

# **Mass-produced Mindfulness for Common Mental Health Problems**

**The awkward dance between managed systems and human  
meaning**

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A greater and calmer sentience is key to much of our better health and life-experiences. Can we mass-produce methods to achieve this?

*Our truest wisdom must be sought and grown, slowly and with difficulty, by each individual afresh. Humanity's tragedy is that our follies are so directly and easily transmitted, and on a massive scale.*

The therapeutic mission – to find ways to bring inner peace, stability and resilience to the anguished – is barely controvertible. Throughout our lives we need havens of quiet, space, stability and deliberation. This becomes even more true when we find ourselves disturbed and dis-integrated: our 'common mental health problems'. So why not find ways to tranquilise and mentally cleanse we many sufferers *en masse*? Instructive packages from Mindfulness™ should do it, surely?

But such a commendable plan would be launched from an important fallacy: that mindfulness is a defined activity or commodity that can be distilled, manufactured, distributed or prescribed like a drug or vaccine.

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I have many problems with this well-intentioned view.

First, let me start with my understanding. It is that mindfulness is akin to philosophy, meditation, religion, wisdom or holism. It is an aim, an ethos, an aspiration: its direct pursuit is mostly unrewarding; mostly we find it as an *attitude* to our life's reflections and activities.

An optical analogy: mindfulness is akin to mastering our own zoom lens to both internal and external realities. We see the small detail, now the bigger picture. We see the thing-alone, now with depth of field: its history and interconnections. We see the moving image of the process, and the still image of the state. In mindfulness we learn both to freeze our frame and move our image ... and vice-versa. Propulsive and receptive; systole and diastole.

The routes to such calmer, clearer, unsullied experience are myriad, some are timeless. Some examples: the cave paintings of our ancient forebears, yoga, meditation, chess, Japanese Tea Ceremonies, the rapt musician, bird watcher,

Tai Chi supplicant or fly fisher. It is the attuned mother of her infant, the freshly attentive gaze of lovers, the moment of compassionate understanding, the weekend topiarist with his garden shears, the percipience of the environmentalist.

This is a personal portrayal of mindfulness and it is important that it remains so, even if others find it useful. Paradoxically, if we are provided with an 'official' definition, then that soon ceases to be mindful.

This conundrum is shared also by philosophy and religion: all offer their integrity, spirit and inspiration best when fresh, unformalised and conducted in small groups. Once institutionalised into large groups the kernel is lost and we are largely left with the shell. So, seeking these activities is very different to having them prescribed: a religious pilgrim in a secular State is very different from an obedient adherent in a theocracy. Some medicines are good to take, but bad to prescribe.

Yes, (my understanding of) mindfulness makes it crucial for grace, peace, effectiveness, creativity, social competence and intimacy – and that is just in our daily lives! In the consulting room it is a chamber of the heart of healing, psychotherapy and the art of pastoral healthcare. But, as we have seen, the paths to it are myriad and idiosyncratic: some individuals may find it through the abstractions of Yoga or Gestalt Therapy, others through water colouring or tennis. Mindfulness is the substrate or solvent: an explicit and didactic superstructure can become superfluous and cumbersome. Then, unnaturally propelled, mass-produced Mindfulness can become an empty perversion of its origin, like piped Musak in a public space.

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Enthusiastic proponent practitioners of Mindfulness have approached me. They have sounded, to me, like pharmaceutical salesmen or sanctuary-seekers. The salesmen are saying: 'Try this! It's good for so many complaints!'. The sanctuary-seekers say: 'Amidst our intolerable tumult, here is peace: join in our Retreat.'

But the kind of mindfulness I am interested in is neither like a symptom-relieving drug nor an escape-sanctuary: it is a *suffusion* of all. It is an essential for *holism*. Starting with myself, I seek a sentience of everything I think, everything I say and everything I do. It is important that this uncompleteable project is not expediently delegated to a separate activity or commodity.

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But our 'progress' is making such panmindfulness increasingly difficult. This is because such progress depends upon ever more automation, managed systems, algorithmic templates and standardised procedures. All of these exist to replace the fallibly discriminating eye, mind or hand of the individual: the flakiness of the human: the seat of mindfulness.

In my world of NHS Healthcare, the burgeoning of our powerful technology is displacing our human contact, engagement and mindfulness. The Here and Now with *this* person is eclipsed by banks of data and lists of prescribed imperatives. To counter this sense-numbing tide I do not want courses or specialists in Mindfulness: I want to salvage a culture that respects the complexities of head and heart-space: one that encourages a more delicate but natural mindfulness to take root and thrive.

'Co-creation' is another current buzzword: let's *do* it. No, I do not want instruction.

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