

# Mindfulness in coaching: A model for coaching practice

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*This is the first in a series of papers to look at mindfulness coaching as an approach suitable for use with coaching clients. This paper presents a brief overview of mindfulness for readers who are less familiar with the approach and highlights other sources for a fuller account of mindfulness coaching. The paper sets the scene for a subsequent series of papers in this and future issues of The Coaching Psychologist Techniques Section. Each of these subsequent techniques papers presents a short description of a technique grounded in mindfulness that can be used with clients or by coaching psychologists to enhance their own presence, resilience and empathy.*

**Keywords:** Coaching; coaching psychology; mindfulness coaching, contemplation, reflection and meditation.

## The background – mindfulness coaching

**T**HE TERM MINDFULNESS has its origins in the term ‘Sati’. ‘Sati’ originally means to remember. The term combines remembering with a sense of non-judgemental acceptance, kindness and friendliness.

At a more formal level, a range of writers within the Buddhist tradition have offered definitions of mindfulness over the past 2500 years. Bhikkhu suggested that at its most simple, mindfulness could be considered to be ‘*reflective awareness*’ (Bhikkhu, 1998, p.47).

More recently writers such as Jon Kabat-Zinn, who can be credited with polarising mindfulness in the West, has suggested it is a way of paying attention on purpose, in the present moment using a non-judgemental mind:

*‘Mindfulness is simply a practical way to be more in touch with the fullness of your being through a systematic process of self-observation, self-inquiry and mindful action. There is nothing cold, analytical or unfeeling about it. The overall tenor of mindfulness practices gentle, appreciative, and nurturing’* (Kabat-Zinn, 1991, p.13).

The core idea of awareness has links to other spiritual traditions including Islam, Judaism and Christianity. In Christianity this has been most commonly expressed through ‘watching’ within the Bible. A call for believers to watch is a theme present throughout Bible teachings. Watching was seen as a hallmark of being a disciple, but has become less talked about within modern Christian practice. Watchfulness involves being full present in the present moment. Through this awareness, Christians believe both the presence of the self and the presence of God becomes more real. For some practicing Christians this is expressed through the practice of contemplative prayer, which in other traditions may be considered to be meditation. This involves a greater focus on being in God’s presence than of asking God for a specific outcome.

Lambert (2012) has offered one route for Christians to explore this through a 40-day meditative journey. Others, such as Langer (1997), Chaskalson (2015) and Bhikku (1988) have offered alternative routes within different traditions.

Ellen Langer came up with the term mindfulness independently of its Buddhist and wider spiritual traditions. She was exploring the concept of ‘mindlessness’ she felt had come to dominate modern life. She

felt a switch to a more mindfulness state offered great benefits. In this approach Langer defined mindfulness as:

*‘...characterised by an entrapment in old categories; by automatic behaviour that precludes attending to new signals; and by action that operates from a single perspective’ (Langer, 1997, p.4).*

For Langer, mindfulness is the opposite of this state of mindlessness. Mindfulness is the ordinary process of noticing, which involves three categories: *‘the continuous creation of new categories; openness to new information and an implicit awareness of more than one perspective’* (Langer, 1997, p.4).

Having used mindfulness over the past decade or more within my coaching practice, I have come to use the following short-hand definition which I share with clients:

*‘Mindfulness is a state of mind that, when cultivated regularly, promotes an inclusive, accepted and authentic experience of the present moment.’*

This definition’s attraction is the experiential nature of the definition. While mindfulness writers have tended to focus on the process, for leaders and manager in organisations I have found an interest is in what the process can deliver.

Others, like writer Michael Chaskalson have suggested that mindfulness is nothing more than *‘the quality of paying attention to yourself, others and the world around you in a certain way’* (Chaskalsen, 2014, p.6).

### **Mindfulness research**

The past 20 years has seen the quantity and quality of mindfulness research expand as a result of the development of MBSR and MBCT. Jon Kabat-Zinn is widely credited with popularising mindfulness and of the development of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course, which has been delivered across the world to thousands of participants, and with multiple RCT studies.

Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) was developed from MBSR by Mark Williams, who noticed that participants with depression who completed MBSR experienced significantly higher relapses than those from other groups.

As a result of these programmes multiple studies exist which show how mindfulness contributes to lower levels of stress, depression and burnout (Flook, et al, 2013), increased resilience (Aikens et al., 2014), improved work-life satisfaction (Michel et al., 2014), improved general health (Bazarko et al., 2013), greater self compassion (Flook, et al., 2013) while also helping in emotional detachment for workers in emotionally demanding roles (Krasner et al., 2009).

### **Mindfulness resources**

From its origins more than 2000 years ago, through the work of Langer and Kabat-Zinn, and more recently the excellent work of Michael Chaskalson, there are a host of resources available for psychologists to draw upon. However there remains a gap in the coaching space with few papers exploring the coaching benefits or how coaches might develop their practice through applying mindfulness either for themselves or their coaches. Exceptions include Liz Hall’s *Mindful Coaching* (2013) and Gordon Spence’s work.

In Table 1 I have briefly summarised some of the papers and books available for coaching psychologists interested in this topic.

### **Applying mindfulness to coaching psychology practice**

I have argued elsewhere (Passmore & Marianetti, 2007) that mindfulness can be useful for both the coach and coachee. I believe it offers four core benefits. These can be summarised as: preparing for coaching for coaching, maintaining focus during the session, remaining emotionally detached and sharing these practices with coaches for benefits at work and home. These are summarised in Table 2.

**Table 1: Mindfulness coaching – books and chapters.**

Books	Book chapters and articles
<p>Hall, L. (2013). <i>Mindful coaching: How mindfulness can transform coaching practice</i>. London: Kogan Page.</p> <p>Lambert, S. (2012). <i>A book full of spark: A study in Christian mindfulness</i>. Watford: First Apostle.</p> <p>Spence, G.B. (2008). <i>New directions in evidence-based coaching: Investigations into the impact of mindfulness training goal attainment and wellbeing</i>. Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM.</p>	<p>Marianetti, O. &amp; Passmore, J. (2009). Mindfulness at work: Paying attention to enhance wellbeing and performance. In A. Lindley (Ed.) <i>Oxford handbook of positive psychology and work</i> (pp.189-200). Oxford: Oxford University Press.</p> <p>Passmore, J. &amp; Marianetti, O. (2007). The role of mindfulness in coaching. <i>The Coaching Psychologist</i>, 3(3), 131-138.</p> <p>Spence, G.B. (2017). Mindfulness at work. In L. Oades, M.F. Steger, A. Delle Fave &amp; J. Passmore. <i>The Wiley Blackwell handbook of the psychology of positivity and strengths-based approaches at work</i> (pp.110-131). Chichester: Wiley.</p>

**Table 2: Four coaching benefits.**

Benefit for the coach	Benefits for clients
<p><b>(i) Preparing for coaching for coaching</b> A short body scan can be useful when preparing for a session as a tool to create the mind and create the appropriate mental space for the session to come.</p> <p><b>(ii) Maintaining focus during the session</b> Mindfulness can help the coach observe and capture the wandering mind to remain fully focused through the session on the client and their experience.</p> <p><b>(iii) Remaining emotionally detached</b> Mindfulness can help the coach be more conscious of their own emotional state, not only prior to the session but observing non-judgmentally changes during the session as the coach responds to the clients own changing emotions. Allowing the coach to respond empathetically while also observing these emotions to use these as useful material, where appropriate, for the conversation.</p>	<p><b>(iv) Teaching the techniques to clients:</b> Coaches can draw on their own personal experience of using coaching for the benefits listed in column 1 and share their experiences with clients. What is important is to encourage clients to develop their mindfulness practice as a daily habit or routine, as opposed to a bandage to use in an emergency.</p>

In the following series of technique papers I want to suggest some short practical techniques which can turn the positive feeling many coaching psychologists have for mindfulness in to half a dozen practical tools to use with coaching clients. I hope colleagues will find these useful and be inspired to share their own techniques in future editions of *The Coaching Psychologist*.

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