

Article series on Relational Mindfulness for the journal *Coaching at Work*

This three-part series by Emma Donaldson-Feilder explores 'relational mindfulness' - an approach that takes mindfulness into the interpersonal sphere - and what it can offer leaders, coaches, mentors, supervisors and those they work with.

Part 1 appeared in the March/April 2020 issue (Vol 15, Issue 2)
Parts 2 and 3 will appear in future issues

Part 1. Relational mindfulness: why the enthusiasm and what is it?

By the time I attended my first 'Mindfulness for coaches' course in 2008, I had been flirting with mindfulness and meditation for nearly 10 years – reading books, using guided audios, learning Transcendental Meditation, getting really interested in ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy). The 2008 course, however, was a key early milestone on a journey towards weaving together my work as an Occupational and Coaching Psychologist and coaching supervisor with my enthusiasm about the potential benefits of mindfulness and meditation. Attending my first Insight Dialogue retreat in 2011 was another milestone – in retrospect, probably a step-change – on my journey of integration.

Why the enthusiasm?

The research literature about the benefits of mindfulness and meditation has grown exponentially over recent decades. What was once firmly positioned in the spiritual and personal domain has moved, via significant applications in the clinical, medical and psychotherapeutic worlds, into workplaces and work-related applications. Research evidence (e.g. Jamieson and Tuckey, 2017; Lomas et al, 2017) is now showing positive outcomes from work-based mindfulness programmes, including improved employee health and wellbeing.

However, my enthusiasm was sparked as much by my personal experience as the research literature. Seeing how mindfulness/meditation practice led to improvements in my own ability to be present in the moment, to quieten my self- and other-judgemental tendencies, to be calmer and kinder in relationships, and to live a happier, more grounded life, I wanted to see the benefits ripple out to others. Initially, the main integration of this into my work was in terms of my presence as a coach and coaching supervisor: my own mindfulness practice helped me to be more present for my clients, more aware of different aspects of what was going on in the moment, better able to be grounded and 'hold' the client in the coaching or supervision process. As I attended further courses and stabilised my own mindfulness meditation practice, I started to offer clients brief guided mindfulness practices where this felt appropriate for the coaching or supervision. I subsequently trained as mindfulness teacher to better enable me to guide clients in this way.

My discovery of Insight Dialogue (ID) initially seemed to be just a further means of developing my own mindful presence and mindfulness guiding. ID is a form of meditation that shares the intentions of the Buddhist Insight Meditation tradition, aiming

to give insights into the human condition, suffering and the end of suffering. The distinctive element to ID is that it adds a relational dimension to the process of meditation and insight: it involves meditative contemplations in dyads, small groups and large groups of practitioners. Developed by Gregory Kramer in the US (Kramer, 2007), ID has spread around the world in the last 25 years and now has an international community of teachers/facilitators. As I engaged with ID, I saw a marked increase in all the mindfulness benefits I had already noticed, particularly in my relational awareness, empathy, compassion and kindness, and in how I could translate mindfulness into my day-to-day life. I also found my wisdom and understanding growing as a result of the contemplation topics and teachings that ID included and the insight-generating possibilities of meditating in relationship; and I saw over and over the “magical” shift in the room resulting from the connection and the shared sense of common humanity that emerges as people meditate in dialogue with one another whilst contemplating existential, wisdom-based topics.

By 2016, I was engaged in discussions with fellow ID-practising coaches and leadership development professionals about how the “magic” of ID could be integrated into our work. Surely, we said to one another, a form of mindfulness meditation that focusses on the interpersonal must be an ideal vehicle to support development for those for whom relationship is a central part of their role: for example, leaders, people managers, coaches and coaching supervisors. As an evidence-based practitioner, I looked around for research evidence that could support us in this integration of ID into coaching and leadership development. Finding that the research literature was almost non-existent, I tumbled into doing a Professional Doctorate with that integration as its central theme. It is the doctoral stage of my development journey that has led to my putting together a suite of programmes that are a form of relational mindfulness based on ID.

What is relational mindfulness?

At a generic level, relational mindfulness is about taking mindfulness practice into the relational sphere. I am by no means the only one using the term: I know of a research programme exploring relational mindfulness training at a business school in the Czech Republic (Vich and Lukes, 2018), and a meditation teacher who has written a book and created a 4 week online programme entitled relational mindfulness (Tull, 2019); and there are no doubt others also describing their work in similar terms. Meanwhile, many mindfulness courses now include some form of relational mindfulness exercise (for example, I often hear of mindfulness 8-week courses that build this into session 6).

My relational mindfulness (RM) programmes incorporate a particular form of relational mindfulness practice that is specifically based on ID. They build on Gregory Kramer’s creation of ID, and on the Interpersonal Mindfulness Programme that blended ID with mainstream mindfulness training approaches (Kramer, Meleo-Meyer and Turner, 2008). This grounding in ID gives RM a number of distinguishing characteristics, including: the dialogic form of meditation, supported by silent/personal practice; a set of six guidelines that anchor the meditative nature of the practice; and contemplation topics that steer the meditative sharing.

I will now describe each of these distinguishing characteristics in turn. However, whilst descriptions can perhaps give a sense of the shape and intention of RM, as anyone who has experienced mindfulness practice knows, describing what happens is not really the point. To really understand what a practice is about and the benefit it offers, having a cognitive sense of what it is about is not enough, we need to experience it. (Coaching at Work is offering opportunities to experience RM for Coaches in a taster at the annual conference in July and as a day-long masterclass in November.)

Dialogic form of meditation, supported by silent/personal practice: As in ID, the formal guided practice of RM involves meditating together in dyads, small groups or a large group. Initially, there is usually a designated speaker and the other person is/people are the listener(s); this separation of roles supports the meditative quality of the practice. The formal practice of RM always includes an initial period of silent/personal meditation to settle and ground the co-meditators, together with mindful pauses at regular intervals to bring them back into the moment if needed and deepen the meditational basis.

Six guidelines: The feature that perhaps most distinguishes RM, as based on ID, from other dialogic and relational mindfulness/meditation is the use of the six ID guidelines, crafted by Gregory Kramer, to anchor the meditative nature of the dialogue.

- The first two guidelines, *Pause* and *Relax*, provide the grounding in personal meditation and will be familiar to those with experience of mindfulness.
 - *Pause* points to being fully present moment by moment, being aware, noticing what is happening and stepping back from the rush of doing, saying or thinking in order to bring attention to immediate experience.
 - *Relax* invites a calming of the body, heart and mind and acceptance of whatever sensations, emotions and thoughts are present; helping the co-meditators to be with their experience, even if it is unpleasant, and release the habit of resisting or avoiding it; letting go of judgement and bringing a friendly awareness.
- The third guideline, *Open*, marks the transition from the personal to the relational. It guides an expansion of awareness beyond internal sensations, thoughts and emotions, to take in the external world, both other people and the environment. This more spacious awareness allows the co-meditators to notice the relationship between self and other, the flux and flow of the relational moment.
- The fourth guideline, *Attune to emergence*, supports what might be called 'beginner's mind'. It is the opening of awareness to allow flexibility to be with the constant change and complexity of the world, supporting the co-meditators to be fully present with the ebb and flow of experience; it is a letting go of preconceptions and planning and of trying to control what happens next.
- The final two guidelines, *Listen deeply* and *Speak the truth*, bring authenticity and full presence into each moment of dialogue.
 - *Listen deeply* invites a stable, receptive awareness that provides kindness, empathy and sensitivity, while being fully present to the person who is speaking, to their words, body language, tone, energy and context.
 - *Speak the truth* involves a mindful discernment of the subjective truth of experience and sharing what is useful. At a gross level, this is about not lying, and instead telling things as we actually see them; at a more subtle level, it is about expressing what is true in the moment and discerning what is valuable, kind and timely to be spoken.

Contemplation topics: Formal practice of RM includes a contemplation topic or question that offers the opportunity to explore experientially the nature of being human and human relationships. These are designed to encourage a re-evaluation of assumptions, habits and patterns and an examination of aspects of the human experience in the moment.

How does this translate into our lives and work?

Of course, as with any mindfulness or meditation practice, the formal practice of RM is not an end in itself. It is the informal practice, the translation of what happens in the meditation into the rest of our lives, that is the litmus test of its value. The proposition on which my work is based is that, because RM is practised in relationship with others, a

situation that is more closely aligned with day-to-day living than silent meditation, it should be easier and more natural to apply it in settings other than the training room or meditation hall – and particularly to relational situations, including coaching, supervision, leadership and people management.

In the second part of this series of articles, in the next issue of *Coaching at Work*, I will explore what RM means for us as coaches and coaching supervisors: how it can support us in our work with clients as well as in our personal and professional development. The third and final part of the series will examine what RM means for leadership development, including sharing the findings of my doctoral research that explored how this might happen.

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