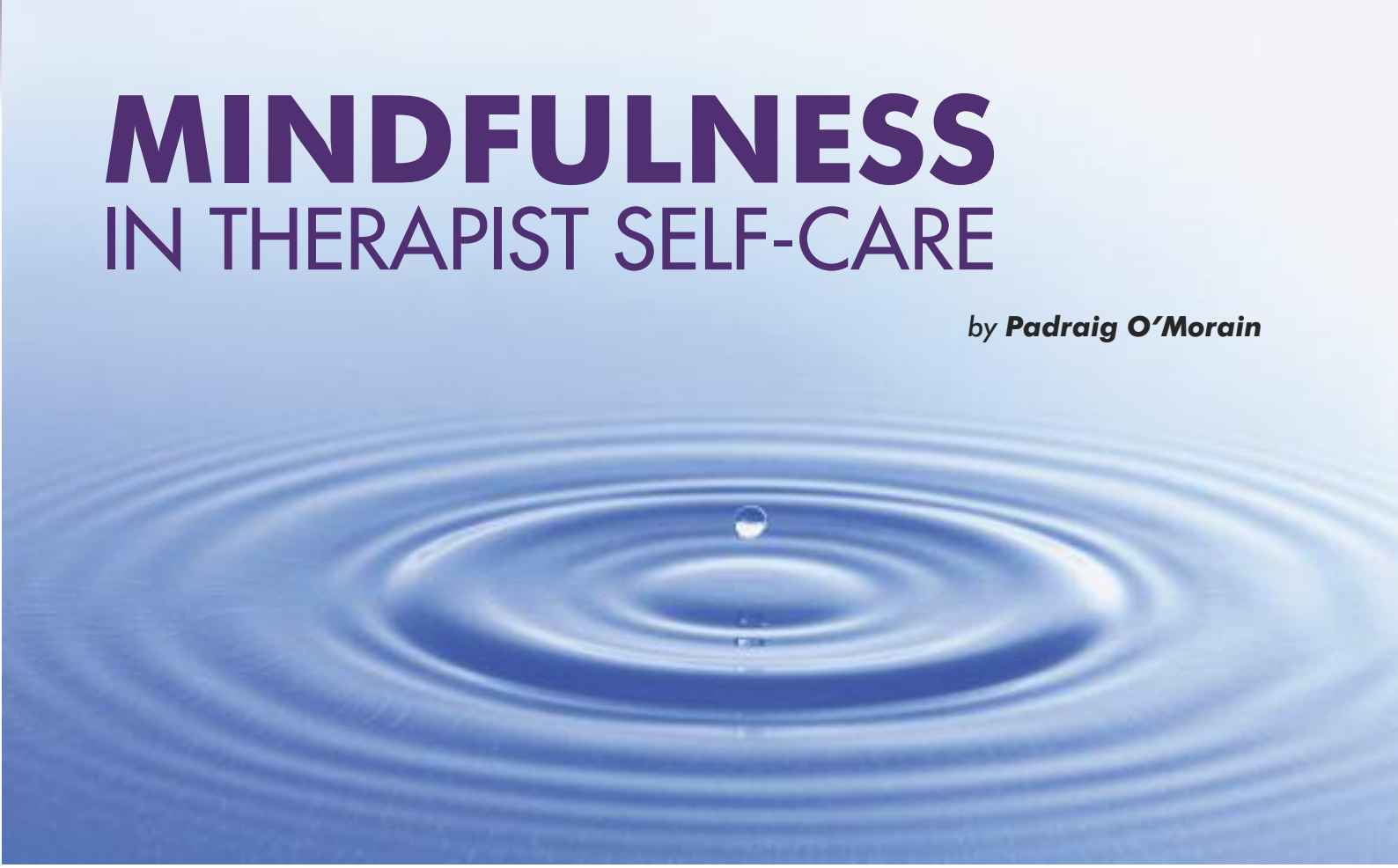
MINDFULNESS IN THERAPIST SELF-CARE

by **Padraig O'Morain**



This article aims to help you, as a therapist, to use the practice of mindfulness in your own self care. I give a definition of mindfulness followed by a series of mindfulness practices.

Two key introductory points: First, the practice of mindfulness will usually help you to deal with stress and with difficult emotions but this is not always a pleasant experience: the practice requires you to turn towards your emotions and not to distract yourself from them. This however, is a valuable aspect of mindfulness too - I do not need to argue this in a publication for therapists - and the overall benefit of mindfulness practice, I find, is to provide a valuable tool for facing life's challenges.

Second, mindfulness is an attitude as well as a practice. The attitude associated with mindfulness will become clear in the definition which follows. Therefore, the definition is worth reading later even if you skip forward to the practices (I call them practices because mindfulness doesn't just happen: you have to practice it).

What is mindfulness?

My working definition is that mindfulness involves deliberately connecting with my flow of experience with acceptance and without attachment.

Deliberate connection: We are all aware of something most of the time. Even when we are "lost in thought" the mention of our own name will usually get a response. If your awareness has been captured by memories of an unpleasant interaction with a client or supervisor or of a disturbing story told you by a client, you are aware of that memory though perhaps of little else; or perhaps you are giving your awareness to thoughts of your own inadequacies as a therapist. All this can be done without any conscious decision on your own part.

In mindfulness practice, however, we make a decision, a deliberate choice, to be aware of our experiences. That act of making a deliberate choice seems to give us some distance in relation to our own experience. So as well as being aware of conducting an angry exchange with someone in my imagination, I might also choose to give my attention to the sensation of walking, to the person sitting in front of me right now, to washing my hands and so on. That fantasy exchange is now occupying part of my awareness but only part.

Acceptance: Acceptance is at the heart of mindfulness practice. But what does it mean? In this context it simply means that we do not fight with the fact that reality is the way it is. This does not mean that we would not change reality if we could. Nor does it mean that we have to like the reality that we experience. But we do not waste effort and energy fighting the fact that something is the way it is. The angry client who dismissed you as

incompetent or uncaring is, perhaps, entirely wrong. Right or wrong, you were hurt and upset. But you do not have to spend your time having mental arguments with yourself about the fact that your client has said these things. You notice the hurt and you move on. In doing so, you preserve energy for working out what to do next.

Similarly, acceptance of some dreadful memory or event that the client has told you about does not in any sense mean condoning what happened to the client. It means that you can allow yourself to feel the emotional hurt or pain of the memory without having to construct scenes and scenarios about it.

Attachment: Attachment, as I use the word here, means clinging onto something. I may have formed the belief that I am an extremely good therapist, quite capable of handling anybody who may come my way. If I insist on clinging to that view of myself, then the client who is angry with me can upset me very easily indeed. The point here is not whether my client is right or wrong: it is that if I see my view that I am a therapist who can handle anything and everything as essential to my happiness, then I am attached to that view. The irrational beliefs identified by Albert Ellis in Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy could be seen as a list of ideas to which one can become unhealthily attached.

So, my client thinks that I'm a waste of time, that I am interested only in money and that I am not very good at what I do. When I practice mindfulness , I am still aware of this but I am also aware of my breathing or my walking or my feet against the floor or what the person I am with is saying to me. I accept that this is my client's view, that it is hurtful and that I need to work out what to do about it but as a mindfulness practitioner I am not filling my head up with little dramas in which I confront the client and win the day. Hopefully this wider focus will help me to let go of any attachment I have to the idea that I must be so impressive that all my clients will love me all the time.

I said that mindfulness is an attitude as well as a practice. However, it is my experience that my chances of adopting a mindful attitude when I need it are boosted if I practice mindfulness when I don't need it.

The rest of the article will describe a number of practices and I hope that, among them, you will find a few you can adopt for yourself.

MINDFULNESS PRACTICES

A basic awareness practice:

Pause for a few moments and notice your breathing. Do this for a while.Whenever you notice your mind has drifted away, bring it back to what you are doing.
Notice your posture, that you are sitting, standing, walking or lying down.
Notice the points of contact between your body and the chair, your feet and the floor.
Notice your clothes touching your body.
Notice sounds in the room; sounds outside the room; the furthest away sound you can hear. Just notice the sounds without judging them.
Now back to noticing your breathing again. Whenever you notice your mind has drifted away, bring it back to what you are doing.

This practice incorporates many elements of mindfulness. First, you are using your senses to connect you with current experience. "Staying in the now," to take a phrase often applied to mindfulness, is a somewhat abstract concept. Tuning into what your senses are bringing you right now is a physical experience, and this is true of most mindfulness practices. Second, you are using awareness of breathing at the start and end of the practice. The breath is a valuable object of attention for mindfulness practice and I include a number of breath-based practices below. I have more to say on this later. Third, you are accepting that your mind will drift off into thoughts and that you will need to bring your attention back many times to what you are doing. This drifting is often seen as an imperfection in mindfulness practice - on the contrary, developing your ability to observe a thought without reacting to it, and then to return calmy to your breathing is a valuable benefit of mindfulness and should be cultivated rather than spurned. Fourth, you notice sounds without judging them - this is acceptance which I have described above.

You can use this basic practice as you go about your business or even in bed at night where it is a great deal more calming than recounting your worries to yourself and may even lull you to sleep.

The body scan:

Lie down or sit comfortably. Bring your awareness to successive parts of your body, spending no more than five to ten seconds on each, for example:
Your toes
The soles of your feet
Your ankles
Your calves
Your knees
Your thighs
Your hips .....

all the way to the top of your head (not forgetting your chest, tummy and arms).

When you have done this, imagine that, as you breathe in, the breath is filling every cell of your body. Try to get a sense of your whole body breathing.

Then, when you are ready, open your eyes.

If you experience pain, discomfort or tension in any part of your body, just imagine you are breathing into it and softening it. Notice the area around the pain and discomfort and breathe into that too to soften it. Also notice the parts of your body that are not in pain or discomfort. Then move on in the next five to ten seconds.

You can find free audio clips of body scans of differing lengths at http://www.freemindfulness.org

Do the body scan for 10 to 20 minutes at a time. Doing the body scan for long periods, such as 45 minutes or an hour, can bring up repressed memories and emotions.

The body scan is an excellent mindfulness practice and is central to Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction programme at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center (Kabat-Zinn, 1991).

The body scan will help you to understand, in an experiential way, that your stress or discomfort is not your whole experience but only part of it. In Bruno Cayoun's Mindfulness-Integrated CBT (*Mindfulness-Integrated CBT*, 2011) our processing of experiences, whether originating outside or inside ourselves, ultimately - though quickly - produces a bodily sensation which may or may not come into awareness but which influences our behaviour. Becoming aware of these sensations in a non-reactive way brings us a broader range choices and possibilities and the body scan is also central to his approach.

Befriending anxiety:

Begin by noticing your breathing. Then bring to mind a source of anxiety. For about three to five minutes, observe its physical effects in your body with curiosity, as if this feeling was new to you. Avoid getting caught up in the story behind the anxiety. Also avoid rejecting it or trying to change it. All you want to do is observe the physical manifestation of anxiety.
2nd 3-5 mins: Move to observing how the anxiety affects your breathing. As you do this, attempt to maintain an attitude of welcome towards the sensations.
3rd 3-5 mins: Now observe the effects on your body and on your breathing together. Continue to take a friendly attitude towards the physical sensations.

The above practice is based on Christopher Germer's observation that "Since anxiety is unavoidable, it is fruitless and often counterproductive to try to eliminate it." (*Mindfulness and Psychotherapy,* 2005)

The practice is also based on the hypothesis that sometimes what we are really avoiding is the physical sensation of anxiety (or another unpleasant emotion). Being mindful of the physical sensation and observing it in a friendly way can interrupt our conditioned reactions and can make it possible for us to choose a response.

With a little practice, you can learn to switch your attention to the physical aspect of strong emotions rather than prolonging them through thinking about them, as you go through your day and without having to go through the procedure above..

Walking:

If one is too agitated to use any other kind of mindfulness practice, then mindfulness of walking can gradually help to bring a sense of calm. This is a matter of walking somewhat slowly and keeping your attention by the act of walking, perhaps coordinating breathing and walking, and not on the agitation in the person's head.

Mindfulness of walking is a traditional mindfulness practice and when used in the traditional way the walking should be extremely slow with a separate awareness of raising the foot moving it forward and putting it down again. This sort of walking however is hardly practical for most of us most of the time. That is why walking "somewhat slowly" is recommended above.

FIVE BREATHING PRACTICES

One breath in, one breath out:

Every now and then pause. Breathe in and out once in awareness. You may be sitting at your desk, working in the kitchen, stalled in traffic - all these situations and many others provide an opportunity to do this simple exercise.

Ten per cent:

Can you give ten per cent of your attention to your breathing as you carry out tasks or walk, read or watch TV? Of course at times you need to give 100 per cent of your attention to what you are doing but when you can give that ten per cent it will anchor you to the moment.

Checking in with the breath:

Checking in with your breathing provides a quick and useful way to get in touch with your present-moment experience. The method couldn't be simpler. *As you go through your day, notice your breathing from time to time. All you need to do is notice: you don't have to breathe in any special way.*

Four stage Mindfulness of Breathing:

1. For a few minutes focus on your out-breath. Notice how the breath seems to go down through your body to the floor. Notice the movements in your tummy as you breathe out.

2. Now notice the tiny pause between the end of the out-breath and the start of the in-breath. You don't have to make it happen - just notice it. For a few minutes notice this pause at the end of every out-breath.
3. Now for a few minutes notice the in-breath and how your body feels as you breathe in.
4. Now notice the tiny pause between the end of the in-breath and the start of the out-breath. You don't have to make it happen - just notice it. For a few minutes notice this pause at the end of every in-breath.

ACCEPTANCE AND COMMITMENT THERAPY

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy is an attractive application of mindfulness, explained in a most accessible way in Russ Harris's book, *The Happiness Trap* (2008).Two ideas in particular from the ACT approach are useful from a self-care perspective. The first is "defusion" and the second is the distinction between the "thinking mind" and the "observing mind."

Defusion:

One of the great benefits of mindfulness practice lies in helping us to "separate out" from distressing forms of thinking. This is not the same as disassociating or splitting: it is a chosen attitude, made easier to implement by the practice of mindfulness. We "fuse" with our thoughts when we cannot gain any distance from them, when we give them more credence than they deserve and when we are, in effect, driven by them. Think of how this could happen following a session with an angry client or a session in which the story told by the client was deeply disturbing.

Mindfulness practice leads to the understanding that our thoughts are not the be-all and end-all of everything. ACT-based approaches aim to bring about a "de-fusion" of our whole selves from our thoughts. For instance if you spot the thought "I want my clients to stop making demands on me" (burnout might produce such a thought) you are encouraged to put "I notice I am having the thought that" in front of it. Then you get: "I notice I am having the thought that I want my clients to stop making demands on me." I find the use of this phrase ("I notice I am having the thought that") gives me a distance from the negative judgements I make about myself

This is not a question of making the disturbing thoughts go away. Rather it is a matter of allowing them to take their place in the totality of your experience - as part of one's experience but not all of it.

This approach, and mindfulness approaches in general, sees thoughts as fleeting constructions which lack permanence and solidity.

Thinking Mind vs Observing Mind:

Try to observe your breath or the scene in front of you for a few minutes without commenting mentally on what you're doing. Just observe. Notice how mental activities inevitably begin to generate themselves. These may be images, memories, pieces of dialogue, or judgements. When you notice this happening, return to observing.

For the purposes of this practice we think of ourselves as having two minds. We may or may not have two minds but in an operational sense the distinction is helpful for our purposes. The observing mind notes our experiences without comment. The thinking mind is the one that generates opinions, memories and so on . (In ACT memories are not seen as thoughts but the distinction is not crucial for our purposes).

Very often the thinking mind is acting out of old patterns, some of which don't serve us particularly well. Practising mindfulness involves switching into "observing mind" mode. Thoughts still come and go in the background because the thinking mind never really goes silent for a very long. But deliberately cultivating the observing mind will give a sense of spaciousness, will almost always reduce stress and in my experience allows new, creative ideas to come through - ideas which could otherwise get lost in the chatter of the thinking mind.

Should any readers have questions about their practice of mindfulness, or should they wish to join the mailing list for my monthly mindfulness newsletter, they need only email me at pomorain@ireland.com

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