

## CHAPTER 1

# Core Concepts of Mindfulness

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My own exposure to mindfulness began in the early 1990s when I read Stephen Mitchell's (1992) translation of the *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tzu as a first year college student. At this young age, I thought the text was nonsense. The profound messages within this book did not reach me because I was not ready to learn them (I didn't have an "empty cup"). Several years later, once I began my training in general and sport psychology, I was exposed to mindfulness and Eastern approaches to living including Buddhism, Taoism, and Shintoism. Mindfulness is an element of each of these approaches, although wrapped in a different cultural traditions and language. I read Gallway's (1974) *Inner Game of Tennis* and Kabat-Zinn's (1990) *Full Catastrophe Living*. I became increasingly interested in Zen and Buddhist teachings, and these readings seemed to fit well with my studies in psychology and sport science.

My sport psychology training eventually brought me to progressive muscle relaxation, guided imagery, flow states, and therapeutic models for helping clients change. All of these concepts have elements of mindfulness weaved into them, but they are called different things. I also adopted the regular practice of yoga, which taught me many lessons about the breath, present awareness, acceptance, nonstriving, and compassion. My orientation to mindfulness came from

a philosophical and personal well-being perspective even before I had been exposed to counseling, psychotherapy, and performance psychology. Because of this initial orientation, I still consider myself a student and not a scholar of mindfulness. I have never measured mindfulness with a scale or built an intervention based on any of the common models of mindfulness. Nevertheless, mindfulness affects nearly everything I do in my job as a teacher, supervisor, mentor, and researcher. I try to focus on being mindful in each of my encounters with individuals and groups, and I trust they will experience these moments differently if I am present. In terms of using mindfulness models, it does seem a bit reductive to try to conceptualize and construct, usually within a Western scientific approach to theory building, what is essentially an individual and existential experience of being mindful and present in the world.

*My model is better than your model!* The essence of mindfulness is probably impossible to contain within a model or measure with a psychometric instrument, though many authors have tried. The emphasis on evidence-based practice has forced the hand of many therapists into manualized treatments that are reimbursed by insurance agencies. The two most popular therapeutic approaches are Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn & Santorelli, 1999) and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2011). These models, or approaches, to mindfulness have been adapted to and applied within many clinical and nonclinical settings. Within our field, there are at least two sport-specific adaptations of these models, including the mindfulness-acceptance-commitment approach (MAC; Gardner & Moore, 2007) and mindful sport performance enhancement (MSPE; Kaufman, Glass, & Arnkoff, 2009). The chapters that follow will explore these models in detail, assess their usefulness, and connect the concepts within these models to complementary theories from sport psychology and psychotherapy.

These models are no better or worse than any other approaches adopted for therapy; the interpersonal elements between clients and therapists matter most (see Chapter 4). In Section 2 of this book, we asked authors to compare and contrast modern theories for therapy and behavior change with the core concepts of mindfulness outlined in this chapter. It is our hope that by juxtaposing these core concepts against the concepts contained within several popular theories we can advance our understanding of the practical meanings of mindfulness among sport and exercise psychology students and practitioners.

Psychologists and other academics are good at asserting their egos in academic journals and books, and, well, I'm doing it right now! I am aware I must guard against owning or laying claim to any part of these ideas about mindfulness. They are not mine.

There is much to be learned, however, by writing and reading about mindfulness and bringing the ideas into one's own daily life. Like many skills discussed in the pages of sport psychology textbooks, mindfulness can be experienced through steady awareness and practice. Throughout the centuries, teachers of mindfulness have shared quotes, stories, and activities that can be used to help us all become more mindful. If there is a goal to these pursuits, it would be to live each moment, right here, right now with whatever arises (e.g., joy, love, fear, pain). As noted in the preface to this book, mindfulness as a technique to improve sport performance is a specific application rarely considered in many of the primary sources of mindfulness written long before the emergence of our field.

No doubt these models, and research using them, have advanced our understanding of how mindfulness connects to sport performance and to athletes' lives. From a recent systematic review, preliminary evidence is emerging, primarily from case studies and nonrandomized trials, to support the idea that mindfulness-based interventions may improve sport performance. (Sappington & Longshore, 2015). However, as consumers of mindfulness information, we must understand the limitations of approaches that rely on a specific model or instrument to assess and evaluate complex intra- or interpersonal processes. The issue is not too different from using a questionnaire to assess and track changes in team cohesion. Surely, something must be lost when translating a complex process such as cohesion into a set of ordinal questionnaire items that are summed together across a group. So, here in the beginning of this textbook, let's start at the core of the matter.

## What Is Mindfulness?

At its simplest level, to be mindful is to pay attention on purpose. To be aware. To breathe. To be still. To observe. To experience what is happening in this moment, and to accept without judgment the thoughts and emotions you experience.

Many components of mindfulness have been identified over the years, and we have settled on five core concepts or *threads*, which we have asked authors to weave into their chapters so we can create a cohesive quilt of mindfulness throughout the book. We have also encouraged authors to add any additional core concepts that have emerged in their own practices or work as they develop their chapters. The five core concepts include (a) present-focused awareness, (b) an accepting or open attitude, (c) a nonjudging approach, (d) compassion for self and others, and (e) the energy of mindfulness. Though presented separately here for academic dissection, each component is connected to the others as each manifests through (or builds upon) the experience of the other.

### **Core Concepts of Mindfulness**

*A present-focused awareness, on purpose.* The practice of mindfulness has present experience as the primary source of energy and information. To learn about yourself, your thinking patterns, and your biases, you can engage with each moment by bringing your awareness to what is happening right now. This purposeful approach may include broad awareness of your own thinking patterns as well as specific attention to a task, thought, or emotion (Brown & Ryan, 2004). Mindfulness practice centers here because we have an inclination to live outside of reality, either lingering in the past or waiting for future moments to arrive. Dedicating thought and energy to these moments of “unreality” can lead to frustration, dissatisfaction, and suffering in the forms of anxiety, depression, etc. Purposefully bringing your attention to the present moment can temporarily relieve this dissatisfaction and can help you identify other things that may be contributing to your suffering.

Nearly all mindfulness exercises start by asking you to bring your attention to your breath. You might try this now, saying something simple such as “I am breathing in, I am breathing out” with each full inhalation and exhalation. Do this for a few breaths. Pay attention to the air coming into, and out of, your nostrils or mouth. This present-focused awareness can be cultivated further through meditation exercises, yoga, or by single-tasking (i.e., practicing doing one thing at a time with dedicated attention). For example, right now I am doing my best to write this chapter without the distractions of meetings, phone calls, emails, and so forth. This core concept is truly as simple as it sounds. Place your priority, your energy, your attention on the only moment you have. Start there. Or rather, start here.

*Acceptance of what is, openness to what may come.* Beyond the idea of prioritizing the present moment, there is an additional attitudinal component to mindfulness that deals with the quality of the experience. Authors (e.g., Bishop et al., 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 1990) have described this attitude as open, accepting, and curious. Students of mindfulness work to cultivate this attitude by sitting and studying what is going on internally at any given moment. The idea is to allow thoughts and emotions to flow naturally without organizing and judging everything that occurs and to give up trying to control the stream of consciousness. Beginners may struggle with this attitude for extended periods of time, opening up and closing down repeatedly, and even seasoned practitioners don't stay accepting and open for long periods (see Chödrön, 2006). Although this concept seems simple—to observe and accept what is happening and what we are feeling—it can be quite difficult to stay with for more than a limited time. In Western culture, we are taught that some of these thoughts and emotions are better or worse than others, that we should stop our thoughts or change our emotions. This idea of acceptance and openness promotes another novel concept in our culture: stillness. For many, the idea to just be still and to observe, without actively trying to evaluate or change something, can be quite foreign or uncomfortable. It can feel like you are doing nothing, which is the idea—simply to “be” in the moment. When still, thoughts and emotions pass rapidly at times, slowly at others. Thoughts and emotions change, sometimes without conscious effort. Gaining awareness of these internal patterns and becoming curious about them is a noble first step in the pursuit of mindfulness.

These first two components—present awareness and the specific quality of that awareness—for many researchers are the only components of mindfulness considered. We have chosen to include additional elements in this book to be more inclusive of the spirit and flavor of mindfulness instead of only the conceptual content, because the application of mindfulness in sport is in its infancy. We have asked all of the chapter authors to weave into their writing the two core conceptual components of mindfulness as well as the following three additional features often noted in academic and lay texts regarding the practice.

*Nonjudging (watching, guarding).* This third component is a subtle expansion upon the attitude element of mindfulness. Because of the quality of most cognitive behavioral techniques where there is judging and labeling thoughts

and emotions, this particular component deserves particular attention. Language within mindfulness texts stresses this nonjudging principle in different ways, usually as watching or guarding. By taking this perspective, students of the practice can gain distance from their thoughts and emotions. Using a river analogy, the students can metaphorically sit on the bank of a river while the thoughts and emotions float by. Using this approach, one can observe that many thoughts are not rational (and some are totally useless!), and that some emotions are not connected to present events, and that both thoughts and emotions come and go. The guarding stance, typically from Taoist or Zen perspectives, suggests that we can often become trapped by irrational or deceptive thoughts if we pay too close attention to them and treat each one as a truth. The underlying lesson may be translated as “we are not our thoughts or emotions.” Practitioners of ACT label this process as “diffusion” of thinking (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2011), and this stance (or skill) can be a useful addition to an athlete’s toolkit.

As you gain awareness of your own internal patterns, especially the ones you don’t like, understanding these patterns are part of your experience but do not define you can be an important lesson. For example, if athletes commonly experience performance anxiety and label themselves as chokers or head cases, this practice could help them instead realize “anxiety comes and goes” instead of “I am an anxious puppy.” Similarly, we all experience grief or depression in our lives, and these feelings are worth owning and having though they may feel heavy and unpleasant compared to joy or happiness. There is value in learning through observation that “I am experiencing depression” compared to “I am a depressed person.” It is worth repeating that when you allow these thoughts and emotions to take their natural course, patterns come and go. Gaining awareness of these patterns of thinking and emotion in our lives, from a safe distance (sitting on metaphorical river bank), can be a useful experience for both our clients and us.

The nonjudgmental attitude is a critical piece of accepting the present moment as is. Our experience has often taught us to categorize thoughts, moods, experiences as good/bad, enjoyable/not enjoyable, or useful/not useful. Getting to the moment is the critical first step, but it is the open and nonjudging attitude that creates the space to allow acceptance to occur, and to allow us to linger in the present without judging and categorizing everything that comes into our awareness.

*Developing compassion for self and others.* There is a softness, a flexibility, a warmth in many of the original and contemporary texts on mindfulness that is difficult to express in words (Byrom, 1976; DeMello, 1990; Kornfield, 1993; Mitchell, 1992; Hanh, 2014). But it's there. You can feel it, you can smell it. If you read enough of the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn, you will find it rooted in self-compassion and love. With titles such as *Full Catastrophe Living*, *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, and *Stopping the War*, you don't need to go much beyond the titles to understand his focus is on understanding the self, and that the self is not perfect. The concept of self-compassion has even emerged as a complementary line of research in psychology (Neff, 2003). The core idea here is that we all experience unavoidable suffering in life. In our roles as mentors and therapists, we can help others reduce, but not eliminate, their own suffering. Combining this core concept with the previous three allows the full flavor of mindfulness to emerge. Compassion towards your own suffering (e.g., limitations, failures, mistakes, loss) when attended to, observed and not judged, changes your perspective on the pace, flow, and purpose of life. When directed outwards, as in loving kindness meditations, this change of perspective can fundamentally alter how you interact with others.

Becoming more compassionate towards yourself and others can often be linked to softening or diminishing the influence of the ego. In this context, the ego can be thought of as putting attention and value on the self, or our identity (i.e., "me"). Buddhist and Christian authors alike suggest that most all of our ideas of the ego are false, and thus these ideas must be watched and guarded against (DeMello, 1990; Hanh, 1996). Many other Eastern writings highlight the "myth" of the ego, and even go as far as recommending "ego death." From this perspective, the ego is framed as being in the way of our growth and likelihood of experiencing (at least momentary) enlightenment. Juxtapose this concept against the climate of modern professional sport where athletes are rewarded for asserting their own will and dominating others. This tension between the spirit of mindfulness and the culture of sport is worth pursuing, and the broader issue of using mindfulness to "improve" (performance) is a key ethical issue within psychotherapy (Harrington & Dunne, 2015). Noted as the performance paradox in the preface to this book, we have asked authors to comment on their own experiences in teaching others to improve while at the same time cultivating compassion.



*The energy of mindfulness.* The final core concept is even a bit more difficult to capture than self-compassion and the loss of ego. When you spend time paying attention to the present moment, something changes. You experience life in a different way, and because of this, there is a change in the energy of the moment. Others will feel the difference as well if they are in your presence. This energy can be viewed from both intra- (i.e., internal) and interpersonal (i.e., interactions with others) angles. Siegel (2010) discussed the internal “flow of energy” (p. 262) created through mindfulness practice that changes our brain neurochemistry and how we process information. Many studies of meditation have explored this energy through scientifically measuring changes in cortisol and neurotransmitters or through altered brain imaging patterns. Nanh (2014) highlighted the changes you might observe in your interactions with others due to the energy generated through being mindful. Other authors, based in the traditional medicine practices of Native Americans, go further and suggest that with repeated practice, the energy created through mindful awareness can actually alter the atmosphere in a room or place, not just your own brain chemistry. (Boyd, 1974). Though difficult for some to appreciate, when put into the context of sport, it is not hard to imagine scenarios where a coach or individual athlete changed the energy within the team by their attitude, actions or presence in a specific moment. Thus, individually or collectively, we can purposefully tap into energy (and perhaps unknown capacities) by pouring our attention and effort, over and over, into the present moment.

This final core concept connects back to the first. By turning your attention to the present moment, you are lighting a match that allows you to see things differently, and creating warmth (and light) that might be felt by yourself and others. The more you practice, the more skilled you might become at getting the match to light, building a fire, and sustaining that warmth over time.

## Mindfulness Traps

Hundreds of authors have written thousands of articles and books about mindfulness, so it doesn't take much time to become confused about competing definitions, orientations, or models of mindfulness as related to human performance. One important piece of anyone's journey towards becoming more mindful is understanding what *is not* mindfulness. Sometimes, it is easier to understand mindfulness from this perspective mainly because it is easier to



use words to describe experiences that are not mindful than to describe those that are. Part of the reason this lesson resonates is that we spend so much time in states of neurotic unhappiness, and our moments of mindfulness can be fleeting.

### **Mindfulness is not (necessarily) . . .**

- *Calmness.* You can just as easily be mindful of your anxiety and tension as you can be mindful of your feelings of joy or relaxation. There is much to be learned by mindfully experiencing various states of suffering, and many authors would argue it is through this sort of mindful suffering that growth occurs.
- *Meditation.* Sitting still is a common way of helping to teach mindfulness, but it is not mindfulness nor does it immediately improve mindfulness. What you do during meditation and how you experience sitting affect the outcomes. You can easily just “sit still” to escape your stressful life, and your mind can be aimlessly wandering during meditation or a yoga class. Observing these patterns of “avoidance” or “aimlessness” can be a path towards greater mindfulness but the exercise itself is not.
- *Passive.* The idea of *just sitting* and not *doing something* with every moment is uncomfortable to many in Western cultures trained to multitask their lives into maximal productivity. Mindfulness, however, is far from passive (yet, it is gentle), and it is far from simple. Anyone who has tried to meditate, practice yoga, or just breathe can attest to the difficulty of focusing or channeling thoughts and emotions while being still. This process is quite active, and requires effort to maintain and re-direct your attention from moment to moment.
- *Something else to achieve so your life will be better, something to master.* Do more. Achieve more. Be more. These common mottos pervade modern life, yet they do little but create stress and a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction with our current existence and performance. The core of mindfulness is that everything you need is already available in the present moment if you tune in. There is nothing else to achieve besides that, and many other orientations or approaches will often create confusion and frustration in the student of mindfulness.
- *An escape from the pain of this world.* It is certainly a trap to believe that to practice mindfulness is to escape from your problems and suffering.

The truth is somewhat the opposite: the point would be to use mindful awareness to experience and understand your pain and suffering from a different, even equanimous, perspective. Become curious and interested in your suffering; approach it, as opposed to avoiding it.

- “*Totally,*” “*completely,*” or “*fully*” anything. One of the issues in much of the writing in both academic and popular texts on mindfulness that send Mark and me around the bend is the pervasive use of *absolute* language. When we read absolute language (e.g., all, every, totally, completely, fully) in discussions of mindfulness, we know the statements are probably wrong, or, at least, misleading. Readers of mindfulness scripts or listeners to CDs are often gently instructed to “focus fully on the moment,” “become totally aware of your breath,” or “completely engage with your current emotions.” Well, folks, that ain’t going to happen. To set up people with subtle demands and expectations that they should be able to “completely” or “totally” do anything is to also set them up for failure and disappointment, both of which are antithetical to the spirit of mindfulness and self-compassion. For example, when instructing clients in mindful exercises, we often prepare them with something like this: “As you focus on your breath you will probably find that your mind wanders to other thoughts or sensations, and the focus on the breath is lost. That’s perfectly fine because that is what our brains do. They are messy, busy places that take us on walkabout all the time. As long as you keep coming back to the breath over and over again, even if it is just for a couple seconds before your brain takes you away again, you are doing just fine. And, in reality, there is no way to do this exercise wrong. Whatever happens is just more data for you to pay attention to.”

## Putting Mindfulness Into Practice In Daily Life

What does it mean to practice mindfulness as an SEP student or professional? We hope the many examples in the subsequent chapters in this book will stimulate ideas on integrating mindfulness into your own life or with your clients. As noted in our preface, mindfulness is a “state of being in the world while doing things.” It is possible, for example to be mindful while washing your hands, cleaning the dishes, checking email, listening to clients, or reading this chapter.

You can choose the moments in which you cultivate mindful awareness, and you can decide how and when to dive into the struggle. Some of you may prefer solo meditation practices using your smart phone; others may prefer group study and workshops. Some clients may gravitate towards relaxation training or guided imagery, whereas others may be most comfortable in a yoga class. There is no one method or path, and there are many ways to begin the walk but no clear ending.

We have asked the authors in this book to explore what we are calling the paradox of performance. This idea refers to taking mindfulness beyond its core—a personal and interpersonal practice—and applying it to help athletes, coaches, and teams improve their sport performance. One contemporary author, Josh Waitzkin (2007), offers a useful perspective on this paradox in his book *The Art of Learning*, a semi-autobiographical account of his own pursuit of a world championship in martial arts (as a novice) after becoming a chess grandmaster. He argues performance excellence happens when we create the right conditions in the present moment for unimpeded self-expression. His approach focuses on refining the process through which incremental learning can occur via repeated feedback and “failures,” and reduces the emphasis on “trying to improve” or “striving for success.”

How do you personally navigate this paradox to improve at something, and how can you help others find their own paths? What barriers have you encountered in taking this approach to your work? We are hopeful the many examples, and the use of personal reflection, will expand our dialogue on mindfulness beyond models and performance psychology.

One final question on putting mindfulness into practice is worth our attention. Should you go to a 10-day mindfulness retreat at a Zen center? No, unless you want to. Mindfulness retreats or regular attendance at a meditation center dedicated to the practice can all be useful. For some, the time away from the demands of work and family can be critical to create space for learning to occur. For others, the austere environment may be quite uncomfortable or unappealing. To integrate mindfulness, each of us must find a *middle way*. This path of moderation is explored by finding a way to think, speak, and understand clearly within the context of our ongoing lives as sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, fathers, mothers, students, and mentors. For it is within this

context of life that we are asking our clients to apply these skills, so we think it would be a good idea to study and try to understand our own contexts while we are helping others on their paths.

## **Summary**

When we embarked upon this book project as editors, we hoped to create a comprehensive resource for students and professionals in sport and exercise psychology. Beyond that, we hoped to capture the elusive spirit of mindfulness as well. The idea of the five core concepts emerged as the central feature of the book to guide our work from front to back, and to keep us focused on what is most important: the experience of mindful moments and the qualities of those experiences. It is for these reasons we have not adopted or endorsed any particular models of mindfulness, and we have turned our attention to the intra- and inter-personal processes that occur during the practice of mindfulness. We feel these processes are the mechanisms for any change that might occur in your own, or others' performances in sport and life.

The chapters that follow in this first section of the book focus on the historical roots of mindfulness, the evidence regarding mindfulness as a therapeutic intervention, and the key steps to becoming a mindful practitioner. The second section of the book challenges readers to critically examine the core concepts of mindfulness against popular theories from our field including psychodynamic and cognitive-behavioral approaches to therapy, flow and imagery theory, and neuropsychology. The final section of the book provides five specific case applications of mindfulness interventions including coach, injury, and team contexts. Each chapter is rooted in the biases and experiences the authors bring to their approaches to mindfulness-based interventions.

I am also aware that any chapter written on the core concepts of mindfulness is incomplete, especially one that focuses at times on the application to sport and exercise settings. So, in a way, I am already destined to fail at the things I aimed to achieve. Part of this realization is comforting, however, because if there is no real right way to do it or to make it "fully complete," why not write it the way resonates with me? I hope this chapter, and the thirteen that follow, points you in the right direction and informs the next steps you take on your path towards living with joy and compassion.

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