

## Practitioner's Corner: Mindfulness and Grief

by Eunie Alsaker

Mindfulness is a skill which has been around for centuries but has recently exploded in attention and popularity. What is new in the last generation is that we have come to understand the science behind this ancient concept. For those living with grief, mindfulness can be a powerful tool.

Henry Emmons (2015), a recent MCDES presenter, defines mindfulness as "Awareness in the present moment with acceptance." Heather Stang, who writes specifically on the intersection of grief and mindfulness, defines it as "the art of using your senses to be fully awake in the present moment" (2014, p. 8). Mindfulness has been proven to be effective in pain management, improving concentration, emotional regulation, and living with depression and anxiety, as well as with grief.

According to Robert Altman (2015) the opposite of mindfulness is mindlessness, where we simply react to our experiences. We feel something unsettling and we immediately want to change it by running away or trying to stop it. Or we feel something upsetting and we define ourselves by it rather than seeing it as one part of our whole being. Grief is distressing, and can contain emotions beyond what we believe we can carry. Mindfulness provides an alternative way to not get rid of but rather relate to difficult thoughts, emotions, or physical sensations. Often what creates the greatest hardship is not the primary emotion or thought itself. It is the judgment we ascribe to that emotion or thought. (I can't...I should...I shouldn't...Why am I so...) We may feel overwhelmed or afraid, but we don't stop there. We attach thoughts about our thoughts which lead to secondary emotions of anger, guilt, or self-punishment.

Misconceptions, both cultural and internal, about grief cause unnecessary suffering.

When we train our mind to stay present and notice, acknowledge, and normalize the thought or emotion, we begin to rewire our brain. A reactive mind quickly slides into the past and judges actions and inactions or jumps into the future and dwells on fears and unknowns. Focusing on the breath and immediate experience puts our prefrontal cortex back in charge and calms the fear center of our brain.

I think of it as a four-step process. Notice/acknowledge the emotion. "I am sad." "I am scared." Followed by normalizing it. "And that's okay." "This is a part of grief." Or notice the thought, "I can't do this," and respond with, "That is my thought, not a fact." And then shift focus to the breath and engage in deep belly breathing, as opposed to shallow chest breathing which leaves us more vulnerable to a stress response. Finally bring attention to whatever it is we were doing, e.g., I am chopping vegetables for dinner. I am talking to Jane. I am noticing the birds in the tree. Quite the opposite of multi-tasking; we focus in on one thing.

In this process, many things shift. We now have some distance from our thoughts and emotions. We are not attached to them in the way we are when we judge them. They are part of us, but not all of us. It is a way to honor our true emotions without spinning out into the unknown. As Emmons puts it, it keeps us from drifting into the chaos where we are overwhelmed or paralyzed by emotion and from being totally disconnected from our emotions (2015).

We are breaking down the past, present, and future into only the cur-

rent moment. I may not be able to hold all the pain of the past and fears of the future on top of the current moment, but I can handle this one instant.

One of my favorite results of mindful-

ness is an increase in confidence. We discover an inner strength and ability to hold difficult emotions we did not know we had. Our self-narrative goes from, "I can't," to "I am." When we are not resisting or fighting, we open ourselves up to post-traumatic growth, to making meaning out of tragedy.

A central component of mindfulness practice is compassion. Compassion naturally increases when judgements decrease. I always like the "best friend" test. Am I treating myself in ways I would treat my best friend? Or does my inner critic never stop, pointing out "mistakes" and fears, finding blame, and citing incompetence. Most mindfulness practices include some type of loving kindness meditation. When we treat our self with compassion, we stay away from critiquing our past or convincing our self the future will always be bleak. Directing compassion toward our suffering with words such as, "May I be safe. May I be at peace. May I be loved" is powerful. As Tim Desmond (2016) likes to say, "Healing happens when suffering is met with compassion."

This is all relatively simple in concept, but not necessarily easy to do. As with anything we wish to improve upon, it helps to develop a routine and practice. Neuroscientists have found that intentionally practicing these



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skills for 20 minutes per day for eight weeks is the start of lasting structural changes in the brain. However, even starting with three to five minutes once or twice a day makes a direct impact. A morning practice sets the tone for the day and an evening practice calms and clears the mind. By setting aside time to practice, it then becomes easier to use impromptu. There are many ways to practice these skills. Stang in *Mindfulness & Grief* (2014) lays out multiple easy-to-follow exercises. I encourage you to check out her book. Some common recommendations include:

- Stop periodically throughout the day and do 2-3 rounds of deep breathing. Scan your muscles for tension (and release). Notice and state your emotions.
- Choose one thing to do with full attention on your task. Make a cup of tea or walk to your next meeting with awareness.
- Notice where you feel grief in your body. And then concentrate on that area and breathe toward it. As I learned in Lamaze class prior to the birth of my first child, breathe into the pain. Resisting makes it worse.
- Use your increased awareness of emotions to reflect on triggers. I feel particularly nervous right now. What is the cause? What triggered this deep sadness? And then expand this to pleasant emotions. I feel at peace. Why? My life feels meaningful. What is creating this feeling? I feel a connection with someone.

How did I open myself to this relationship? I feel alive after I run. How might I then increase the times I am hopeful?

- Develop a practice of self-compassion and use it daily.

Using mindfulness skills also improves our own clinical work. It increases our ability to stay present with our client's story and decreases the temptation to plan ahead. When we fully connect with a client's story, we become more compassionate. We are trained to meet clients where they are. As grief counselors, this is particularly important for we live in a culture which sets up expectations of closure or an ending time for grief. We want to guide our clients to accept their grief journey as uniquely their own. Mindfulness assists both client and clinician in this process.

## References

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