

Relevance of mindfulness to developing interpersonal skills



Mindfulness as a psychological concept can be conceptualised as a present centred, non elaborative and non judgemental awareness in which all of the individual's sensations, feelings and thoughts that are present in their field of attention is taken account of and accepted (Bishop et al, 2004). Hargie (2006) states that behaviour that an individual pursues consciously can be said to be mindful, while automatic behaviour must be defined as mindless. Bishop et al go on to state that " Mindfulness in contemporary psychology has been adopted as an approach for increasing awareness and responding skilfully to mental processes that contribute to emotional distress and maladaptive behaviour." (p. 230). they suggest that operationalising the concept requires that the definition have two components, and that previous definitions do not adequately capture the nature of the concept. The first requires the individual to regulate their attentional mechanisms so that they focus on immediate and present experience, which will allow them to recognise internal events that occur in the present. This necessarily involves the individual's conscious awareness of their own feelings and thoughts as well as their surroundings. A result of this can be metacognitive abilities that allow them to control their powers of concentration. The second component of their definition of mindfulness requires the individual to adopt a certain kind of orientation towards their experience as they occur immediately, which will be characterised by openness, curiosity and acceptance. This orientation component requires the individual to accept their ' mindstream', to maintain a curious and open attitude, and to think in terms of different categories. Wiemann, Greene and Burleson (2003) note that within the context of interpersonal encounters, mindfulness implies increased attention to each individual's characteristics in new encounters. They suggest that this

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is particularly important in intercultural settings because in these, it is more important to try to be prepared for unexpected behaviour from others. This essay will consider the relationship between mindfulness and interpersonal behaviour, including relationships as well as whether mindfulness can help people to improve their interpersonal skills.

With regard to the relationship between mindfulness and interpersonal behaviour, Brown, Ryan and Creswell (2007) point out that research into the influence of mindfulness has only begun relatively recently, and has also focused largely on how it can enhance romantic relationships. For example, Welwood (1996) proposed that mindfulness encourages connection, closeness and attunement in these kinds of relationships. Goleman (2006) found that it can increase the individual's ability to pay attention to the content of their partner's communication and also to be aware of their non-verbal behaviour and affective tone. Brown et al conclude that " this scholarship suggests that mindfulness may promote interaction styles that support healthy relationship functioning and enhance overall relationship quality." (p. 225). Barnes et al (2007) used the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (Carlson & Brown, 2005; Brown & Ryan, 2003), a self-report measure of mindfulness, to look at the relationship between mindfulness and relationship satisfaction. They found that increased mindfulness on the scale predicted increased satisfaction in relationships as well as more capacity to respond to relationship stress in a constructive manner. The study was carried out in a sample of dating couples who were not distressed. One possible criticism is that the study relied on self report and there was a danger of participants responding to face validity in some of the questions.

These concerns were addressed to a certain extent in a second study, using a paradigm of conflict discussion. The authors found that scores on the Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale predicted lower scores of emotional stress to conflict. This effect in turn was explained by the fact that they experienced less emotional stress in advance of the discussion, indicating that mindfulness actually helps protect the couple from stress, and does not just have a simple buffering effect. Objective raters also found that mindfulness was associated with better quality of communication, which is consistent with Tickle Degnan and Rosenthal's (1990) finding that sustained attention in social exchanges is essential for rapport to be established. More generally, Baer et al (2006) found that there was a positive association between mindfulness and aspects of emotional intelligence, which are related to improved social skills (see also Brown & Ryan, 2003). This can lead to better perspective taking, response patterns that are cooperative and increased satisfaction in marital partners (Schutte et al, 2001). Brown and Kasser (2005; see also Brown & Ryan, 2003; 2004) found that mindfulness as measured by the Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale had a positive association with, or even predicted, a sense of interpersonal closeness and relatedness. This suggests that mindfulness plays a role in supporting social connections, which can be considered a fundamental psychological need (Deci & Ryan, 1991). However, this proposition must be tested and confirmed by further research.

Furthermore, incipient intervention studies also support the notion that mindfulness has a beneficial role in relationships. Carson et al (2004) adapted the extant Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction programme (Kabat

Zinn, 1982) to a couples based intervention, which was named Mindfulness Based Relationship Enhancement. They found that, compared to control couples, those who undertook the intervention showed significantly increased partner acceptance, autonomy, and relationship satisfaction, and significantly reduces relationship and personal distress. These results held both post-test and at a follow up carried out three months later. All couples in the study were non distressed. This indicates that increased mindfulness can lead to positive outcome in terms of interpersonal behaviour.

Burgoon, Berger and Waldron (2000) argue that in order to properly consider how mindfulness can help to address social issues, it is necessary to specify the features that characterise the communication context, the individuals communicating, or the messages being communicated that have the potential to increase mindfulness. Langer (1978) and subsequent authors (e.g. Hewes & Graham, 1989; Schul & Burnstein, 1998) have identified a number of situations that prompt individuals to exhibit more thoughtful behaviour. These include new situations, new formats for communication, and situations that are uninvolved. Waldron (1997) went on to study conversations and found that some of the proposed mindfulness prompts were indeed manifested therein. Conversations that included this kind of behaviour had associated patterns of behaviour that included more questioning, longer turns taken in the conversation, calls for evidence to be given and more interruption, which all indicate that efforts are being made to take control of the situation. However, it should be noted that this approach may not necessarily be considered the best for systematically examining the

use of mindfulness prompts due to the fairly small number of conversations that were recorded.

Dekeyser et al (2008) also looked at the relationship between mindfulness and interpersonal performance and feelings. Firstly, they looked at the factor structure and reliability of a mindfulness measure, the Kentucky Inventory of Mindfulness Skills (Baer et al, 2004), which is also based on self report. They used a sample of Psychology students and parents, all of whom spoke Dutch. They were able to replicate Baer et al's finding in terms of the four factors that underlie mindfulness, which are characterised as Describe, Observe, Accept without Judgement and Act with Awareness. These were invariant through the samples tested, and all of these aspects of mindfulness displayed positive associations with self expression during a variety of social situations. Additionally, an increased tendency towards mindful observation was correlated with higher levels of empathy. The other factors of acting with awareness, acceptance without judgement and mindful description were correlated with more accurate description and identification of emotions and feelings, lowered social anxiety, increased body satisfaction and lowered contagion of distress. Thus, this study indicates that several factors, many of which are highly personal in nature, are associated with aspects of mindfulness. This further strengthens the notion that high levels of mindfulness are associated with a number of positive psychological outcomes, although the nature of this relationship is not clear. It must be remembered that correlation in no way infers causation and it is possible that mindfulness exerts more of a moderating or mediating effect.

Furthermore, mindfulness may have some clinical applications, such as the relatively recent use of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, which is a treatment programme that was originally devised in order to help to manage chronic pain (Kabat Zinn, Lipworth et al, 1987; Kabat Zinn, Lipworth & Burney, 1985). The treatment programme is presently used in order to help to reduce the psychological morbidity that comes along with chronic illnesses, as well as in the treatment of behavioural and emotional disorders (Kabat Zinn, 1998). Bishop (2002) has pointed out that the use of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction has increased in terms of popularity despite the fact that there has been no rigorous scientific evaluation of the treatment programme. However, clinical trials have begun to be carried out. Reibel, Greenson et al (2001) found significant reductions of psychological morbidity in patients with a medical illness using the programme (see also Carlson, Ursuliak et al, 2001; Speca, Carlson et al, 2000). Williams, Kolar et al (2001) also found that Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction helped to increase individuals' psychological well being and mitigate stress in samples that were not clinical (see also Shapiro, Schwartz & Bonner, 1998; Astin, 1997).

In conclusion, the nature of mindfulness is complex and appears to have two separate but interconnected components; attention and orientation.

Mindfulness is related to interpersonal behaviour because it can promote styles of interaction that lead to improved social behaviour and can also have a positive influence on relationships with others. Indeed, the research indicates that mindfulness can have a protective capacity against social stress, although how it does this is not yet clear. Furthermore, early research

indicates that interventions that encourage mindfulness can not only reduce stress following illness, but can also have positive impacts on interpersonal relationships. Although the field is relatively young, research is showing more and more positive aspects of mindfulness for interpersonal skills and behaviour. One possible future direction for research would be the development of a more objective way of measuring mindfulness. At present, most studies rely on self-report, which is influenced by the participant's concept of themselves. Exploratory studies looking for other indices of mindfulness, perhaps using galvanic skin response, event related potentials or functional magnetic resonance imaging may be of use.