What to Expect from Mindfulness

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When I began practicing mindfulness 15 years ago, I did so somewhat secretly. I believed if those around me knew I was engaging in an activity they would consider exotic they would relate to me as though I had joined “hippy-dom” to “bliss-out” and they would reject me. I thought that because I believed if they knew I was meditating they would think I had rejected them, people who faced life’s challenges square-on as they wanted to believe they did. Since I had no desire to withstand such unfound criticism nor to defend the virtues of a practice I was only beginning to experience but for which, based on what I had heard, I had great expectations as a safe method to manage the mounting stress I was experiencing, I did not tell them about my practice. While I doubt those around me today would consider practicing mindfulness quite as “airy-fairy” and off-putting, I believe they, too, would consider a practitioner suspicious, not quite alien but not quite like them either, so I still keep mum with friends, neighbors, and family about my practice, which adds a certain prickliness to my life. Such is the milieu in which I reside. Yet, as author Barry Boyce (2011) reports, much of Western society seems to be experiencing a mindfulness revolution. Within the past decade or so, books have been written about mindful parenting, mindful eating, mindful partnerships, mindful leadership, mindful teaching, mindful yoga, mindful gardening, being a mindful therapist, and mindful anxiety reduction. Multitudes, it seems, are discovering that this two-thousand, six hundred year-old practice breeds calm and insight even during such stress-provoking times as these of global fiscal uncertainty tied to a growing human population and the over-arching demands that places on our ecosystem and national interests.

Now, after 15 years of practice, I am glad I began. And I am glad I am continuing to learn how to use this tool which helps me experience increasing clarity, hopefulness, and calm irrespective of what life brings and to speak and communicate with greater ease under all circumstances. I have shared some of what I have learned through papers presented at previous ISAD Conferences, for instance, “My Personal Experience with Stuttering and Mediation” in 2003, and “Shenpa, Stuttering, and Me” in 2005, by applying the deepest lessons mindfulness has to teach: Be Present. Be Kind (especially to ourselves).

Because I believe others with stuttering problems also may discover living ever more mindfully helps them speak and communicate more as they wish, I decided to write this paper as encouragement to do so but not as an uncritical “rah-rah” piece. As the fair-minded clinician and researcher I believe I am, I have chosen to communicate an incontrovertible realization from study (e.g., Salzberg, 2011; Chödrön, 2005) and direct experience (e.g., Silverman, 2011; 2005), namely: 

Mindfulness is transformative but not easy. In fact, as Jon Kabat-Zinn (2005, p. 21), the originator of the complementary medical practice of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), starkly advises, “...practicing mindfulness meditation is not for the faint-hearted.” The practice, which can be introduced readily (e.g., Salzberg, 2011; Hahn, 2003; 2002), can be frustrating, boring, and uncomfortable, even painful at times to practice yet also inspiring, strengthening, and calming. As with developing a stuttering problem, each person seems to experience a course and time table of learning particular
to his or her own circumstance. Yet, there are similarities. We are all human after all.

What outcomes may be expected and what involvement may be required when participating in this essentially self-directed activity constitutes the content of this essay. My hope is that those contemplating whether or not to adopt this time-tested practice, which contemporary neuroscience and cognitive science reveal institutes beneficial changes in brain structure and function (e.g., Begley, 2010/2007; Siegel, 2010), to speak and communicate more as they wish may find this paper useful. It is adapted from Mindfulness & Stuttering. Using Eastern Strategies to Speak with Greater Ease (Silverman, 2011).

But first I want to thank the Conference Chair, Prof. Judith Kuster, for once again hosting this comfortable space to exchange information, experience, yearnings, and support. And I invite you to post comments or questions that arise from what you read here.

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM MINDFULNESS

This title may jar you if you practice mindfulness in any of its many forms (e.g., Kabat-Zinn, 2005) and have heard or read that holding expectations can hinder, even derail, the process. But, if you reflect for a moment, you may recall you began practicing because you heard or read that living mindfully leads to greater health, happiness, and ease in life. This apparent contradiction concerning the role expectation plays toward realizing those often reported outcomes offers a fulcrum around which to consider the cost-benefit ratio of applying mindfulness to stuttering problems, and I will use it as such.

Mindfulness

For those relatively new to the concept and even for those quite familiar with it, it is helpful to consider or re-consider what mindfulness is and what it is not. Mindfulness is not a prize for sticking with a plan of action the way tapping into an underground stream may be considered a reward for weeks of hard drilling for water in an arid landscape. Mindfulness is like the drill bit. It is a tool we can use to find inside what many of us desire: Calm and clarity, along with greater ease and happiness. But, unlike other tools, we can not purchase, lend, or borrow mindfulness. Nor can we fabricate it. What we can do is cultivate it. And we can do that through correct instruction combined with courage, patience, and persistence in the application of it (e.g., Salzberg, 2011; Kornfield, 1996). Many cultivate mindfulness through practicing shamatha vipassana meditation (Piver, 2008), as I do (Silverman, 2003; 2005).

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

I began meditating to relieve mounting stress associated with marriage, child rearing, and career building in the early ’70’s. The thought that meditating may help me speak and communicate with greater ease did not occur to me then or even in 1996 when I began practicing insight, or mindfulness, meditation following the instruction of Jack Kornfield (1996). I did not even realize that the skills I was learning in practice were to be deliberately and directly transferred to ordinary life (e.g., Boyce, 2010; Loori, 2008; Hahn, 2002), although I had glimmers they could. I began to recognize I did not need to let strong emotion linger by fueling it rehashing stories that gave rise to it; I could instead gently return my attention to my breath to be present as I did while meditating. And I began noticing when I was telling myself stories in my head rather than attending to what was going on around and inside me. It was in 2003, as I read Pema Chödrön’s (2003) article describing shenpa, a Tibetan word that names the urge we experience to escape something unpleasant or something that reminds us of something unpleasant, and how to work with it that I recognized the role mindfulness could play in working effectively with stuttering problems, my own and other peoples’, by decreasing negative self-talk, increasing self-mastery, and becoming more open.

Decreasing Negative Self-Talk

We seem to talk to ourselves all the while we are awake (e.g., Salzberg, 2011). Becoming increasingly mindful makes that apparent. For someone with a stuttering problem, worrying about stuttering and regretting having stuttered helps maintain the problem. Yet, because we are so accustomed to stutter-related worry, planning, and regret, we frequently fail to notice we occupy ourselves that way. Becoming ever more mindful of what we are silently telling ourselves throughout the day, as we are when we meditate, reduces the amount and intensity of unpleasantness we may experience related to speaking and gives us more time to actually speak. And, as we do when we meditate, we gently release these often unnecessarily critical thoughts to attend with interest, rather than judgment, to what is going on inside and outside us, which builds our confidence and increases our desire to think and act in ways helpful to ourselves and others.
Increasing Self-Mastery

Our view of who we are and how we need to be can become as distorted as our reflection in a funhouse mirror. Ultimately, we exit the darkened funhouse, which is really not a fun place to be at all, and see ourselves and our stuttering in the light of the sun. We recognize that our stuttering is not a marauder we need to conquer. Our stuttering is what we do (Williams, 1957). And it is not who we are (Silverman, 2010). We may never fully know why we stutter, but we can know how we respond to our stuttering. We can, through the use of mindfulness, observe what we are thinking and telling ourselves before, during, and after we stutter and gently release these thoughts and behaviors without getting caught up in them or in blame. We can, using mindfulness, feel the energy of our emotions and let them dissipate by refusing to entertain ourselves with stories that intensify and prolong them. We can, using mindfulness, carefully observe how we breathe to be present with each in-breath and each out-breath. And, using mindfulness, we can notice signs of excess tension in our lips, tongue, jaw, chest, and elsewhere and, with gentle awareness, allow it to release. We do not need to master our stuttering to speak with greater ease. We need to master ourselves. We begin this noble task by first becoming aware of what we are thinking, experiencing, and doing.

Becoming More Open

"I live my life in widening circles that reach out across the world."
- - - Rilke's Book of Hours (Barrows & Macy, p. 45)

As we use mindfulness to become more accustomed to recognizing our thoughts, being with our emotions, noticing our bodily sensations, and monitoring our actions as they arise and more skillful relating to them, we become more participatory (e.g., Hopkins, 2008). Our increasing self-mastery brings greater confidence with the desire to live life more fully. We are more willing to speak-up at home, with acquaintances, with strangers, and even with those we consider difficult. Similarly, we become more willing to speak in diverse settings. We even feel more kindly toward others, having begun to relate more kindly to ourselves. In short, we recognize our undeniable kinship with others and cease to feel separate. Knowing we are not alone, we begin to heal.

EXPECTED EFFORT

"If you wanna get to the castle, you got to swim the moat."
--- "Richard from Texas," (Salt & Murphy, 2010)

What Richard from Texas was telling Liz in the movie Eat Pray Love was that she needed to learn to live in the moment if she wanted to realize her desire of having peace. In the next scene, Liz heeds his advice by sitting to meditate. As she settles in, she notes it is 1:59 pm. We see her looking about, scratching her wrist, gazing at the ceiling fan, and noting an insect landing on her neck. We hear her silently wondering where she might live, happily considering building a meditation room, harshly reminding herself to clear her mind, then ruefully asking, "Why is this so hard?" before comparing her distracted efforts to meditate to a seemingly focused individual sitting nearby. Then we see her notice the clock registering 2:00 p.m., and we witness the look of abject horror on her face as she silently declaims, "Oh, my God, kill me!" before darting for the door. One minute meditating temporarily induced furious self-recrimination, a sense of personal defeat, and the social skills of a harridan as she encounters Richard on her flight from the meditation room. Several weeks later, we observe a more focused Liz seated calmly in meditation. With determination, consistency of effort, and skilled guidance, she is more assuredly meditating. Similar high's and low's await us, too, if we take up the practice. And, if we do, we eventually find ourselves applying to our stuttering problem, all aspects of it, the mindfulness skills we learn to quiet our mind and focus our attention and to greet and remain with difficult and with pleasant emotions and bodily sensations as they arise and as they fade. And we live and communicate with increasing ease.

REFERENCES


Boyce, B. (2011). The Mindfulness Revolution. Leading Psychologists, Scientists, Artists, and Meditation Teachers on the
Mindfulness-based therapies are thought to improve your ability to concentrate, enhance your ability to feel relaxed, improve your self-esteem, and bring about a reduction in pain sensations. They have been shown to be effective in relieving anxiety, depression, stress, pain, and the symptoms of other chronic health conditions, such as fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue syndrome. Research has indicated that mindfulness and meditation stimulate changes within the brain—changes that affect the way we process sensations, our thoughts, and our emotional responses. What to Expect From an MBSR Program. MBSR requires an eight-week commitment. The program is hosted by a teacher who has been trained in the treatment protocol.