Mindfulness – a brief roadmap

This document gives a quick overview and roadmap to mindfulness concepts, practice and leadership applications for busy college teachers. It’s also a brief survey and recap for those who are familiar with mindfulness. See my list of recommended readings for going deeper, and my starting practice worksheet for how to get started with a basic daily mindfulness practice.

What is “Mindfulness”?
Informally we often use the term “mindful” to apply to doing something thoughtfully and deliberately. But mindfulness as a discipline and practice refers to something more fundamental than just thoughtful attention.

A brief exercise will help you get an experiential feel for what mindfulness is and why practicing it can have profound benefits in one’s professional and personal life.

Exercise. Noticing what's here right now.

Follow the steps below slowly and carefully, pausing briefly between each step.

1. Notice what it feels like to be you right now as you read. Do you feel relaxed, busy, energized, tired, neutral? Whatever you notice, just observe, without needing to change anything.

2. Bring your attention to your breathing, without trying to change it. Just notice that you are breathing in, and you are breathing out. Notice where you feel your breath arise, perhaps in your nostrils, throat or belly. Stay with this noticing for a few breaths.

3. Notice any body sensations that are arising as you breathe. Perhaps you notice tingling, heat or coolness... Notice the feel also the air on your skin, and how that feels. Whatever arises just notice it with curiosity. Stay with body sensations for a few breaths.

4. Expand your attention to the space around you. Notice the feeling of space, and perhaps sounds arising. Notice as you do that you can notice both body sensations and sounds, and that your attention can flow naturally from inner sensations to outer sensations. Let a few breaths arise and pass as you continue to notice.
5. Complete the exercise by reflecting briefly on how it now feels to be you, in this moment. How are you feeling now: relaxed, busy, energized, tired, neutral?

In this brief exercise of present moment attention, you may have noticed one or both of the following. Firstly, that you may have attuned to sensations, feelings or thoughts that you weren’t aware of a moment before. Often, in a brief exercise like this, folks can “pop out” of thoughts and notice a range of other things. Secondly, you may have noticed that your mind wandered on occasion: you were following the instructions, and then – briefly – you got lost in thought, and a moment later, came back, remembered what you were doing, and continued the exercise. In fact, you may have gone through one or more cycles or paying attention…mind wandering…paying attention again.

Now let’s give a rough working definition of mindfulness and connect it to the previous exercise. Mindfulness is the state (or practice) of being skillfully with whatever is arising in our conscious experience in the present moment, as opposed to distracted or lost in thought.

In the previous exercise you may have noticed your mind wandering. If not, you are surely familiar with it, as it’s a universal human experience. We spend much of our lives literally missing the moment, instead ruminating about the past or obsessing about the future. Research on mind wandering (see my recommended readings for references) show that our minds frequently wander - 47% of the time is a typically cited figure. However, there are mindfulness meditations (see the next section for more about meditation) that can help train our wandering minds. Even if there were no other benefits to mindfulness, simply gaining some of that lost attention back can have immense benefit.

However, mindfulness is about more than training focus and attention – important as this is. The term “mind” in mindfulness refers to more than thinking, but whatever is arising in conscious experience. In the exercise you took a quick inventory of what can arise in your conscious experience apart from thoughts. Our conscious experience is not just thinking, but also includes the sensations (touch and internal body sensations, sounds, sights, smells, tastes), feelings, or a blend of these qualities. Mindfulness practice can help us become more familiar and skillful in working with the entire range of our experience, by offering us techniques to observe it more clearly.

As a concrete example, consider a familiar emotion such as boredom. We all experience it, and generally try to alleviate it, perhaps through productive activity, but often through checking out on technology or some other distraction. However, mindfulness practices can help us to get to the body sensations and feelings that arise as part of boredom that lie beneath the automatic,
unexamined (and difficult) thoughts such as “I’m bored” or “this is really boring”. When we do this as part of practice, we discover that these automatic thoughts are the cause of much unnecessary suffering. We may not be able to eliminate every situation in which they arise, or the fact that they do arise, but when they do arise we can have more wisdom and capacity to deal with them. Mindfulness complements the external strategies we develop to deal with life and work challenges by giving us internal strategies to work with what’s arising in our experience of the here-and-now.

My view is that mindfulness is a mental health practice that in a decade or two will be seen as essential to promoting mental wellbeing in the same way as exercise is seen as essential to promoting physical wellbeing. Already many K-12 schools (there are large programs, for example, in California, Britain and many other areas) are including it as part of their curriculum.

Meditation and Mindfulness

Meditations are practices that help us cultivate mindfulness. The most common starting meditation is one that uses the breath as the main object of attention. The basic idea is that by paying attention to the breath, noticing when we get lost in thought (as we inevitably will) and gently bring our attention back to the breath, we train our wandering minds to come back to the present moment in other situations as well.

However, focusing on the breath is not the only form of meditation. In principle, anything that is part of our experience could become the “object” or “anchor” of our attention – or a mediation can be “open monitoring” – staying aware of the flow of thoughts, feelings and sensations without particular focus. There are also meditations to cultivate particular positive qualities such as self-compassion, or kind feelings towards others. A meditation course will usually introduce you to a variety of practice techniques.

It’s worth clearing up some common preconceptions about meditation. You don’t have to sit in any extreme posture – sitting normally in a chair is perfectly fine. You can do some meditations while walking - and in fact, you can basically ensure any form of movement is a mindful practice by bringing your attention back to the sensations of movement. While some folks choose to meditate for long periods, or go on intensive meditation retreats, there are strong benefits to a daily, consistent practice of 10 minutes.

Finally, a common misconception is that meditation is directed towards, and will create feelings of contentment or bliss. This misconception is often reinforced in media portrayals of meditation. While meditating often produces feelings of contentment and other positive states, for most meditation practices that’s not an explicit goal. The aim is be with whatever arises in our conscious experience and notice it clearly.
Developing a personal daily practice

Like (say) a healthy eating habit, you’ll get most benefits from practicing mindfulness if you develop a daily practice. If you can, it’s helpful to have the support of a structured program and experienced teacher. Options for this include:

- There are several well established, structured mindfulness courses. Two of the most common are MBSR (Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction), or MSC (Mindful Self Compassion). These courses are also available online.
- Several books contain structured programs: see my list of references for some of the most common ones.
- Several meditation apps have courses within them. One I really like is the Waking Up app by Sam Harris, which has a starting course and ongoing daily meditations. Headspace also comes highly recommended.

It’s also possible to build a basic practice on your own and get the support you need from books or online. See my starting practice worksheet for suggestions.

What’s in a mindfulness course?

Mindfulness courses vary in content and duration but generally contain some common elements:

- A set of meditation practices. Often the course will start with a breathing meditation, and once you are familiar with that, introduce variants of it and other meditations.
- What is usually called informal practice. This entails practicing mindfulness through the day by noticing where your attention is, and bringing it back to what you are attending to (if you have been lost in thought).
- An encouragement to notice situations where you struggle to be mindful: it could be in specific interactions, while using technology, etc. I’ve heard these situations called mindless “hot spots”. During the course you’ll be encouraged to notice habitual behaviors and reactions to these situations, and see what insights practice gives to working with them more skillfully.
- Connecting practice to values and ethical behavior. Whether explicit, or implicit, a good mindfulness course will encourage participants to connect any increased insights and
capacity they get from their practice to how they can show up more authentically to their loved ones and their community.

- Group discussion and support as people share common experiences and difficulties during practice.

One cautionary note on choosing a course. Recently there’s been a growth of what’s been termed “McMindfulness” – the corporatization and commercialization of mindfulness courses. In some cases the “mindful” part of commercial mindfulness courses is barely more than a buzzword. This isn’t as much of a problem in education as in corporate life, but even so, when choosing a course, ensure that the teacher has a solid ground in mindfulness, and that the course contains a good grounding of mindfulness techniques from the above list.

**How can mindfulness help leaders?**

Mindfulness is a common component of leadership training programs, and I hope from the outline above it’s clear why this would be the case. The title of one of the books listed in my recommended readings – “Finding the Space to Lead” – puts it succinctly. You may have heard the quote by the psychologist Viktor Frankl:

> Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.

By helping us notice more carefully our reactions to challenges – thoughts, feelings and sensations – mindfulness can help us create the space to respond and act skillfully.

My own approach has been to combine a daily mindfulness personal practice with participation in a local (Portland, Oregon based) mindful leadership group where leaders from many different areas use mindfulness techniques to help themselves and each other. I’ve found both of great benefit in my ongoing (and to be honest, at times humbling) growth as a teacher and leader.

So, how might you use mindfulness to help you as a leader? I think starting a daily practice is a great first step, and you might find that it alone is very helpful. However, if you want a more explicit connection to leadership challenges, I’ve listed several books in my references that use mindfulness as part of leadership development.

I hope this brief outline has been helpful to you as a teacher and leader.

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