

Mindfulness for Supervisors

Padraig O'Moráin



and reacting to the inner and outer experiences that we are all normally, caught up in, and learn to step back from.”(p. 33)

This is what is meant by his more frequently cited statement that mindfulness involves paying attention with a non-judgmental attitude. It isn't a question of abandoning all efforts to assess and evaluate what's going on: it's more a question of not rushing to judgement and of not getting swept away by habitual reactions. Mindful awareness, for instance of our breathing, can give us the space in which to take that non-judgmental attitude.

This attitude leads into the practice of acceptance: “Acceptance as we are speaking of it simply means that you have come around to the willingness to see things as they are. This attitude sets the stage for acting appropriately in your life, no matter what is happening.” (p.39) (citation)

For instance, accepting that you have a drink problem doesn't mean that you will abandon all restraint. Accepting that you have the problem leads on, sometimes sooner, sometimes later, to a

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This article is a reflection on the contribution that mindfulness and the attitudes surrounding it can make to the supervisory relationship and to the well-being of the supervisor himself or herself.

Little or no research has been done on mindfulness in the supervisory relationship and this article, as it is not research-based, does not aim to fill that gap.

I will begin by discussing what mindfulness is; then I will outline ways to create and maintain a mindfulness practice; and then I will reflect on the question of the contribution of mindfulness to supervision.

What mindfulness is

This is worth dwelling on because the effort to define mindfulness can be of practical help in our

mindfulness practice.

My definition of mindfulness is that it is the practice of returning deliberately to awareness of what is happening here and now and of cultivating an attitude of acceptance in our lives.

Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990) who probably did more than anybody else to bring about the current Western interest in mindfulness, writes that “Simply put, mindfulness is moment-to-moment awareness. It is cultivated by purposefully paying attention to things we ordinarily never give a moment's thought to.” (p.2)

He adds later that “Mindfulness is cultivated by assuming the stance of an impartial witness to your own experience. To do this requires that you become aware of the constant stream of judging

consideration of what you can do about it.

Christopher Germer (2005) writes that acceptance is an important aspect of therapeutic relationships. In his chapter in *Mindfulness and Psychotherapy* he says that empathy and positive regard “overlap with acceptance” (p.7). This, of course, will not come as news to the readers of *Eisteach*.

Quite often, more attention is given to present-moment awareness than to acceptance in the public discourse on mindfulness. That’s a pity. In my experience, acceptance is the other half of mindfulness and may be the better half.

In his important book “The heart of Buddhist meditation - a handbook of mental training based on the Buddhist way of mindfulness,” Nyanaponika Thera (1962) sees “bare attention” as providing the “key” (p.30) to mindfulness.

“Bare attention consists in a bare and exact registry of the object.” He notes that “this is not as easy a task as it may appear, since it is not what we normally do, except when engaged in disinterested investigation. Normally man is not concerned with disinterested knowledge of things as they truly are, but with handling and judging them from the viewpoint of his self-interest, which may be wider or narrower, noble or low.”(p.32)

“Bare attention first allows things to speak for themselves, without interruption by final verdicts pronounced too hastily.” (p. 35)

Nyanaponika Thera wrote in the Burmese Buddhist tradition which had a major influence on mindfulness as practised today in the West.

This approach could be seen as an intertwining of awareness

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and acceptance. Both, of course, are central to the work done in the counselling space and in supervision.

Mindfulness as an approach has been most highly developed in Buddhism which traces its origins back approximately 2,500 years. Most of the people who use mindfulness in the West today are not Buddhists. Jon Kabat-Zinn’s implementation of mindfulness almost 40 years ago to help people to change their relationship to pain and to stress - through his Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction courses - was entirely secular, though the practices were Buddhist practices or derived from them. Similarly, Professor Mark Williams’ work on mindfulness and depression and Dr Marsha Linehan’s use of mindfulness as a resource for people with Borderline Personality Disorder are secularised without spiritual or religious connotations.

Ways to cultivate mindfulness

At its simplest, mindfulness means being aware of what you are doing while you are doing it. This means being aware that you are breathing, walking, driving, running making a phone call, cooking a meal and so on. When you notice you have drifted off into thoughts, you bring yourself back to awareness of what is happening in the world outside your thoughts - to what you are physically doing, for instance.

This return to awareness is done with acceptance that people drift off again and again, so it is done gently.

Quick mindfulness practices

Here are three:

- 1. Get in touch with your senses.** Notice the temperature of your skin. Notice that you are breathing in and out. Notice background sounds around you. Notice your breathing again. Every time your mind drifts as you are doing this - and it will - bring it back gently to the present moment.
- 2. Just notice your breathing.** Just notice that you are breathing in and out. Notice the in-breath and the out-breath. When thoughts come into your mind, return to your breathing. Do not get involved with them. Simply go back to noticing your breathing in and out.
- 3. Create mindfulness triggers.** Pick some everyday things that you do routinely. Decide that whenever you do them you will be mindful and will be aware that you are doing them. Examples are: brushing your teeth, going up or down stairs or steps, arranging your desk or other workspace, tidying, washing up, taking a shower.

Some slightly longer mindfulness practices are:

Awareness of breathing. Sit still. Notice that you are breathing in and out. Notice the in-breath and the out-breath. If you are breathing through your nose, notice that the air is colder when entering your nose than when leaving. When thoughts come into your mind just let them float on by. Do not get involved with them. If you like you can just label your thoughts: when you get a thought, just say to yourself “thinking”. Then go back

to noticing your breathing in and out. If you like, you can count your breaths, counting from 1 to 7 and then back to 1 again. Do this for 3 to 20 minutes, once or twice a day.

Awareness of walking. Notice the feeling of the ground against your feet as you walk. Notice your breathing. When you drift into your imagination, bring your mind back to your walking. Be aware that you are walking, of the feel of walking and of your breathing. Do this for 3 to 20 minutes once or twice a day.

All these practices are simple.

What you are doing with them is training yourself to return easily and often from mind wandering to the present moment and to do so with acceptance (in this case of the fact that your mind wanders a lot).

From the practices above choose what suits you best. Do mindfulness practice at set times during the day or as the opportunity arises. Prof Mark Williams suggests at least eight minutes a day which can be made up of shorter periods. One option is to do a brief practice between clients.

If you want to explore further mindfulness practices, you will find audios which you can download and use at no cost on my website www.padraigomorain.com under the "Audios" heading.

Mindfulness and supervision

Here are the effects, as I see them, of mindfulness practice on supervision where the supervisor has made mindfulness part of his or her life.

a) **The supervisor is fully present in the room.** In other words, the supervisor is better able to step out of preoccupations with whatever may have happened before the supervisee arrives. If you

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had a fight with somebody in a call centre before the session, a short mindfulness practice can orientate you towards the supervisee and not towards your newly acquired enemy in the call centre, at least for the length of the session.

b) **Mindfulness allows you to "park" the effects of previous sessions at least temporarily.** In other words it can enable you to meet the supervisee "anew" and without having the encounter coloured from the beginning by the emotional hangover, so speak, of previous sessions with this person. Of course, patterns are significant, have a tendency to re-occur and need to be attended to. But mindfulness, by enabling you to step out of the patterns for a little while, can make more room for the arrival of new issues and material in the session.

c) **You can bring a perspective of "beginner's mind" to the session.** This Zen concept describes the capacity to look at things afresh without having your very perception clouded by what has gone before. What has gone before doesn't just include what has happened between you and the supervisee; it also includes your own experience of similar cases to that which the supervisee is bringing to you. How you handled a similar case may be useful and informative but it is probably less important than how the supervisee has handled,

is handling and will handle the case which he or she is bringing to supervision. Because in mindfulness we tend to step out of patterns of thinking and rumination, we have a far better chance of approaching these cases with "beginner's mind" when we are mindful. This doesn't mean that we only apply "beginner's mind" and leave our previous experience outside the door. It means we try on a "beginner's mind" as part of our approach to the issue and mindfulness practice makes this much easier to do.

d) **It improves the chances of spotting countertransference at work in the supervisor/supervisee relationship.** If countertransference is a human trait than supervisors being, presumably, human share that trait. Who else is sitting in front of you invisibly beside this person? An earnest/rebellious student? A respected/dodgy colleague? Uncle? Aunt? Son? Daughter?

The possibilities are, of course, endless but it is well to have some inkling of them, how they might be pushing the supervisory relationship in a particular direction, whether that is a helpful or unhelpful direction. Since countertransference appears to be largely unconscious as a dynamic, an inkling may be as good as we can hope to get. But I believe that in fostering an ability to detach from habitual thinking, countertransference

helps us to get a somewhat larger inkling than would otherwise be the case.

- e) **Makes you aware of your goals for your supervisee and for the supervisee's client.** Therapeutic relationships are fluid and hard to pin down and don't usually run along neat parallel tracks. It's fine to think that the supervisee's client really ought to leave her husband. However, expressing that without mindful restraint could derail the therapy if the supervisee takes this as the required way to approach the matter with the client. You may feel that the supervisee really ought to lay down the law with a client who habitually arrives five minutes late and runs ten minutes over. But for all you know your insistence, if too strongly put, could end up demoralising the supervisee without necessarily solving the problem of time-keeping. What a more mindful approach does is to help you to see your goals for the supervisee's work and to make a cool assessment as to the extent to which you should or should not promote them.
- f) **Helps you to be compassionate and to temper that compassion where necessary.** Supervisees can suffer the same pangs of self-doubt as anybody else. Sometimes the self-doubt points to an issue the supervisee needs to deal with but often, in my experience, it is unjustified and may occur because the client is travelling more slowly than the therapist wants him or her to travel; because the client is obstructing the therapy, in the eyes of the therapist; or because the therapist generally brings an attitude of self-doubt to his or her interactions

with the world. The mindful supervisor will recognise this and will help the supervisee to explore his or her self-doubt with compassion and in a way, that is more likely to be useful than simply denying or ignoring it. If the supervisee's self-doubt is justified, then compassion needs to be tempered with the duty to help the supervisee to correct his or her approach. Mindful detachment can enable the supervisor to navigate these tricky waters.

- g) **Cultivates self-compassion in the supervisor.** Supervisors, too, have a need for their own compassion, in other words for self-compassion. A supervisor may feel that he or she is not as good a therapist as the supervisee, may feel nervous about telling the supervisee something that he or she does not want to hear, may feel exasperated by the supervisee's habitual responses and so on. In all of these, kindness towards the self can be a form of practical self-care for the supervisor. Mindfulness promotes both compassion and self-compassion. In this way it can help the supervisor to spot unjustifiable self-criticism or to treat oneself with kindness where the criticism has a grain of truth in it. Self-compassion is not only a question of being kind to oneself - as described by Dr Kristin Neff in *Self-compassion* (2011), it also involves recognising one's common humanity. In this case, recognising common humanity involves acknowledging that other supervisors probably feel the same way from time to time. This breaks through the sense of isolation or being uniquely faulty.

Conclusion

The above are just some of the ways in which mindfulness can make an important contribution to the supervision relationship. Perhaps as importantly, mindfulness can contribute much to the well-being of the supervisor as a person. It is by adopting mindfulness practices and attitudes, such as those outlined here, that one can begin to experience those benefits. ☺

References

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