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Write a reflective summary of 1) your experience of engaging in the mindfulness-based programme during this module, and 2) your own mindfulness practice 'journey' during this module.

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In this essay I cover four elements. These are - the gift of grief, mindful movement, my experience in groups and everyday mindfulness. I consider the effects of these both on my personal practice and my mindfulness journey overall.

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

The thread of my mindfulness journey began in earnest, shortly after the 12th June 2018, the day my eldest son took his life.

As I have travelled on my mindfulness journey, I have come to the painful understanding that my son has given me a gift. As I began to recognise this, I said to myself at first and then hesitantly to others – ‘He gave me a gift. I did not expect it or want to receive it. But I have it now and cannot return it. It is beholden upon me for my sake as well as his, to us it as well as I can.’ My overriding intention for the last six months has to been to hold my son in my attention and attitudes. His life, his death and his memory.

Often in practice, with thoughts of my son present, I would experience intense feelings and sensations in my body. These could involve pressure and pain behind the eyes, a welling of tears and constriction in my throat. Thoughts would centre around a sense of irrevocable loss and sadness. Connected with this would be a sense of guilt, self-judgment and wanting to withdraw from painful feelings.

Early on in the module, I set my intention to notice these thoughts, registering them and letting them go, before returning my attention to an anchor point. As the course progressed, utilising the attitudinal foundations (Kabat-Zinn, 2013) I tried a different technique, that of ‘approaching’. I invited myself to be aware of painful thoughts, as merely events in the mind, and then breathing into associated areas of bodily discomfort. Throughout, seeking to be accepting and non-judgemental of thoughts and feelings. Breathing in, opening and gently directing awareness with my breath and seeking to soften and let go as I breathed out.

This non-judging approach often proved challenging. In many instances, I was unable to welcome or accept this aspect of my experience. I thought that if I was able to be do this, it

would indicate I was somehow 'ok' with his death. This in turn triggered further painful thoughts, including judging myself for not having saved him. I would feel a range of powerful sensations including a tightening across my shoulders (the usual place where I notice stress in my body) and then referred pain down my spine and a sense of creeping cold spreading across my upper arms. This avoidance of painful thoughts and stress in my shoulders, is a pattern that was in evidence across much of my experience.

In response to this, reflecting on my experience and using the attitudinal foundations of acceptance, trust and seeking to be non-judgemental; I would kindly breathe into the areas of tension as painful memories and feelings arose, repeating to myself the mantra - 'Love....Love'. This being an expression of the love I feel for my son and the love I feel for myself. Letting go of the habitual tendency to self-criticise and instead understanding it is ok to love myself. Despite, or perhaps because of, everything that has happened.

More widely, this shift in perception has encouraged me to be kinder to myself. Historically, a perceived poor performance across different walks of life, led to a sense of not feeling worthy and consequently not being kind to myself. This in turn adversely affected some of my relationships. A greater acceptance of myself alongside a less-judgemental approach is benefitting those around me, my family, my work colleagues and those who I teach on mindfulness-based programmes.

Mindful movement

My experience of mindful movement has been central to my mindfulness journey across the last six months.

I have found 'Embracing the tree', a Qi Gong posture, challenging and rewarding at the same time. Holding my arms static and outstretched, I would notice growing tension and pain in my shoulders and arms, accompanied by a barrage of thoughts around striving, concerns around not being able to hold the position and whether I had the mental strength to do so. In response, I would seek to be patient and accept these thoughts and sensations by

breathing into them and then breathing out, softening and letting go. In addition, the invitation from the guidance was to relax other areas of the body during the process. With this permission given, I experienced a sweeping sense of acceptance and awareness of letting go.

With the invitation to let the arms drop, I was flooded by the most intense sensations of release. Hands, shoulders and arms, throbbing and tingling. I became suddenly aware, that challenging moments in everyday life can be overcome and there is a physical and emotional benefit from doing so. In that moment, I felt viscerally connected to certain body parts, with a focus excluding all else. This brought with it consciousness of a beginner's mind, as if feeling my hands and arms in a way not previously sensed before.

The experience of this physical and mental challenge has helped me at other times. An example of this, pertains to a recent experience of submitting an article I wrote for a publication, that was not accepted. Upon reading the email informing me, I felt the rejection as a raw wave of anger. This was accompanied by repeating waves of tightness and tension in my jaw, neck and all the way down my arms. I consciously greeted these painful sensations as a 'welcome old friend', doing so with a slight smile on my lips and breathing into areas of discomfort, softening and allowing. When thoughts of the rejection returned and seemed too great to manage, I instead focused my attention on parts of the body where I wasn't holding tension, letting go into these relaxed areas. I continued with this alternating approach for over an hour. When the sense of frustration finally receded, I felt buoyed by my approach, which I sensed had reduced the effect both in terms of duration and impact. I also sensed a confidence that this technique could be successfully utilised in the future. In the body, I felt this buoying effect as a kind of settling, a reduction of stress in the shoulders and a calming sensation through the chest and abdomen.

With other aspects of mindful movement, such as 'Embracing the Sky', I have been aware of a tremendous emotional connection with the body as the hands sweep past the chest and face and then a sense of openness and spaciousness as the arms spread out above my head. As well as feeling physically open in these moments, I am also aware of being open to life, to others, even to myself. In addition, when I allow the body to be led by the breath I feel a

sense of lightness, euphoric in nature, in my face and uplifted arms that is impossible to put into words.

Experience in groups

Across the module I have noticed a range of different experiences in groups. At the outset, arriving in the large main group and in my first academic outing in many years, I felt daunted. Almost immediately I had thoughts around not being good enough and that other people were likely to be better, smarter and more mindful than me. On a couple of occasions, I felt that my contributions were not perceived to be good enough. I noticed considerable discomfort at this. Thoughts of disappointment and inadequacy were followed by a feeling of anger and wanting to withdraw. This was accompanied by tightness in the throat and some queasiness in my stomach. At that point I decided to limit my contributions, which goes against my usual approach in communal environments.

I sense that because of the above, I took an alternative approach (resulting in a different experience) with a number of smaller, study buddy and practice groups. I was very active in setting up WhatsApp groups and agreeing meeting times. This is where I found my community and some of my richest experiences. This was not only of value in the groups themselves but also in my personal practice, where I was able to apply the learnings, both academic and emotional. As I write this I notice the effect of these words - kindness, support, generosity and even love. I notice warmth in my shoulders, a lump in my throat and tears behind my eyes. It is connecting so strongly 'virtually' in this way, that I realise how desperate I am to meet these people, my friends, in person as soon as is practicable.

Groups and the on-line aspect of the module has to be considered within the wider context of the pandemic and its effect on my life and practice. I am very aware that I am only sitting here writing this assignment, because of the pandemic. If it had not happened and my business life had not been interrupted, I would not have had the time to consider the Masters route. I am aware of the paradox inherent in this situation, where amidst such suffering and sadness, circumstances have conspired to provide me with an opportunity that

is life-changing and life-affirming. Aware of how I have profited, thoughts of guilt and shame arise, but I am able to let these pass. I know that I can be kind and allow myself to benefit, accepting the hand that has been dealt and not judging myself, as I have so often done in the past.

Everyday mindfulness

During the pandemic, walking my dog over the local hills has represented a physical and mental lifeline. These walks through the hills are ideal moments for mindfulness practice. Another walker passes by, a deer breaks cover and a dog barks in the distance. My mind is constantly distracted and is caught up in ruminative extrapolations. As best as I can, I draw the attention back to an anchor point, my feet walking, my hands swinging by my sides. I stop at a gate overlooking a valley. Above, clouds are sailing across a sunny sky, their shadows chasing each other across the field below. A superb moment to STOP. Take a breath, observe what is happening around me, and proceed. As I do this, even for a few seconds, the effect is extraordinary. Hearing the birds sing, seeing something unexpected in the distance; beginner's mind comes to the fore. I've passed this way previously, but seeing it now, as if for the first time. Within the body, I experience a sense of quietude. Relaxation sweeps through my shoulders and face. I understand this is a simple tool I can use as a powerful agency, any time.

In summary, I am now aware that the reflective experience of the last six months has greatly helped in the way I can live my life. I often think of Larry Rosenberg's observation that this process is like watching *Gone with The Wind*, many times (Rosenberg, 2004). The more I pay attention to the movie of my life, the more I will become familiar with the highs and lows and so less affected by them.

Finally, I am deeply grateful for how my mindfulness journey has helped me become closer to my son. Seeking to accept painful thoughts and feelings that arise, as non-judgmentally as possible. I have an increasing sense of trust that this will help me in my relationship with him and with others, as I travel forward.

References

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