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Chapter 8

Mindfulness approaches

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Aims

This chapter will:

- explain what mindfulness means and where it comes from
- describe how mindfulness approaches explain fear and sadness
- explore how mindfulness-trained counsellors could encourage their clients to engage with fear and sadness
- consider the potentials and limitations for psychotherapists from different approaches engaging with mindfulness
- introduce the practice returning to the present moment alone and in interaction.

Introduction

Activity 1 Mindfulness meditation (adapted from Batchelor, 1997)

Sit comfortably somewhere quiet, either cross-legged on a cushion or in a chair, with your back unsupported and upright but not tense. Rest your hands in your lap or on your knees.

Shut your eyes. Check for any parts of your body that feel tense: your face, your shoulders, your back. Relax these. Notice the feeling of your body against the floor or chair, the subtle melody of sounds around you. Breathe in and out three times.

Now for 10 minutes focus your attention on your breath. Don't try to control its rhythm but just notice it happening. Become aware of the various sensations that accompany it entering and leaving your body: the coolness or warmth of the air, the shifting of your clothes against your skin. Let your mind settle on the ebb and flow of the breath like a boat which is anchored, gently rising and falling with the waves. If you find yourself distracted by thoughts or physical sensations don't judge them or try to stop them, just notice them and gently bring your attention back to the breath.

Comment

Afterwards you might like to consider the following questions. What is this exercise like? What do you find difficult or easy about it? Do you think it is valuable in any way? How would it be to do this if you were feeling sad or anxious? How would it be to do it for an hour a day, or for a whole week? Keep your answers to these questions in mind as you read the rest of the chapter and think about the use of mindfulness practice within counselling and psychotherapy.

Mindfulness is a translation of the Pali word ‘*sati*’, which means ‘recollection’. What are we recollecting when we are mindful? We are recollecting the importance of returning to accepting awareness of the present moment, as in the meditation above (Germer, Siegel and Fulton, 2005). Mindfulness is not just about meditation, but rather meditation is one way of practising mindfulness. It has been an integral part of Buddhism for 2500 years but has recently been taken up by western psychotherapists from various approaches (notably cognitive-behavioural therapy – CBT) to inform and enhance their understandings and practices. Unlike the other approaches covered in the last few chapters (4–7), mindfulness is not so much a type of therapy as a way of approaching suffering which is taught to clients to apply in their daily lives. Mindfulness therapies are often taught in group-based classes or programmes, or in self-help books and CDs, rather than in one to one in therapy. For this reason, I will concentrate here on the understandings and practices that mindfulness teaches, focusing on how it might look in the therapy room only at the end of the chapter.

Origins of mindfulness

The Buddha was born Siddhattha Gautama in *c.*490 BC in northern India. The story goes that he led a sheltered life in a palace, waited on by servants. His father ensured that he was never confronted by anything disturbing. When, as a young man, he became restless, his father arranged a trip outside the palace for him and attempted to make sure that he would see nothing distressing. However, despite all precautions, Siddhattha saw one person wracked with illness, another crippled by old age, a dead body and a wandering monk. He became so troubled by the realisation of the uncertain and transient nature of life, and the suffering inherent in it, that he could no longer remain in his pampered world and left his home and family. He travelled as a monk for 6 years, practising many of the religions of the day, which usually involved austerity and denial of pleasure, but nothing seemed to help. Finally he sat under a tree for 7 days, at the end of which he had an ‘awakening’ and understood human suffering and how to free himself from it. He spent the rest of his life passing on this understanding to those around him.

The Buddha

This account of the Buddha’s life is very unlikely to be accurate, but rather it is a story containing the key issues that his teachings addressed (Keown, 1996). It suggests that people keep themselves locked in ‘palaces’ where they feel safe and secure: trying to get the things they desire and to protect themselves from the things they fear. But there are times when the ways in which they distract themselves fail and they perceive the reality of life: that it involves suffering and that it ends. For the Buddha this recognition was a call to live differently, in a way which engaged directly with suffering rather than attempting to avoid it. The Buddha’s essential teachings are often called ‘the four noble truths’ (see box), which might give the idea that they are statements to be believed. It can be more useful to think of them as courses of action to take.

The ‘four noble truths’ as actions (Batchelor, 1997)

- 1 Attend to suffering.
- 2 Understand its roots in craving.
- 3 Let go of craving, and thus end suffering.
- 4 Cultivate the path (that is, keep doing 1–3 and they will become more effortless).

We will return to this theme of ‘craving’, and ‘grasping’, throughout the chapter. Basically the idea is that, in trying to keep ourselves safe and happy, we crave what we want (if we don’t have it) and grasp hold of it (if we do). It is this craving and grasping that exacerbates suffering rather than eliminating it as we had hoped it would. Mindfulness is a way of continually bringing our attention to the present moment so that we can be aware of this process.

Mindfulness today

It would be impossible to fully reproduce any of the Buddha’s teachings here because there have been so many different versions of Buddhism over the years (see Keown, 1996). Many have argued that Buddhism will have to adapt once more in its translation to western audiences and, indeed, there have been multiple attempts to do this (for example, Goleman, 2003; Hanh, 1991). Undoubtedly part of the appeal of Buddhist thought to the western world is that the underlying philosophy does not require any religious beliefs (in god/s or an afterlife, although equally it does not preclude such beliefs), so it may fit better with a secular mindset than many of the other major religions. Perhaps the frequent use of the word ‘mindfulness’ rather than ‘Buddhism’ as an umbrella term for the psychotherapies which draw on Buddhism is another attempt to distance the psychology and philosophy from the religion.

We might ask ourselves why Buddhist ideas have become so popular in the West of late. Of course, there is no definitive answer to this, but one plausible explanation might lie in the current ‘epidemic’ written about by Alain de Botton (2004), Oliver James (2007) and John Naish (2008). These authors all speak of a culture where people are hooked on wanting more of what they desire (possessions, success, the approval of others), compare themselves enviously to others who have it, and are terrified of losing it. De Botton relates this to secularism, democracy and consumer capitalism: many of us no longer believe we will be rewarded in the next life so we seek rewards in this one. The notion that everyone can achieve success also implies that if we don’t succeed it is our own fault; and the mass media and commercial industries rely on convincing us that we are lacking in some way that needs to be addressed (by watching their show or buying their product). These authors also point out that constantly wanting more does not make us happy. Quite the opposite: James links it to our high rates of internal suffering (depression and anxiety) and Naish to the external ecological disasters we now face. Sound familiar? The stories these authors tell of western life at the start of the twenty-first century are not unlike the story of Siddhattha Gautama told above. Perhaps, as a culture, we are recognising that we have been shutting ourselves away in palaces of our own making, chasing pleasure and trying to keep up with the Joneses, but that this can exacerbate, rather than protect us from, suffering.

It is interesting to note which psychotherapeutic approaches have engaged most with Buddhism. By far the majority of books bringing counselling and Buddhist ideas together come from cognitive-behavioural therapists. Indeed, CBT has engaged to such an extent that ‘mindfulness’ has been hailed its ‘third wave’ (the first two being behaviourism and the cognitive revolution: see Chapter 7). High-profile branches of the third wave include the acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) of Stephen Hayes, the dialectical behavioural therapy (DBT) of Marsha Linehan and the mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) programmes of John Kabat-Zinn, which have been developed into mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) by Segal, Williams and Teasdale (see further reading at the end of the chapter). Each of these proposes different theories to tie mindfulness into cognitive, behavioural and biological processes, but the practices they advocate are quite

similar. Research evidence for these therapies has been so favourable (see Chapter 13) that mindfulness workshops have been incorporated into many of the governmental mental health initiatives in the UK.

The other major therapeutic approach to draw on Buddhist ideas is the psychoanalytic approach (for example, Epstein, 1995; Molino, 1998; Young-Eisendrath and Muramoto, 2002). Although there certainly are therapists who bring humanistic and/or existential ideas together with mindfulness theories and practices, perhaps there is less need because mindfulness is closer to the understandings and techniques already present. Mindfulness involves an accepting listening style similar to Rogers's person-centred approach (see Chapter 5), and Keown (1996) argues that it was the resonances between humanistic and Buddhist ideas that first led to Buddhism entering mainstream western culture. Staying with the present experience in mindfulness is akin to phenomenology (see Chapter 6) and the key ideas of Buddhism are close to, and in some cases inspired by, those of the existential philosophers (Batchelor, 1983). There are also schools of psychotherapy and counselling that are purely based on Buddhist ideas (for example, the Karuna Institute, 2009, in the UK).

As with the many different versions of Buddhism that exist, there are also many versions of mindfulness, or Buddhist, psychotherapy, all of which have slightly different theories and practices depending on which approaches they have combined with which Buddhist teachings. In this chapter I have attempted to pull together some key strands which run through the writing and therapy on mindfulness.

Mindfulness, fear and sadness

Mindfulness does not draw important distinctions between different emotional states; rather, it understands them all under the general Buddhist notion of 'suffering'. Whilst I will give examples specific to fear and sadness here, the same understandings, and practices, apply to both of these and to other difficult feelings like anger, shame or jealousy. Let's turn to the different elements of mindfulness now: acceptance, being present and awareness.

Acceptance

The first element of mindfulness is 'acceptance'. Consider the case illustration below for an example of the non-accepting way in which we often approach our lives.

Case illustration: Nancy's suffering

Nancy awoke to the sound of her alarm clock. She switched it off but didn't get out of bed: it was so warm and being asleep had felt so good. Maybe she could just snooze off for a little longer. She heard the sounds of her partner and son getting up and going to the bathroom and began to worry: 'Why am I struggling to get out of bed? That's a bad sign.' She realised that she certainly was feeling a bit low, and that made her feel worse. She tried to figure out what might be wrong. The sunlight shone through the curtains and she berated herself: 'It's a beautiful day out there, I should be happy.' This was a familiar feeling. She remembered how bad she'd felt at work yesterday when she used the wrong word in a meeting and thought everyone was looking at her. But that didn't seem a good enough reason to feel this rotten. She rolled over and pulled the duvet over her head heartily sick of herself. 'Other people manage to get up in the morning without all this,' she thought. 'What's wrong with me that I can't handle it?' By the time she did haul herself out of bed she was heavy and exhausted.

Williams, Teasdale, Segal and Kabat-Zinn (2007) explain that the experiences of depression and anxiety often involve this kind of process of feeling sad about feeling sad, or feeling frightened about feeling frightened. We focus on the gap between how we are, and how we want to be, and try to close it, but instead of narrowing the gap and making us feel better, this actually widens it and results in further anguish. This is the kind of 'craving' I mentioned earlier. In craving to feel better we often find ourselves feeling worse.

Pause for reflection

Remember a time recently when you were feeling a little out of sorts: anxious or low. Now imagine telling yourself, as Nancy did, that you should be feeling better, that you have nothing to feel bad about compared to so many other people. How do you feel now?

Hayes (2005, p. 3) calls this kind of process 'psychological quicksand': the more we struggle and try to change the situation (away from feeling so bad), the deeper we sink into it and the worse we feel. All our attempts to 'figure it out' or to 'make ourselves feel better' leave us feeling wretched.

When we can't sort out our tough feelings, the other strategy we often employ is avoidance, or distraction. We turn on the television or throw ourselves into our work in an attempt to drown them out, but often this doesn't work for long either. It is a bit like putting our hands over our ears when someone is trying to tell us something urgent: they just shout louder. And, the noisier the feeling becomes, the more scary it is to turn and listen to it rather than trying to distract ourselves from it.

When trying to change, or to avoid, our feelings doesn't work, we often get to the point of having to acknowledge they are there, by which time they are overwhelming. Then, saying to ourselves 'I am depressed' or 'I am anxious' often means that we *identify* purely with those feelings, and they start to feel fixed and frozen. Quickly, we begin to feel that 'depressed' or 'anxious' is *all* that we are right now, we can't see anything else that is going on. We feel stuck in this moment; as though these feelings are with us permanently and will never go away.

What does mindfulness propose as an alternative to our regular strategies of trying desperately to figure out or to avoid difficult feelings, or becoming stuck in them? Instead of trying to control them, it suggests that we let go and just *accept* the feelings that we have right now.

Case illustration: Nancy's mindfulness

The next day Nancy was heading out of work when a colleague walked past her and made a teasing comment about the mistake she'd made in the meeting the other day. She felt her heart sink: so people *had* noticed her error. Her mood began to plummet and the usual process kicked in of trying to stop this happening. Remembering how her counsellor had explained this to her, she made herself literally pause in her tracks on her way to the car. She stood there and said to herself: 'Yes you are feeling sad right now, but that is only part of this moment.' She breathed in and out slowly and let herself become aware of everything around her and within her: the sensation of the breeze on her face, the sight of the leaves moving in the trees above, the sound of birdsong and somebody backing their car out of a parking space, the tight knot of pain in her throat following the comment, and the weariness across her shoulders from a long, hard day. In accepting the tough feelings, and giving them space to be there as part of the whole of her experience, she felt lighter and much less trapped in them. She opened her car door and got in, gently maintaining that state of awareness throughout the short journey home.

So, the alternative to trying to eradicate difficult feelings, avoiding them, or identifying with them, is to simply accept them and be with them as part of the experience we are having, but recognising that it is not the whole of our experience. The word 'spacious' is often used for this idea of expanding our awareness to accommodate both the tough feelings and everything else in the present moment. We are gentle and curious with the feelings that are troubling us rather than grabbing hold of them and shaking them or turning our backs on them entirely. Of course it is not easy to be with difficult feelings so lightly, which is why mindfulness is encouraged as a daily practice. If we are used to bringing our attention to the moment and expanding our awareness, then it will be easier to do at difficult times.

Being present

Picture of a raindrop as it falls on a pond

As we have seen above, there is an emphasis on accepting the present moment in mindfulness. Let's consider that in more depth.

Pause for reflection

Try stopping yourself at several points throughout the day and considering: Where was I just then? What were my thoughts, feelings, images, sensations?

If you do this, you will probably be surprised by how little of the time you are 'present'. Whilst making the bed I am worrying about catching the train on time. Whilst walking to the station I'm going over an argument I had yesterday and thinking of clever points I might have made instead of what I actually said. Sitting at my desk at work, part of my mind is on my writing and part is going over my 'to do' list and panicking about whether I can get through everything. When I'm interrupted by my colleague I half-listen to what is being said whilst trying to find a way to bring us back to what we were talking about yesterday so that I can prove my point.

We are very rarely fully in the present moment. And when we are in the grip of depression or anxiety this experience of going over the past and worrying about the future often plays out on an even larger scale. Each tough feeling seems to bring with it a tidal wave of memories of other times when we have been excluded, or rejected, or said the 'wrong thing', so that we experience the current emotion multiplied by ten or a hundred. We feel

so terrible that we imagine that only some huge future change will result in us feeling better and we wonder whether we should leave our job or our relationship: overhaul our life completely. We realise how hard and painful that would be and feel even worse.

So mindfulness is a practice of bringing ourselves back from this to the present moment: experiencing what we are going through right now without attaching a load of past baggage to it, or trying to figure out ways to make it different. Hayes (2005) points out that we rarely let ourselves just experience our feelings but instead we come up with stories to make sense of them, relating them to past and future, trying to explain them and get rid of them. The alternative, just being with them, can mean that we come to understand them more fully. We might find that they dissolve once we give them our full attention, or that a nagging bitter pain transforms into a not unpleasant wistful melancholy, or that, although still painful, they become something more familiar which frighten us less.

Being in the present, however, runs counter to the goal-directed way in which most of us live our lives. We feel that 'if only' we can get this job, this relationship or this possession, then we will truly be happy. Like climbing a mountain, every time we reach what we thought was the top we realise that it is a false peak and there is another, further peak above us (Batchelor, 1997). Even when we do get what we want, it doesn't stay what we want for very long. Think about the last time you desired something (a new computer or item of clothing, for example), how long did it give you the pleasure you had dreamed of? How soon before you were longing for something else? Being future-focused is problematic because we won't get everything we want, we will inevitably get some of the things we don't want, and – to paraphrase the Rolling Stones – in getting what we want we may not always get what we need.

Thich Nhat Hanh (1988) says that we operate on 'if only's' on a daily basis. We say that if only we can finish this domestic chore/writing this essay/paying this debt, we can be at peace. But as soon as we are done there is something else to do. We never have peace, just 'the hope of peace some day', unless we can find it in the present moment.

So how do we come back to the present? One way is the mindfulness practice of focusing on the breath that we began with. The breath is often used because it is there wherever we are, and because we can attend to the movements involved in breathing only in the very moment that they are happening (Williams et al., 2007). However, there are many other ways of practising mindfulness.

Meditation on bodily sensations is another common practice somewhat similar to the humanistic technique of focusing (see Chapter 12) where we bring our attention to parts of the body. This can help us tune in to the physical experience of emotions rather than just labelling, and potentially identifying with, them. Also, noticing how it is possible to have one sensation (pain, itching, warmth) in one part of the body, whilst having other sensations in other parts, and how such sensations ebb and flow as we attend to them, is useful to apply to our experience of emotional pain: this can also coexist with other feelings and is transient. Slow walking, and yoga-based, meditations are also useful ways to bring mindfulness into movement and activity. Batchelor's book (2001) and Williams et al.'s book and CD (2007) go through these various forms of meditation.

Awareness

When we fail to return to the present moment in our lives it is easy to become swept along by automatic processes which we are unaware of, and which may well take us down a path that leads to feeling depressed or anxious.

Case illustration: Hugh

Hugh struggled with anxiety in social situations. Whenever he had to meet new people, or attend team meetings, as part of his job, he became so worried that he would sweat and his hands would shake. When he was promoted to a management role, which would involve even more interactions, he decided that the time had come to address this. He had heard that meditation helped people relax and feel calmer, so he went on a silent meditation retreat.

Sitting on a cushion on the floor surrounded by other people, however, Hugh felt anything but calm. In the silence he became aware of an ongoing barrage of thoughts which he previously hadn't even realised were there. He sat there breathing and started to feel stiff, so he adjusted his position. Then he worried that the person next to him had heard him and that they would be irritated with him for disrupting the silence. What if he moved again? Then they'd really be angry. Perhaps they would kick him out of the retreat because he couldn't do it. Just like he couldn't do his new job, because he was so bad with other people ...

Hugh's experience is very common in people meditating for the first time. Often, the first thing they notice is just how frequently these automatic thought processes kick in and carry us off somewhere else. Williams et al. (2007) argue that, unlike the deep unconscious proposed by psychoanalysis (see Chapter 4), it is this 'just under the surface' running commentary that is damaging, because we are so used to its mumblings that we barely notice it going on. If we don't attend to it, we are often dragged along by it, feeling surprised when we find ourselves in blind panic or complete despair because we have no idea how we got there.

Like Hugh, when people notice these streams of thoughts they often think that it makes them a 'bad meditator'. They have some idea that meditation is about having a 'blank mind' so they have failed. This is a common misconception. As we've seen, mindfulness is actually about being present with whatever is there, not about trying to eradicate things. However, as we tune in and become more aware of these thoughts, we become less carried away by them.

Two mindfulness practices are particularly helpful in recognising these processes and finding a way to allow them to 'ebb and flow' rather than following them. In listening meditation we sit in awareness of all the sounds going on around us, noticing how they arise, linger and then fall away. We can then apply this also to the 'noise' of our internal thoughts. A more direct thought-related meditation is described by Batchelor (2001). She says that thoughts are sticky: once they arise we find ourselves stuck to them, and so they pull us along with them. By noticing them, and practising letting them arise and go off without the rest of us attached, we learn a different habit to the one we have previously fallen into.

Part of such meditations involves noticing that whatever bubbles up (sounds, sensations, thoughts, feelings) also, eventually, drifts away again, however intense it may be at the time. In other words, all these things are *impermanent*. On a week-long retreat, like the kind Hugh was on, it becomes clear that the thing that bugged you this morning is replaced by something else by the afternoon. All states are impermanent and that realisation can enable us to weather them, knowing that they will end. There can be fear in the uncertainty of life, which may be why we often try to feel that we are in control of it. But, paradoxically, there can be a sense of security in accepting that uncertainty and

impermanence, knowing that the difficult things will pass just as the easy ones do, and even questioning how we know what is difficult or easy.

The situation ... is like that of the wise Chinese farmer whose horse ran off. When his neighbour came to console him the farmer said, 'Who knows what's good or bad?'

When his horse returned the next day with a herd of horses following her, the foolish neighbour came to congratulate him on his good fortune.

'Who knows what's good or bad?' said the farmer.

Then, when the farmer's son broke his leg trying to ride one of the new horses, the foolish neighbour came to console him again.

'Who knows what's good or bad?' said the farmer.

When the army passed through, conscripting men for the war, they passed over the farmer's son because of his broken leg. When the foolish man came to congratulate the farmer that his son would be spared, again the farmer said, 'Who knows what's good or bad?'

When do we expect the story to end?

(Hagen, 1997, p. 42)

Mindfulness, counselling and psychotherapy

Counsellors and psychotherapists might work directly with clients to take them through mindfulness practice: guiding them, or engaging in co-meditation.

Case illustration: Working mindfully with Hugh

After his meditation retreat, Hugh went to a mindfulness therapist, Steve. Here is a, somewhat summarised, section from the middle of their session:

Steve: How are you feeling right now? What are you aware of?

Hugh [speaking quickly]: Anxiety. Just anxiety. I've got this meeting tomorrow, to tell the team our new direction. I just keep going over and over it in my head. I can't think about anything else.

Steve: I notice your hands are trembling even as you talk.

Hugh [looking down] Yes, it's true. I'm imagining all those faces looking at me, judging me.

Steve: Okay. I wonder if what we could do now is to try to come back to the present moment. This anxiety is here, these thoughts and images. But can you expand your attention out to include the rest of what is here right now?

Hugh [sighs and closes his eyes]: Okay.

Steve: Take a few slow, deep breaths. [They do so together]

Steve [slowly, after a minute or two]: What are you aware of now? Let's start with physical sensations.

Hugh: Still trembling [holds out his hand and smiles, then puts it down]. My ... face feels quite hot ... But there's a draft in the room, I can feel it round my ankles ... I'm sitting really tense [relaxes back into the chair]

Steve [after a few more moments]: What about sounds. What can you hear?

Hugh [after a minute]: I thought it was silent but ... there's a truck moving outside ... I heard the rustle as you changed position ... while we were quiet I could hear my heart, sounded like it was in my ears somewhere ... it wasn't too loud ... kind of soothing.

Steve: Where are your thoughts now?

Hugh: Thinking it's interesting how much noise there is when you listen ... wondering whether my hand would still tremble if I put it out ... worrying that I haven't prepared for the meeting enough ... but ... trying not to get carried away by that thought ... [breathes deep] ... wondering whether to walk home after the session.

Mindfulness is also useful for therapists themselves to practise, particularly before seeing a client, to prepare them to be present with them and with any difficult feelings that arise, to know their limitations, and to establish a good therapeutic alliance (see Chapter 12) (Germer et al., 2005).

Activity 2 Mindfulness practice with others

Ask a friend to help with this activity. Spend a little time before your conversation attending to your breath as we've practised. Then ask them to talk for 10 minutes about an issue that they are currently experiencing. As they talk, try to cultivate mindfulness during the exchange between you, being aware of all that is going on in them, in yourself and between you. Afterwards, ask them how it was for them, and reflect on how you found the experience.

Comment

Do you think that this is a good way for a counsellor or psychotherapist to be when working with their clients?

Pause for reflection

Link this chapter with the previous chapters you have read in this book. In what ways does mindfulness fit, and not fit, with the other approaches that we have covered?

Some have been critical of 'third wave' CBT for repackaging old ideas as their own, and sometimes charging quite a lot of money for it. An alternative way of looking at the situation is that Buddhist philosophies have to adapt for modern, western audiences, and these therapies fit with the current emphasis on biological and cognitive explanations, and empirical research.

It has also been argued that such approaches bolt mindfulness onto existing therapies, rather than engaging fully with potential incompatibilities. For example, approaches which include diagnosis are in danger of fixing people in exactly the ways that mindfulness cautions against (see Chapter 2) and conventional CBT and psychoanalysis may encourage focusing on the gap between where a person is and where they want to be, which mindfulness says exacerbates suffering. Mindfulness is about being with feelings in an accepting way. If therapists encourage it as a way of eradicating depression or anxiety, it may, paradoxically, throw the client right back into suffering as they wonder 'Why isn't it working?' and 'Why can't I do it better?'

Limitations of mindfulness

What are the limitations of mindfulness itself? In addition to the tricky paradox just mentioned, the main one is how difficult people find to actually practise it. As I was writing this chapter, several of the other authors commented to me how hard they had found meditation when they tried it. Whilst I find it helpful myself, I easily neglect it in favour of something more stimulating or distracting. People might find group meditation more supportive and motivating. Williams et al. (2007) recommend the meditation retreats run by Gaia House in the UK. Guided meditations on CDs can also help (for example, Kabat-Zinn, 2006).

We might also consider practising mindfulness in ways that are more familiar to us than sitting and watching our breath, using different activities to ‘anchor’ us to the present in the same way that the breath can. Examples include walking, yoga, playing a musical instrument, cooking, writing (Goldberg, 1986) and building mindfulness into existing day-to-day rituals. Many authors suggest mindfully eating a tangerine or raisin (Hanh, 1991; Williams et al., 2007). Perhaps we can create a mindful space during our tea break, with the first bites of each meal or after washing our hands each time we go to the bathroom. Here is another suggestion from Thich Nhat Hanh which might be appreciated by the people we live with, too!

Washing up mindfully

While washing the dishes one should only be washing the dishes, which means that while washing the dishes one should be completely aware of the fact that one is washing the dishes ... The fact that I am standing there and washing these bowls is a wondrous reality. I’m being completely myself, following my breath, conscious of my thoughts and actions. There’s no way I can be tossed around mindlessly like a bottle slapped here and there on the waves.

(Hanh, 1991, pp. 4–5)

Finally, there are those who have criticised mindfulness for encouraging people to accept the situation they are in rather than fighting for change (which may be more appropriate in some situations; see Chapter 10). However, people have responded by pointing out both that Buddhism itself emerged as a form of activism against fixed societal hierarchies, and that mindful awareness is a good foundation for ethical action since we can see the situation fully and clearly when we are mindful. Hayes’s ACT therapy (2005) encourages *acceptance* of where you are at present and *commitment* to live by your values (which are clearer when you are mindful). A non-grasping approach to interactions with others means we are likely to engage with them more compassionately and as full human beings rather than viewing them in a limited ‘us and them’ or ‘I-it’ manner (see Chapters 1 and 12).

Conclusion

To conclude this chapter let’s return to the theme of non-grasping. Martine Batchelor presents the following metaphor.

Let’s imagine that I am holding an object made of gold. It is so precious and it is mine – I feel I must hold onto it. I grasp it, curling my fingers so as not to drop it, so that nobody can take it away from me. What happens after a while? Not only do my hand and arm get cramp but I cannot use my hand for anything else. When you grip something, you create tension and limit yourself.

Dropping the golden object is not the solution. Non-attachment means learning to relax to uncurl the fingers and gently open the hand. When my hand is wide open and there is no tension, the precious object can rest lightly on my palm. I can still value the object and take care of it; I can put it down and pick it up; I can use my hand for doing something else.

(Batchelor, 2001, p. 96)

The motion of realising that we are grasping and letting go runs through mindfulness in terms of how we relate to our feelings, our thoughts and ourselves. Table 1 summarises how this motion operates in relation to the topics of acceptance, being present and awareness which we have explored in this chapter.

	Table 1	Summary
	Suffering (grasping)	Mindfulness (letting go)
Acceptance	Grasping how we want to be (happy) and trying to get away from how we are (troubled)	Recognising all of what we are in the moment and letting go of the craving to be otherwise
Being present	Grasping onto similar past experiences or future plans that could make things better	Letting go of anything other than what is present now, being spaciously aware of all of this
Awareness	Being dragged along by sticky thoughts and automatic processes	Being aware of what bubbles up and allowing it to drift away again, impermanent

In mindfulness, whether practised in meditation, in the therapy room, or in day-to-day life, we bring our attention to the present moment so that we can be aware of all that is there, including suffering. In gentle, accepting, awareness, we see what it is we are grasping for and are able to ‘let go’ or hold it more loosely. If we keep *recollecting* the need to bring our attention back to the present in this way, it will become more effortless each time we do it, just as a path through a meadow of high grass is easier to walk the more times we have walked it before (Batchelor, 1997).

Further reading

This book is a great introduction to meditation practices:

Batchelor, M. (2001). *Meditation for life*. London: Frances Lincoln.

The following two books are the most engaging ones I have found introducing Buddhist ideas and mindfulness:

Batchelor, S. (1997). *Buddhism without beliefs*. London: Bloomsbury.

Hanh, T. N. (1991). *The miracle of mindfulness*. London: Random House.

This book includes introductory chapters on each of the major forms of mindfulness CBT:

Hayes, S. C., Follette, V. M. and Linehan, M. M. (2004). (Eds.). *Mindfulness and acceptance: Expanding the cognitive-behavioural tradition*. London: The Guildford Press.

This book has more general chapters on mindfulness and therapy:

Germer, C. K., Siegel, R. D. and Fulton, P. R. (2005). (Eds.). *Mindfulness and psychotherapy*. London: The Guildford Press.

The following two self-help-style books apply mindfulness to sadness and fear:

Williams, M., Teasdale, J., Segal, Z. and Kabat-Zinn, J. (2007). *The mindful way through depression: Freeing yourself from chronic unhappiness*. New York: The Guildford Press.

Brantley, J. (2007). *Calming your anxious mind*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.