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Foundation Assignment Two

Write an essay which integrates detailed examples of your personal experience of mindfulness practice with the wider, theoretical rationales which underpin the eight-week course.

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Introduction

In this assignment, I will be reflecting on my experience of mindfulness and my mindful practice, alongside consideration of theoretical rationales and underpinnings from the eight-week course. I will be considering how these elements interrelate and how they have more broadly impacted on my life and way of living. I will be considering the following four themes –

- The gift of grief
- My intention, attention and attitude
- Anxiety and compassion
- Community

The gift of grief and how the support of practice has helped me to accept it

The thread of my life has been imbued with a considerable amount of experiential avoidance, which Crane (2017) describes as seeking to become divorced from the direct experience of challenging thoughts, emotions and body sensations. This seemed the only answer to painful memories associated with my adolescence and childhood, which led to feelings of guilt and consequent low self-esteem.

Session six of the Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression (M.B.C.T) programme (Segal et al., 2018) encourages participants to reduce the degree of identification around what they are thinking and see thoughts as only thoughts and transitory events in the mind. I now appreciate that thoughts may not be facts, but at the time my thoughts and the associated internal language were so insistent that I felt they were real. As such thoughts can be expressed internally in verbal form and because the mental processing configurations that create and maintain suffering often prioritise a verbal-conceptual level of information (Teasdale & Chaskalson, 2011) this had a considerable impact on my life. In those moments, thoughts of guilt and inferiority could be accompanied by panic – tightness in the throat, nausea and pain around the eyes. At these times I was at the mercy of almost any external

stressor. The slightest upset or sense of unease would activate the fight or flight response as I sensed the situation to be threatening. An “amygdala hijacking” (Daniel Goleman, 2012) would take start this stress response, activating the sympathetic nervous system with the release of stress hormones, adrenaline and cortisol. In the body I would experience raised heart rate and shallow breathing and practically, more likely to react rashly in a situation than respond in a considered fashion.

Caught up in the effects of a stress response (Folette et al., 2018) there often followed the physical urge to flee from the situation, which was often impossible. This would inevitably lead to maladaptive, rationally unsupported, thinking (C.M.R.P., 2020; Teasdale & Chaskalson, 2011) as I monitored the discrepancy (Feldman & Kuyken, 2019; Segal et al., 2018) between my current unsatisfactory situation and a preferred but unattainable alternative. There is no doubt that for long periods, I was operating with a high degree of automaticity (Bargh, 2014) and auto-pilot, caught up in ruminative thinking cycles (Crane, 2017) and unaware of present moment reality. Automatic pilot is the focus of the first session of the M.B.C.T. programme, entitled - ‘Awareness and Automatic Pilot’ (Segal et al., 2018). Over-time it became apparent that I was being impacted by ongoing effects of the stress reaction cycle (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). This cycle of regularly reacting to stress, wear and tear on my body and increased sensitivity to stress; manifested itself in exhaustion, burnout and I think depression although this was never diagnosed. Amid this maelstrom of emotions and ongoing experiential avoidance (Folette et al., 2018) I consistently struggled to create compassion for myself. Although I now appreciate that self-compassion involves treating oneself with the same kindness, concern and support you’d offer to a good friend (Neff, 2015) this was not something I was able to do for myself at the time.

In relation to my inability to generate self-compassion, the key factor has been how I perceive myself in relation to others. As a result of my experience on this module, I have received tremendous nourishment from an understanding of general vulnerability and with reference to this, how mindfulness can highlight the traits shared by humans, that tend us towards suffering (Crane, 2017). Previously without this knowledge I had felt isolated and had a sense of inferiority from a perceived sense of ‘being different’, essentially suffering solely from specific vulnerabilities (Kabat-Zinn & Kabat-Zinn, 2021). Following engagement in

the course with small groups and in the final home group's sharing session, I became conscious of this universal trait of human suffering. Knowledge of this characteristic has helped me find a sense of community with others who have trod a similar path to me, especially those who have lost someone they love. This has helped me to view my thoughts from a more objective standpoint (Chaskalson, 2011) and appreciate that not all thoughts are facts. Landing upon this realization, I appreciated a sense of liberation, uplift and release of energy across my throat, shoulders and forehead. I know this is powerful, actionable information I can apply to my life, whenever I feel vulnerable. Subsequent to this thought, I experienced a sense of letting go, accompanied by a soothing and settling across my neck and shoulders.

This perspective has enabled me to re-perceive my situation and take a more decentered approach to what I perceive, creating greater clarity and less immersion in my own drama (Shapiro et al., 2006). This more aware mode of being has helped me to fully understand, that the patterns of mind that are trapping me in emotional suffering, are the same patterns that stand between me and the potential for a more satisfying way of being (Teasdale & Chaskalson, 2011).

My intention, attention and attitude

The importance of intention, in and around my mindfulness journey and my involvement on this module, is fundamental. The shape of this intention has crystalised across the year, greatly assisted by my understanding of the Intention, Attention and Attitude Model (IAA Model) (Shapiro et al., 2006). This theoretical model suggests three axioms of mindfulness (intention, attention and attitude) and introduces a meta-mechanism of action :

re-perceiving and then considers this perspective shift in terms of the transformation of mindfulness. Across the year it has become clear my intention, the 'knowing why', is primarily about the relationship I have with my eldest son Rory. How I can stay connected to him, despite his physical absence and how I can relieve some of the pain of his loss, whilst also staying as close as possible. Learning to hold this intention close, to be with it and letting go of the need to make things somehow different from the way they are.

Turning to attention, over time I have been able to better focus on the present moment and with painful thoughts arising I would register them, perhaps name them and then let them

go, returning to a chosen anchor point, normally my hands placed on a cushion. I would appreciate this returning and settling, by experiencing a wave of relaxation across my face and behind my eyes. In relation to Attitude I have sought to turn towards my experience, to welcome in kindness and self-compassion, but found it very hard for a long time. I was able to offer this happily to Rory, but not to myself. This conflict was completely in tune with my lifelong difficulty in showing compassion towards myself and I also felt any sense of ease or letting go in this area, would somehow indicate I was 'ok' with his death. With these thoughts in mind, my emotions were especially raw and would be accompanied by a sense of unbearable sadness and disempowerment. I would often lose myself in thoughts relating to discrepancy monitoring (Segal et al., 2018); 'What if I had not gone to work that day, what if I had managed to find out he was still in the house, what if, what if...' Floods of tears accompanied by nausea would ensue, alongside an ice cold feeling in my stomach, across my chest and down my arms. These uncomfortable sensations would predicate further painful thoughts about his loss and prompt ongoing painful bodily sensations. At the beginning, the only option was to use sleep or distraction as a way of escaping this debilitating cycle.

Over time I have been able turn towards my thoughts and feelings using the attitudinal foundations (Kabat-Zinn, 2013) of acceptance, trust and seeking to be non-judgemental. In my practice I would kindly breathe into areas of tension as painful memories and feelings arose, repeating to myself the mantra - '*Love....Love*'. This being an expression of the great love I feel for my son and that which I feel for myself. This has enabled me to let go of my habitual tendency to self-criticise and instead understand it is ok to love myself; despite, or perhaps because of, everything that has happened. This change in perspective has been made possible through a process of decentering and being able to re-perceive my situation (Shapiro et al., 2006).

The challenge and the opportunity of approaching my son and all the thoughts and feelings that accompany this, was beautifully encapsulated by a wonderful friend on the module, when she said that she was thinking of me 'while I felt into the excruciating combination of loving Rory and having him gone.' I am also mindful that, although this work and this 'being human' is hard, I am inspired by the exhortation, not to turn my head and to keep looking at my bandaged place, because I know that is where the light enters (Santorelli, 2000).

The ability to change how I could relate to my son, aligned with an a-ha! moment when teaching my first M.B.S.R. course. This happened when moving from week four - *Learning About our Patterns of Reactivity to Stress*, to week five - *Coping With Stress: Using Mindfulness to Respond Instead of React* (C.M.R.P., 2020). This a-ha! moment was the realisation of a change in direction in the programme. With the first half involving the self-regulation of attention on immediate experience and the second half, a particular orientation towards one's experiences in the present moment, involving curiosity, openness and acceptance (Kempton, 2020). In addition, tellingly, week five on the *Finding Peace in a Frantic World* programme (Williams & Penman, 2011) is called 'turning towards difficulties.' It was clear to me that this was the path I had taken along with my son, on my mindfulness journey across the last year.

Anxiety and compassion

The process of writing this second assignment has been challenging. Despite doing better than I expected in the first essay, an increasing pressure of work following the easing of lock-down has delayed my progress. Considerable thoughts around missing the deadline and not being good enough, were prevalent. I would sense some stress across the shoulders, down my spine and an uncomfortable energy behind my eyes. In these moments, I would notice the signs of driven-doing mode, focusing on a future goal, in contrast to the being mode where attention rests on the present moment (Segal et al., 2018). In these moments, I would employ the three minute-breathing space (Segal et al., 2018). This allowed the opportunity to re-perceive by connecting with the breathe and my body. I would notice a settling, easing of tension around the chest and awareness of different choices on how and when to proceed. I would use this short practice regularly, as it offers an immediate and speedy solution to stressful experiences and moments. At these times I agree with the Kabat-Zinn's observation (2013), that meditation is about stopping and being present, that is all. As I say these words, I know this astute aphorism is true and in response the parasympathetic nervous system is activated (Matos et al., 2017), my heart and breathing

rate slows, I relax and recognise the felt sense of warmth in my arms and shoulders, and a settling in my stomach. These moments allow me the opportunity to step into another world or at least see the existing one, anew. I become aware of a rotation in consciousness or an orthogonal reality (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). Through this comes the opportunity to re-perceive and awareness of choices, about how and when to proceed rather than continue in driven-doing mode (Williams et al., 2017). This state of mind invites entry into a domain of being (Kabat-Zinn, 2013) imbued with greater present moment awareness and the opportunity for skilful action (Segal et al., 2018) in everyday life. I have noticed taking advantage of the wisdom of a pause, on an increasing number of occasions, whether used on the verge of an argument with a family member, in the car, or on a challenging business conversation.

Mindful movement has represented a key element in my focus on self-compassion during this period, in particular extended use of Judith Soulsby's Qi Gong inspired practice. Engaging with this practice over an extended period has enabled me to bypass the guidance and engage directly with myself and my experience without distraction, to see as the saying goes – 'the moon, rather than the finger pointing at the moon.' (Ho, 2008)

Key elements for me, were the sequential movements of Embracing the Tree and then Shou Gung (*translation – The Art of Longevity*). With the first element, the challenging invitation was to hold my arms static and outstretched for several minutes. This would initiate waves of intense sensations and associated thoughts regarding striving, and judgement around performance. Thoughts would bubble up quickly, prompted by increasing warmth and tension in my upper arms and shoulders. My response was to breathe into the areas of tension, 'opening' with the in-breath and 'softening' with the out-breath, letting go and letting be. The release of the arms and transferring into the Shou Gung movement, provided a dramatic release of tension and emotion, accompanied with waves of gratitude and compassion as the hands moved down in front of the face, chest and stomach.

In these movements and moments, I would see a clear view of how to live my life. I am conscious of how to better manage my window of tolerance (Griffith, 2021) using

mindfulness practice to become more aware of, and sensitive to, my emotional and physical edges. I recognise there will be tough times ahead, but there is merit in approaching these and seeking to be ok with them as much as is possible. Oftentimes I would do this practice in Rory's bedroom, the space where he passed away, finishing the practice lying on his floor breathing in and breathing out with a sense of openness and spaciousness, experiencing this as a flow of energy through the chest, face and throat. Present moment awareness and acceptance is a key element of week five of the eight-week course (Santorelli et al., 2017) and this aligns closely with an openness to be with whatever feelings present themselves, positive, neutral or negative (Kabat-Zinn, 2009).

Community

My experience on the module has been greatly influenced by the shared mindfulness practices, journey and experience in groups. Around this, my experience has also been shaped by the pandemic and digital delivery of the module. Initially a little strange, then gradually over time it became a wonderful experience walking into my study and seeing a smiling, digital jigsaw of faces. Having such easy accessibility to this community made me mindful of a number of interconnected attitudinal foundations, gratitude, generosity, acceptance and over time, trust.

During the module, we considered a model of group and team development - Tuckman and Jensen's (2010) model which considers the likely strategies and characteristics that would appear at different times during five stages of development – forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning. My response in the discussion relating to this was overwhelmingly negative. Having previously had poor experiences with this model in business, I initially did not see its relevance in a trusting environment centred around mindfulness. In the large group discussion, I made a critical comment about the model and then afterwards fell into ruminating about the appropriateness of my observation, self-judgement and worries about being accepted. In my body I noticed a hollow feeling in my stomach and dull ache around my upper chest and throat, which then prompted discrepancy monitoring and predictable maladaptive thoughts. On this occasion, I was able

to move to an adaptive (Teasdale & Chaskalson, 2011), successful and effective, mode of thinking by contacting a friend on the course for a reassuring discussion. Following this I have sought to employ a sitting meditation more regularly, inviting myself to see thoughts as passing events rather than facts, moving through the mind rather like clouds drifting across the sky. I do find that these negative thoughts can prove very sticky (Joormann et al., 2011) but I hope this approach will support me moving forwards in letting go of these thoughts and feelings more easily.

Bearing in mind Tuckman's model, I was interested in the assertion that the storming and norming stages can be reversed in mindfulness environments (Mardula, 2014). This can be because, the holding of the group and the tutor's embodying of the attitudinal foundations can encourage a centering in the body and a pausing that may impact on group behaviour. This sense of connectedness certainly chimes with my experience on the module, where alignment over purpose and goals and a sense of support and engagement, came earlier than is case with other groups I have experienced.

Turning to different groups and the stages of development, the key determining factors were a) the group sizes and b) frequency of meeting. I felt that smaller buddy groups provided a more intimate, less exposed environment for discussion and meeting regularly certainly helped with this. With most of my small groups the norming and performing levels were achieved very quickly, and many aspects of the attitudinal foundations fell into place. It has been a real pleasure and joy in these environments, to experience acceptance, gratitude and generosity at the forming and norming stages. Additionally, from the perspective of a trainee mindfulness teacher, I was interested to see a different team development model - the Bangor, Exeter and Oxford Mindfulness-Based Interventions Teaching Assessment Criteria (MBI-TAC) which is made up of - learning container, group development, common humanity and leadership style (Crane et al., 2012). As I progress with my teacher training, this will be something I bear in mind.

My experience in a larger group – the home group, was quite different. Involving more people and meeting less frequently, progress through the stages of development was slower. What was interesting was the dynamic on the final sharing weekend, where the sessions

were so open and honest I had a sense of the group moving through to performing and adjourning in a matter of hours. The group emails that followed the final session were full of love and loss. The adjourning process was painful but also wonderful, and I especially recall the moment when one group member appeared with her new-born baby! I felt this was the most emotionally charged moment on the module. There were some tears and plenty of laughter, alongside a considerable sense of loss with the parting of ways. Sitting here writing this, I feel this as a weight in my throat and stomach and pressure of tears behind my eyes. I do know however that I will take this love and learning forward into groups that continue and also with new groups. With existing buddy groups, we are re-purposing the focus away from purely academic study and towards being vessels to support our meditation and mindfulness journeys. More broadly, I am noticing that my experience on the module is helping me re-evaluate my view of groups, alongside the Tuckman model, in my personal and work life. It has helped me understand and accept that all groups are different and move through stages of development in different ways. I believe awareness of this can help me work more effectively and empathetically in group environments in the future. This realisation brings with it a sense of equanimity (Kabat-Zinn, 2013) a settling around the eyes and cheeks and a feeling of confidence for the future.

Conclusion

Looking back across the last year, my reflective diary and writing this assignment, I recognise just how much the theoretical underpinnings have supported my practice and allowed me to re-perceive my behaviour on an ongoing basis. I am grateful for the additional choices I can now select from and the emotional wisdom that has accompanied this. Most importantly, it has revealed the intention and thread running through my mindfulness journey and my life, for the betterment of relationships relating to all those I come into contact with, but especially with those I love the most, my son Rory, his two brothers Luke and Miles and my wife Jo. For that, I will be forever grateful.

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