (Bodhi, 2011). We have to keep remembering to return our attention to what we are doing, as it inevitably drifts off (Analayo, 2003). Whether meditating or trying to be mindful in my everyday life I constantly forget and fall back into old habits. Part of being mindful is a continued commitment to remember to gently redirect our attention.

'Mindfulness' was the way in which one of the first people to translate Buddhist scriptures into English, Rhys-Davids ([1810] 2007), translated the Pali language word '*sati*'. *Sati* originally connoted remembering, but the Buddha gave it a new meaning, referring to a state of wakeful awareness in which we purposefully, gently and spaciously attend to our whole experience, whatever we are doing. The Buddha described it as 'contemplating the body in the body ... feelings in feelings ... mind in mind ... phenomena in phenomena, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world' (Bodhi, 2011: 20). This is what I was trying to capture when I reflected on how we might mindfully read, or write, this book, and it is also what we were cultivating in the breathing practice.

The emphasis on attention and awareness is reflected in the word cloud (Figure 0.1) of current words associated with mindfulness.

Pause for reflection

Which of the words you came up with earlier appear in this cloud? Which are missing?

(see Chapter 4): is mindfulness an object that we can study (Stanley, 2012c)? It also has implications for practice as it is not just a form of meditation, but a way of being in our whole life.

Third, you may well also have come across a definition of mindfulness which is something like 'non-judgemental attention to the present moment'⁵. This version owes a lot to the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn, who popularised mindfulness in western psychotherapy. Certainly *one version* of mindfulness does involve continually bringing our awareness back to the present moment and non-judgementally accepting any feelings, sensations or thoughts that arise. This is partly why breathing meditation is so popular, because our breath is always available to us and it grounds us in the here-and-now of what we are doing. However, neither the present moment nor being non-judgemental are intrinsic to mindfulness (Dreyfuss, 2011). As well as being mindful of the here-and-now, it is also possible to mindfully attend to a memory or to our plans for the future, for example, or to contemplate our death or other people in our lives in mindful meditation (when we cultivate awareness of the impermanence of life, or compassion). Regarding being non-judgemental (Gethin, 2011), if we attempt to bring mindfulness into our whole lives then we will also attempt to make judgements in a mindful manner, such as when we are deciding what the most ethical action is, for example, or whether to make an intervention in the therapy room. Also, some degree of discrimination is necessary in recognising and altering the habits that we notice when we are mindfully observing ourselves.

Fourth, as we will discover in Chapter 1, mindfulness was originally part of the path that Buddhists were encouraged to follow which advocated 'right mindfulness', not just 'mindfulness' alone. This means that it is intrinsically linked to ethics (Grossman, 2010). The purpose of being mindful was to transcend the cravings, ignorance and hatred that lead to suffering: that was why the aim was to cultivate attention and remembering as opposed to carelessness and forgetfulness.

These issues are worth continuing to reflect upon as we explore different ways in which mindfulness has been taken up therapeutically. Is mindfulness an individual, mental activity, or might it raise wider implications for us as social and embodied beings? Can we study a thing called mindfulness or apply it as one technique among many, or is it a whole way of being that pervades life? How might the non-judgemental, present-focused form of mindfulness be useful, and what

⁵Indeed, this is the definition I drew upon in my previous chapter on mindfulness in Barker, Vossler, & Langdridge (2010). I considered the key elements to be: awareness, (non-judgemental) acceptance and presence. Although exploration of the latter two is useful, we can now see that perhaps only the former (awareness) is really integral to the concept.

other forms of mindfulness are possible beyond this? Is mindfulness a form of attention that can be cultivated by anyone for any purpose (e.g. becoming more productive, or even military training), or is it inextricably linked to a specific ethical stance towards suffering?

Barnes, Moss and Stanley (in prep) apply an idea from systemic therapy to current understandings of mindfulness. In families and other groups, certain 'boastful' stories get told which become the dominant stories (e.g. of who does what in the family, or how they came to be this way). These stories often overwhelm and silence more 'shy' stories. Barnes et al. argue that scientific stories that involve measuring mindfulness and assessing its impact on symptoms have become the boastful stories, and we will return to these in more detail in Chapter 4 when we look at scientific research on mindfulness. However, in this book I will attempt to give room to some of the shyer stories of mindfulness, as well as the more boastful ones, and to highlight some places where these are in tension. For example, as we will see in Chapters 3 and 5, many recent versions of mindfulness are advocated to make people happier, which is in conflict with other versions of mindfulness that see the pursuit of happiness as part of the problem. It is up to you, of course, to reflect on such tensions and to find your own position in relation to them.

We may well find, as we go along, that it is more useful to focus on the experience of being mindful and to float between different understandings of the term rather than grasping after one fixed definition.

Mindful counselling and psychotherapy

Mindfulness therapies have been the fastest growing therapeutic approaches in recent years, with more and more professionals seeking training in this area and looking to complement their own approaches with mindfulness. Mindfulness is increasingly officially recognised as an effective treatment for a variety of 'common mental health problems', with positive outcomes in research evaluating its success (see Chapter 4). The number of research publications on mindfulness being produced worldwide increased exponentially in the late 1990s and continues to rise. There are many best-selling self-help books outlining mindfulness approaches for a general audience, so it is also increasingly likely that people will already be engaged in some form of mindfulness when they seek professional help.

Mark Williams and Jon Kabat-Zinn (2011b), along with many contributors to their recent edited collection on mindfulness, argue that the current time is a critical point at which to pause and take stock about this convergence of classical Buddhist teachings and western therapy and psychology.

They suggest that we need to reflect upon potential confluences and disjunctions and also to think about how we go forward from here. It is my hope that this book will be part of this process of reflection, and that it will enable readers new to this area to engage with mindfulness in a way that is informed by an awareness of both the potentials and limitations of integrating Buddhist philosophy and practice with western therapies.

In recent years mindfulness has become an umbrella term covering all engagements between psychology, psychotherapy and counselling on the one hand, and Buddhist theories and practices on the other. Perhaps this is partly due to the fact that the word 'mindfulness' doesn't have the religious connotations that the word 'Buddhism' holds, which may be off-putting to more secular western audiences. Whilst, as we have seen, mindfulness specifically refers to the cultivation of a certain form of attention, mindfulness therapies often include those that emphasise forms of acceptance or compassion, for example, as well as awareness and attention. This is, perhaps, appropriate because, as we will see in Chapter 1, mindfulness cannot really be extracted from the wider Buddhist theories in which it originates. Some have argued that mindfulness and other aspects (such as wisdom or loving-kindness) are intrinsically cultivated together: when you practise one, you practise the other (Salzberg, 2011).

For these reasons, this book will explore engagements between Buddhism and therapy beyond the very specific employment of mindful attention. However, the reader is encouraged to be aware that different writers use 'mindfulness' in very different ways. This ranges from a narrow definition of 'mindfulness meditation' as only practices where everything that emerges is attended to (in comparison to concentration meditations, like the breathing one, where we bring ourselves back to an object of concentration), to mindfulness encompassing various different meditation and everyday practices (as in Thich Nhat Hanh's approach), to mindfulness as an umbrella term for all engagements which draw on Buddhist theories or practices.

Figure 0.2 illustrates the three main sources that we will be drawing on in the book. Each source is multiple because there are many different forms of Buddhism, and these have been engaged with in even more diverse ways by the authors who have brought them to western audiences. Many forms of therapy have engaged with the various forms of Buddhism to produce diverse therapeutic concepts and practices, and mindfulness has been studied with a variety of methods and from diverse research perspectives.

The first four chapters of the book take us through each of these three sources. As Cohen (2010) neatly puts it, this is a journey from the Bodhi tree (where the Buddha found enlightenment), to the analyst's couch, to the MRI scanner. In Chapter 1 we focus on the main theories and practices of mindfulness, providing more background on the Buddhist

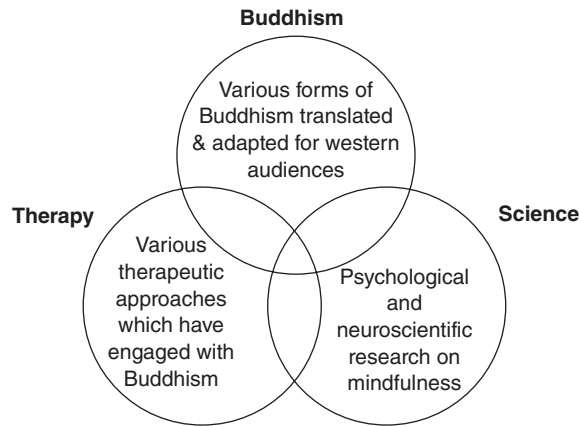


Figure 0.2 Three sources

understanding of suffering in which these originated, as well as further examples of mindful – and related – practices. In Chapters 2 and 3 we turn to counselling and psychotherapy, exploring the key ways in which we can apply mindfulness in our own work. In Chapter 2 we see that while mindfulness is often understood as something that we teach to clients, it can – and perhaps should – also be something that we practise ourselves as therapists, and a way of relating to clients. In Chapter 3 we consider how we might integrate mindfulness with our existing therapeutic approaches, exploring how cognitive-behavioural, humanistic, and psychodynamic therapists (in particular) have engaged with mindfulness. We cover the aspects of theory and practice that they have drawn upon, how this has impacted on their therapeutic practices, the research that has been conducted on the types of therapy that have emerged, and the meeting points and tensions that have emerged. In Chapter 4 we overview the research that has been conducted on these therapies to date, including the recent wave of neuroscientific studies on mindful brains, and outcome research about their effectiveness. We also cover less well known social psychological work on mindfulness and mindlessness as well as qualitative research on the mindful experience.

Once we have introduced mindful therapy and explored how we might work mindfully in general, we spend the rest of the book considering some of the most common difficulties that people present with in therapy, and how mindful ideas and practices might understand and work with these. In each case, we draw on Buddhist theory and practice, on specific mindfulness therapies that have addressed these issues, and on the research that has been conducted so far. In each chapter I offer examples to illustrate how we might usefully work with these issues in a mindful manner.

Finally, we conclude the book by considering what has been valuable about the ways in which western therapy has engaged with mindfulness

so far, as well as exploring possible future directions. We turn our mindful attention on therapy itself, and I offer some thoughts on what my own preferred form of social mindfulness might have to offer.

Summary and conclusions

Mindfulness is a way of being that we can bring to everything we do, and which we might explicitly cultivate through meditation and through mindfully engaging in simple everyday activities. It can be defined, roughly, as giving open, curious attention to the way that things are, rather than attempting to avoid or grasp hold of any aspect of experience, although it is worth being aware of the different ways it is defined in different contexts and not grasping too tightly onto any of these.

Mindful therapies have become extremely popular in recent years. The rest of the book explores the ways in which Buddhist ideas and practices have been engaged with by western therapists and psychologists, and draws out implications of this work for the common issues that people bring to therapy.

Further reading

A great starting point, and a very accessible read, is Thich Nhat Hanh's classic book: Nhat Hanh, T. ([1975] 1991). *The miracle of mindfulness*. London: Rider.

You can read more about Thich Nhat Hanh on his Plum Village website: www.plumvillage.org/thich-nhat-hanh.html.

If you are interested in going further into the various definitions and understandings of mindfulness, then the special issue of the journal *Contemporary Buddhism* which I mention in this chapter is very helpful:

Williams, J. M. G., & Kabat-Zinn, J. (Eds.). (2011). Special issue on mindfulness. *Contemporary Buddhism*, 12 (1), 1-306.

A couple of very recent accessible self-help books on mindfulness are:

Williams, J. M., & Penman, D. (2011). *Mindfulness: A practical guide to finding peace in a frantic world*. London: Piatkus.

Heaversage, J., & Halliwell, E. (2012). *The mindful manifesto*. Carlsbad, CA: Hay House.

There are further resources on mindfulness listed at: <http://socialmindfulness.wordpress.com/references/mindfulness>.
