

**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)

Part 2 appeared in the May/June 2020 issue (Vol 15, Issue 3)

Part 3 will appear in a future issue

**Part 2. What does relational mindfulness mean for coaches, mentors and coaching supervisors?**

My conversations with coaches, mentors and coaching supervisors who have a mindfulness or meditation practice suggest that our client work has benefited substantially from the capacities we have developed through mindfulness and meditation. By enhancing our ability to be present in the moment, to quieten self- and other-judgemental tendencies, to be calmer and kinder, and to be more stable in the face of adversity, mindfulness/meditation can help us to be more present, open, supportive and grounded with our clients. Even if we don't guide mindfulness or teach our clients mindfulness exercises, the quality of our presence when we are mindful makes a positive difference to our coaching, mentoring and supervision.

Relational Mindfulness (RM) takes this a step further by providing the opportunity not only to enhance our capacity to bring mindfulness to our work, but also to build relational qualities and insight. In future, I hope to provide research evidence for this assertion; for the moment, I would like to share what I have found from my own experience and from what others have shared with me.

**Mindfulness and meditative qualities**

As explained in part 1 of this series, Insight Dialogue (ID)-based RM is practised with others in meditative dialogue, supported by a set of guidelines to anchor the meditative nature of the practice and by contemplation topics that steer the meditative sharing. My own experience, together with the reported experience of colleagues, is that practising RM has taken our mindfulness to a new level and also better enabled us to translate it into our coaching and supervision.

When we practise RM formally during a training course or retreat, our meditation partner can enhance our mindfulness through their mindful presence. If our mind wanders off or our awareness wavers, the very presence of a meditation partner can help bring us back into the moment; their stability can support us to calm our agitation or distraction. We now know that various neuropsychological mechanisms – such as mirror neurons and 'brain coupling' – support this attunement between human beings, leading to synchronisation as well as a sense of connection (Fredrickson, 2013).

Experience suggests that, having established a pattern of relationally-supported awareness in formal RM practice, this flows into our 'informal practice' of bringing

mindful presence to our lives and work. Sitting with another person, and particularly making eye contact with them, naturally prompts us to bring our awareness into this new relational moment. It can also be associated with other meditative qualities such as curiosity to investigate what is arising in each moment, energy and enjoyment of the moment-by-moment experience, calmness, concentration, and stability (Kramer, 2014). Over time, practising RM has the potential to engrain these qualities in our neural networks as being associated with, or 'anchored' by, the experience of connection with a fellow human being, allowing us to naturally express them in our lives and work.

### **Relational qualities and awareness of relational habits**

The counterpoint to relationship supporting mindfulness is that mindfulness also supports the development of relational qualities. Part 1 of this series mentioned the "magical" shift in the room consistently seen when a group of people practice ID/RM. This includes a sense of warmth, care and kindness, and also comments from participants about really opening to one another, understanding each other's feelings and having a sense of common humanity. Through the six ID guidelines (see Part 1 for an explanation), RM invites us to be fully present with ourselves and our dialogue partner in each unfolding moment, and to broaden our 'circle of concern' (Fredrickson, 2013). In line with Fredrickson's work, this level of presence in dialogue naturally gives rise to empathy, compassion, kindness, and well-wishing for each other. The originator of ID, Gregory Kramer, and colleagues suggest that ID/RM can help those working with others, such as therapists, coaches, mentors, and coaching supervisors to be more self-aware, more accepting of difficult emotions that arise, more present to and accepting of our clients and better able to collaborate with them to explore the present moment with respect and curiosity (Kramer, Meleo-Meyer and Turner, 2008).

Taking this a step further, my observation is that RM/ID can not only cultivate connection and positive relational qualities, it can also provide a safe space in which to observe our relational habits and patterns. In fact, the former probably contributes to the latter: the psychological safety established through mindfulness, non-judgement and compassion in relationship allows us better access to potential insights (McMordie, 2019). Relationships with other human beings probably bring some of our best and worst experiences: in an attempt to manage this rollercoaster, we develop relational habits, some of which may be unskilful and hard to even notice, let alone change. Bringing awareness to ourselves in RM can help us to observe our relational drivers in real-time, potentially offering us more choice on what we do in future. For example, if my driver is to keep conversation flowing, to ask good questions, or to be seen as empathetic, interesting or clever, RM can give me the opportunity more easily to see this urge, and the resulting behavioural patterns, unfold in the moment, thereby enhancing my self-awareness and capacity to self-manage. As coaches, mentors and supervisors, we need to be aware of and manage our own relational drivers and patterns, so that they do not get in the way of our being able to provide psychological safety in sessions, respond skilfully to our clients or see clearly the relational 'dance' of the coaching, mentoring or supervision. RM offers the potential of a powerful process to build self-awareness and 'get out of our own way'.

### **Wisdom and understanding**

As touched upon in the previous section, RM offers the opportunity for insight. This is generated not only by bringing together mindfulness and relationship, but also by the inclusion of contemplations that provide the topic on which to engage in dialogue. As mentioned in part 1, the contemplation topics and questions used in RM are designed to encourage present-moment, shared exploration of assumptions, habits, patterns and/or aspects of the human experience. For example, an RM contemplation may invite an in-the-moment exploration of the roles we play in our lives and what lies beneath them; or

we may be guided to share our experiences of the challenge of constant change and impermanence, or of the delight of feeling generosity from or to another.

Because of the meditative nature of RM, the contemplative dialogues invite the meditators to slow down the process of speaking and listening, to step out of the habitual rush of conversation, to pause regularly and to bring full attention to the emerging experience of speaking and listening. Often, RM will start with separate a speaker and listener, so the speaker can speak without fear of interruption and the listener can bring full presence to their listening with no need to prepare responses, questions, comments or feedback. (This alone can be a source of insight for those who find either speaking or listening challenging!) As with Nancy Kline's 'thinking environment' (Kline, 1999), this provides space for generative thinking, exploration and challenging of assumptions. Combined with contemplation of existential topics and questions, the openings for insight are rich.

Meanwhile, the fact that RM involves mindful listening to another person's views can provide the chance either to see how we share common human concerns and challenges, or to gain a different perspective on the same question, or both. It can emphasise both our common humanity and the rich diversity of the human experience; and it can reveal over and over that our way of seeing the world is just one of many. We can see the emergence of shared meaning and how narrative is shaped in the process of dialogue.

As coaches, mentors and supervisors, the potential for insight is perhaps one of the most tantalising and intangible benefits of RM. It might offer us the possibility of growing in wisdom, of moving our consciousness up the stages of adult or vertical development (Bluckert, 2019), and of becoming better able to support ourselves and our clients with broadening perspective, living with paradox and handling complexity, interdependence, uncertainty and ambiguity.

### **Other capabilities, such as resilience, self-care and embodiment**

To summarise, RM depends on and further develops three capacities: meditative qualities, relationship, and wisdom. These are the three foundations of ID, the practice on which RM is based (Kramer, 2014). From these capacities flow further benefits: for example, RM has the potential to help us respond more effectively to relational challenges as we learn to manage our own habitual relational patterns and to care for ourselves moment by moment in relational situations. This supports both our own resilience and our capability to coach, mentor and supervise: if we are frazzled, burnt out and under-par, we will have a narrow 'window of tolerance' (Siegel, 2011) through which to operate with our clients; whereas if we are well resourced, energised and calm, we are better able to manage any challenges that arise in the session and create a psychologically safe environment.

RM's potential to build resilience and self-care in relationship is particularly important because part of what we offer to our clients is our presence. To quote Maya Angelou "...people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel". Developing the capacity to self-reflect and self-care in relational situations enables us to embody and model resilience for our clients. Importantly, our own practice of RM with colleagues, perhaps in the context of CPD, can also enable us to acknowledge and bring compassion to the fact that we too are vulnerable, imperfect human beings, learning to model an acceptance of human imperfection without judgement.

### **What next?**

This article has built on the previous article in this series to provide greater depth and understanding of RM and its potential to support coaches, mentors and supervisors in

their personal and professional development, their work with clients and their wider lives. In the third and final part of this series of articles, in the next issue of *Coaching at Work*, I will explore what RM means for leadership development, including sharing the findings of my doctoral research that explored how this might happen. Of course, like all powerful practices, RM is not for everyone and the next article will also touch upon who is most likely to benefit and where care needs to be exercised.

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