

Mindfulness in Moments of Crisis

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ABSTRACT: There are various kinds and extents of crises that require individuals to have the clarity, discernment, and equanimity with which to handle the accompanying daunting challenges. Mindfulness, which is being fully aware in the present moment, is an effective strategy for dealing with the stressors of the adversity and trauma of crisis situations. Mindfulness provides a skill and a discipline that can help build a capacity for resilience. This paper explores the Eastern origin of mindfulness and its Western application, the significance of the practice of mindfulness, and the state of being of mindfulness in a crisis.

RESUME: Il existe différentes crises et différentes ampleurs de crises qui exigent de la part de chacun d'avoir du bon sens, de faire preuve de discernement et de garder son sang-froid pour faire face aux énormes difficultés qui les accompagnent. L'attention complètement déployée à ce moment précis, est une arme efficace pour résister aux stress de l'adversité et au traumatisme des situations de crises. L'attention représente à la fois la qualité et la discipline qui peuvent aider à renforcer la capacité de résistance. A la lecture de cet article, nous découvrons l'origine de l'attention et son champ d'application en occident, la signification de la pratique de l'attention et la disposition à être pleinement conscient ou attentionné en cas de crise.

Introduction

It is significant that crisis happens everyday in varying kinds and to different extents. For the purposes of this paper, crisis is defined as an adverse situation or catastrophic event that is emotionally stressful or traumatic and has a high possibility of an undesirable outcome. During moments of crisis, effective solutions need to be found, tough decisions must be made, and appropriate action has to be taken. Crisis demands clear and rational thinking to overcome the adversity or catastrophe. Crisis requires a state of collected focus and equanimity (calm balance) to handle its daunting challenges. Yet, in times of turmoil, stress increases, anxiety grows, and despair deepens. What often prevails is a feeling of not being in control, as well as a pervasive fear.

This author proposes that mindfulness is an effective strategy for dealing with the attendant, overwhelming stressors of crisis. Mindfulness is a clear, discerning “attention to present-moment reality” that is useful in achieving a focused clarity to manage and respond to adversity (Gunaratana, 2011, p. 141). The practice of mindfulness decreases stress and can reduce suffering (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Siegel, Germer, & Olendzki, 2009). To effectively deal with a crisis and get beyond it, an individual must have resilience, a “combination of heartiness, toughness, and buoyancy of spirit … that is necessary to get through struggling moments, bounce back from adversity, and adapt to external stress” (George, 2009, p.42). Mindfulness provides a skill and discipline that aids in reducing stress and creates a collected calmness to face adversity and move past it by strengthening the capacity for resilience. This paper explores the Eastern origin of mindfulness and its Western application, the significance of the practice of mindfulness, and the state of being of mindfulness in a crisis situation.

The Eastern Origin and Western Application of Mindfulness

Mindfulness in Buddhist Tradition. Mindfulness has its roots in the Buddhist tradition that has been in existence for over 2500 years. The practice of mindfulness is the cultivation of the mind and the body in the present moment. The mind is “the key to understanding and changing experience” (Groves, 2013, p. xv). The Buddha taught that, “what we frequently dwell upon and ponder becomes the inclination of our thoughts” (Groves, p. xv). According to Groves, Buddha:

saw that it matters profoundly which of the many emotions and thoughts that bubble into our experience we pursue and foster. He passionately urged his students to know their motivations, responses, beliefs, and emotions and see their effects. And he devised a detailed and subtle methodology for change which he formulated in the Eightfold Path. (p. xv)

The Eightfold Path is a way leading out of unsatisfactory experience to a path where wisdom can be developed, and self-awakening can occur. One of the

essential tenets of the Eightfold Path is right mindfulness (Kornfield, 2008, p. 218). In the Buddhist teachings, right mindfulness means memory, awareness, and attention (Nyanaponika, 1962). Gunaratana (2011) states that “mindfulness is not a memory in the sense of ideas and pictures from the past, but rather clear, direct, wordless knowing of what is and what is not, of what we are doing and how we should go about it” (p. 140). Mindfulness means maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment (Gunaratana, 2011). It is this paying attention, or being present to what’s occurring and being responsible for what’s occurring that provides for attunement (noticing what is happening while it is happening) to reality and an aware intention to take action and move forward.

Western Application of Mindfulness. For more than three decades, there has been a growing interest in the Buddhist practice of mindfulness. In 1979 Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, a professor of medicine emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, established the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society and its world-renowned Stress Reduction Clinic. Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (1994, p. 4). Being attentionally aware can aid in decreasing levels of stress, so that individuals can “stop reacting to stress and begin responding to stress. This is the path of mindfulness in daily life” (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p.263). It is through a collection of mindful practices, including mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) that Kabat-Zinn brought mindfulness into the mainstream of western medicine and society. He describes mindfulness as:

a form of meditation originally developed in the Buddhist tradition Simply put, mindfulness is moment-to-moment awareness.... just a particular way of paying attention. It is a way of looking deeply into oneself in the spirit of inquiry and self-understanding.... Cultivating mindfulness can lead to the discovery of deep realms of relaxation, calmness, and insight within yourself Mindfulness stands on its own as a powerful vehicle for self-understanding and healing. (pp. 2, 12)

Since the inception of MBSR, mindfulness has gained considerable attention among Western psychologists as an effective therapeutic strategy and practice in maintaining and even enhancing wellbeing (Brown, Ryan & Creswell, 2007). Beginning in the 1980s, there has been a “convergence of two different epistemologies and cultures, namely that of science and that of the contemplative disciplines”, particularly Buddhist meditative practices (Williams and Kabat-Zinn, 2011, p. 3). Williams and Kabat-Zinn argue that because:

Buddhist meditative practices are concerned with embodied awareness and the cultivation of clarity, emotional balance (equanimity) and compassion, and since all of these capacities can be refined and developed via the honing and intentional deployment of attention, the roots of Buddhist meditation are de facto universal. (p. 2)

Thus, as Kabat-Zinn (2011) maintains, it is appropriate “to introduce these practices into mainstream secular settings in the service of helping to reduce suffering and the attendant mind-states and behaviours that compound it” (p. 4). Williams and Kabat-Zinn assert that:

the emergence within science and medicine of interest in Buddhist meditative practices and their potential applications represents a convergence of two different ways of knowing, that of western empirical science, and that of the empiricism of the meditative or consciousness disciplines and their attendant mindfulness.... The promise of deepened insights and novel approaches to theoretical and practical issues is great when different lenses can be held up to old and intractable issues.... Major developments are now occurring in clinical and health psychology, cognitive therapy, and neuroscience, and increasingly, there is a growing interest, although presently at a lower level, in primary and secondary education, higher education, the law, business, and leadership. (p. 3)

This burgeoning interest in mindfulness within the various fields and disciplines is developing widespread applications of mindfulness practice.

The Significance of the Practice of Mindfulness

The Application of Mindful Practice. In these times of continual crisis, it is becoming evident that individuals need a deeper attention, calmer presence, and focused clarity to effectively deal with adversity and catastrophe. An effective way to handle difficult challenges is to be fully aware and discerning of what is actually happening before choosing the best way forward. Mindful people “understand their reactions to stress and crisis”, as well as “their impact on others”, and are also much more adept at focusing on the task at hand (George, 2013, p.2). Because crisis is so highly unpredictable and pushes people to their limits, individuals need to find their courage and access wisdom to get through the difficulty and continue onward. George maintains that “a crisis provides a unique opportunity to create transformative change” within one’s self and with others (2009, p. 75).

Mindfulness gives a person the clarity to face the reality, deal with the difficulties, and move beyond the adversity. This confrontation with crisis provides a journey into self-discovery and growth. In the process, an individual can come to terms with what he or she believes in, what he or she stands for, and what matters the most to him or her. So a crisis can provide an opportunity for growth and the development of one’s best self. As George confirms, “your defining moment comes when your life story collides with a crisis in the midst of your path. It is in this crisis that you learn who you really are (p. 125). Life has a way of presenting us with “crucible experiences”, the “framing obstacles” and “grand challenges” that are crucial to defining our true selves (Bennis and

George, 2009, p.xv). Mindfulness enables us to become more self-aware and attentive to the circumstances that are impacting our lives.

Yet, Dr. Cheryl Rezek (2012) asserts that:

mindfulness is not a patronizing fad implying that, if we are calm, everything will be fine. The reality of our working world is that all may not be fine. What mindfulness can do is develop a thinking, an emotional, and an instinctual mind [to deal better with the situations in which we find ourselves]. (p.5)

According to Bennis (2009), “people who are intent on going in a meaningful direction have a chance of finding their way through the fog of crisis” (p. xvii-xviii). George (2013) argues that “the best way to become more resilient is to develop oneself into a calm, compassionate, and adaptable [human being]” (p.1). Mindfulness is a practice and discipline that allows individuals to navigate crisis with collected focus and resilience.

How Mindfulness Practice Can Reduce Stress and Increase Resilience. We cannot avoid the stress of everyday life, nor can we escape the stressful condition that we find ourselves in during times of crisis. What we can do is develop ways that deal with the inevitable stress with healthier responses that can be cultivated through a mindful practice. According to Hick (2009), practitioners of mindfulness maintain that it helps them experience more “clarity of thought, life balance, and peace of mind” (p. 2). Mindfulness can help restore balance to individuals to lessen the stress and anxiety that can impede determination and action resulting in diminished performance (Carroll, 2007). Carroll maintains that individuals who develop mindfulness can cultivate clarity and equanimity in spite of life’s difficulties and challenges. Mindfulness helps people use a fuller capacity of their minds to pay more attention in the moment so they can focus and concentrate in order to strengthen self-efficacy or have confidence in their capabilities.

Researchers have found that mindfulness can reprogram the brain to be more rational and less emotional. When faced with a decision, meditators showed increased activity in the posterior insula of the brain, which has been linked to rational decision-making. This allowed them to make decisions based more on facts than emotion (Weise, 2011, p. 2). Neuroplasticity research, which is the “science of how the brain changes its structure and function in response to input”, has found that attention has an ability “to physically alter the brain and enlarge functional circuits” (Begley, 2011, p. 3). Neuroscience studies have shown that the brain can be trained and transformed (Begley, 2008).

When confronted with adversity or catastrophe, an individual has the mental capacity to adapt and be resilient if the right frame of mind has been developed and can be utilized. Mindful practice and discipline can strengthen resilience through a presence of mind that gives one the ability to work with constant change and a state of impermanence, to remain clearly focused on the present, and to respond to a situation as it arises (George, 2009). In responding to the reality of constant change from a place of deep calm and focus, with the

presence of mind to face the reality of any situation, decisions can then be made from a state of awareness and determination.

Mindfulness can help build a capacity for resilience. Mindful practice cultivates the clarity and focused attention to deal with adverse situations in a non-emotional, non-judgmental manner. Through discernment, the mind is able to interpret the reality of the situation in a rational way that affords effective decision-making. A calm, collected attention helps to harness personal energy for productive purposes. Once an individual is motivated to respond constructively and move forward, there is a strengthening of self-efficacy that is crucial for resiliency.

State of Being of Mindfulness in a Crisis Situation

Mindful State of Being. The cultivation of mindfulness through practice and discipline creates a mindful state of being (an overall mental and physical condition). This mindful state of being is developed through “self knowledge and awareness” (Garms, 2012, p. 2). According to Langer (1989), a mindful state creates receptivity and when an “open-minded attitude is applied to our own behavior, change becomes more possible” (p. 70).

Calvino (1988) eloquently describes this transformative power of a change in perspective:

Whenever humanity seems condemned to heaviness, I think I should fly like Perseus into a different space. I don't mean escaping into dreams or into the irrational. I mean that I have to change my approach, look at the world from a different perspective, with a different logic and with fresh methods of cognition and verification. The images of lightness that I seek should not fade away like dreams dissolved by the realities of present and future.... (p. 7)

Mindfulness requires that each phenomenon be examined according to its individual nature, along with its origin and be comprehended with the understanding that it can be terminated by eliminating the cause that gives it being (Bodhi, 2011).

Before the mind can fully and effectively comprehend and discern a phenomenon, it has to be brought to a place of still presence. This stillness allows people to think and the calmness gives them the energy to address difficulties. Through deep breathing, the in-breath acknowledges intruding thoughts and the out breath lets them go. The flow of this release brings the quiet of the mind that cultivates a “lucid awareness” (Bodhi, 2011, p. 19). From this clarity, there is an attunement to the self and the surroundings. Individuals are better prepared then, to put mindfulness into an everyday practice of intentional awareness.

This calm attention gives individuals an alert awareness to acknowledge intruding thoughts and dispassionately examine them in a non-critical, nonjudgmental way. Mindfulness is a careful consideration and discernment of

what presents itself, what addresses or confronts us in life; it distinguishes between what is essential and what is accidental. Individuals can then adapt and not be stuck in a certain way of thinking about something so that they can move forward and advance further.

A mindful state of being provides an openness of full possibilities where people in crisis are no longer traumatized beings or victims who have no control over their situation or predicament. Buddhist belief is that we live in the place of opportunity, and we need to be open to possibilities in order to cultivate insight and wisdom to overcome life's challenges and sufferings. Wisdom is required in order to "decode" or understand what is immediately experienced. It is settling down and being able to look at the reality of the situation, combined with an ability to discern what is happening and see beyond the crisis.

A Personal Narrative of Mindfulness During Crisis. Mindfulness is something I live or try to live each day. For me, it has become a practice and a way of being. I am not Buddhist. This is not a religious way of conducting myself but rather an authentication of my true nature. I write about mindfulness with deep humility and gratitude. Being mindful has helped me recover from pain and suffering, and given me the clarity and presence of mind to overcome adversity and crisis.

In June of 2013, Alberta experienced one of the worst natural disasters in its history. Floods ravaged communities in Calgary and the town of High River. My home in High River sustained extensive flood damage. Eventually, there was over five feet of sewer backup and overland water in my basement. It destroyed most of the contents and belongings that were housed there such as my family photo albums, my daughter's and son's childhood treasures, as well as my books and teaching materials collected from many years as an educator. For two weeks after the flood, my neighbors and I were not allowed back into our homes. A state of emergency was declared in the town and as each day passed, anxiety and despair grew from not knowing if there was damage or what the extent of the damage was to our residences. People became frustrated and angry about the lack of information and a sense of helplessness was prevalent.

Finally, we were informed that we could return to our houses for an hour to collect whatever valuables we could carry out. The next day was deemed to be the beginning of the cleanup process. We were to gather whatever help we could from family, friends, and volunteers and left to our own devices to deal with the situation of restoration and issues of insurance coverage.

I vividly recall that late Friday afternoon, when I was allowed to return to my home for the first time. I was struck by a sense of dark, eerie, and lifeless silence. I walked to the open basement stairwell and looked down at the extensive damage. It was apparent that the water had been at least six feet high at the beginning of the flood and then somehow receded to about six inches over the following two weeks. In its wake, was a dark grey sludge that covered everything. Black mold had grown rampant in the stairwell and it quickly became apparent that the basement would be in the same state, if not worse. At that moment, a sickening feeling of anguish washed over me. How could I possibly deal with the enormity of this destruction to my once tranquil home?

The task of cleanup seemed daunting and it was difficult to even know where or how to begin.

Since my neighbors and I were not allowed to begin the cleanup process at that time, we dejectedly got in our vehicles to steel ourselves for our return in the morning with whatever resources we could muster. I remember wondering, as I was driving back to Calgary where I was staying, how I was ever going to manage everything that would need to be done in the ensuing weeks and possibly months. I was in a state of shock at the destruction of my home and the enormity of the task of cleanup and restoration. It was as though I could not believe what had happened; that I was an unwilling participant in an unfolding surrealistic nightmare.

After this initial shock subsided, I began to realize that I needed to collect myself and draw from the breath and energy of the mindfulness practice that had been my salvation during other times of pain and suffering in my life. The thought that kept repeating itself over and over in my mind was, "just breathe, one small step at a time. This too, shall pass." I willed myself to breathe slowly and deeply. I focused my attention on each in-breath and out-breath, becoming aware of my mind and body connection and consciously relaxing the tension in my neck, shoulders, and back.

Once I had achieved this calmness, I was able to collect myself, process what I was confronted with and determine what I would need to do to begin the onerous work ahead. I knew that I would have to tackle one task at a time as I began to mentally make arrangements for the following day. Attending to these details created a determination and resolve to deal with the situation in the best way I was able to, which in turn eventually brought a resilient mode of managing and going forward. Not an easy thing to do, but necessary. And so the almost insurmountable, became possible bit by bit.

Have there been setbacks, challenges, and difficulties that have attempted to erode my mindfulness? Yes, of course. Everyday worry and stress builds and causes a weariness and deep sense of battle fatigue, but when I feel that pressure of anxiety and anguish begin to resurface again, I call upon my mindfulness practice and am able to get through whatever difficulty has arisen in that particular moment.

It is now eight months after the destruction of my home by the June flood. Through the wonderful help and support of family, friends and volunteers, my basement has been gutted and cleaned up. Mold has been removed, a new furnace and hot water tank installed, and new insulation and poly put in. The damage to my main floor has been repaired and I am back living in my residence. My home has overcome its violation and is renewed. There is a feeling of peace and serenity in it once again.

The Lesson of Mindful Practice During Crisis. There are many houses in High River that have not been restored and residents who have not recovered from the flood because they lack the necessary frame of mind and resiliency to get beyond the crisis. Collectively, these people have become a community of walking wounded. They are traumatized and do not know where to turn or what

to do. They are stuck in an anxious helplessness that makes them unable to take action and move forward. People, who are in crisis, are initially in a state of shock, which is often followed by a state of deep despair. Their vulnerability and sense of victimization prevents them from being decisive and taking the necessary action to confront the catastrophe and effectively deal with it. So then, how can people be supported in managing such disastrous situations?

One of the roles of education is to interpret crises such as the recent flood in High River in order to better understand its impact and be supportive of its schools' constituents. This is crucial because crisis happens each day in varying kinds and to different extents. Educators can learn a great deal from those who are rebuilding their lives in the aftermath of catastrophe. More research is needed to investigate the positive factors that help people to persevere during and after such disasters. The results of these studies would be useful in helping other traumatized individuals cope more effectively. More research is needed to investigate the positive effect of mindfulness practice during crisis to assist people in persevering during and after disasters such as the June flood. The results of these studies would be useful in supporting other "traumatized individuals to cope more effectively with adversity that is outside of their control" (Westburg, 2001, p. 497).

Conclusion

Mindfulness practice and discipline can reduce stress and build resilience during times of crisis. There are moments in our lives when we must overcome adversity and personal trauma. Mindfulness can help us reach a state of equanimity and focus on dealing with these challenges. A clear, discerning attention assists us in handling such difficulties. In times of turmoil and despair, our confidence and determination can be diminished resulting in a sense of inadequacy and helplessness. Amid fearful anxiety and anguish, individuals need to find a way to decrease stress and increase perseverance.

Drawing from the Buddhist tradition, mindfulness practice, which is being fully present in the moment in a discerning way, leads to a cessation of suffering and the achievement of self-awakening. The success of Western therapeutic utilization of mindful practice in the health care professions has proven the effectiveness of mindfulness in stress reduction and improvement of wellbeing. Mindfulness applications have also been applied in various fields including psychology, medicine, business, education and law.

Strong research findings in neuroscience confirm that attention can change the capacity of the brain to transform itself in positive ways. Mindfulness aids individuals in using their minds more fully to attend to a situation with clarity, focus, and concentration. With a collected presence of mind, people are better able to work with constant change and respond to a situation as it arises. A mindful state of being creates receptivity and openness to new possibilities and a resilience to move beyond an adversity.

When a crisis occurs such as the June flood, mindfulness can reduce stressful anxiety and provide a clarity that enables a focused discernment of the

reality of the situation. With a calm assessment, an individual is able to make decisions and take the necessary action to move forward and recover. More research is required to investigate mindfulness and its potential to enable people to persevere during and after a catastrophe. The results of these studies would be beneficial in supporting other traumatized individuals in dealing more effectively with adversity and crisis.

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