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On the essence of mindfulness in an inattentive world

O istocie uważności w nieuważnym świecie

ABSTRACT

The article deals with issues related to the practice of mindfulness. The history of the models is presented, but the focus is on the importance of the process of correcting defects and thinking. The practice of mindfulness, understood as the process of accelerating out of negative mental ruts and the burden of ruminative thinking, has contributed to improving the quality of life and the overall general understanding of the well-being of individuals.

KEYWORDS:

mindfulness, high-speed societies, narrative mode, mental ruts, ruminative thinking, mental well-being

ABSTRAKT

W artykule zostaje podjęta problematyka związana z praktykowaniem uważności. Przedstawiona zostaje historia pojęcia, ale przede wszystkim jego znaczenie w procesie korygowania wadliwych modeli myślenia i funkcjonowania. Praktykowanie uważności rozumiane jest jako proces uwalniający od negatywnych kolein umysłowych i obciążającego myślenia ruminatywnego, przyczyniający się do poprawy jakości życia i polepszenia ogólnego dobrostanu jednostek.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:

uważność, społeczeństwa wysokich prędkości, tryb narracyjny, koleiny umysłowe, myślenie ruminatywne, dobrostan psychiczny

We live longer but less thoroughly, and we speak shorter sentences. We travel faster, farther and more often, and we bring slides instead of memories.

Wisława Szymborska

We live in a 'high-speed society',¹ which makes us act in a manner that is automated and lacks attention and reflection, trying above all to achieve efficiency and effectiveness in every field of our activity. As we live more and more

¹ Rosa 3–33.

quickly, we function inattentively, and we are usually chronically dispersed and absent. The permanent rush makes us distracted because too many stimuli compete for our attention. As we find it difficult to maintain concentration and focus, we make more mistakes and wrong decisions. In a state of constant tension, it is difficult for us to control our emotions and the constant flow of thoughts. The remedy in this quite exhausting and *de facto* dysfunctional situation for an individual is to practice mindfulness. It not only corrects the flawed models of our thinking and functioning, but above all it contributes to improving our quality of life and, therefore, our general well-being.

Mindfulness has been popular in Western culture since the late 1970s, and it has been maintained in Eastern cultures for 2,500 years.² In ancient texts, mindfulness appears in the context of dealing with pain (both physical and mental) and as a practice for maintaining mental well-being.

The topic of mindfulness in journalism is usually understood in three ways: as a certain theoretical construct (the idea of mindfulness), as practices for maintaining mindfulness (e.g. meditation), and as psychological processes.³ A review of the definition of mindfulness allows us to treat it as a state of consciousness, or meta-consciousness. Mindfulness can be understood as a state of consciousness for which emotional stability, sensitivity, and emotional maturity are appropriate. Attention processes are understood as systematic training which results in deepening one's own consciousness, modelling (or rather correcting) one's own automatic behaviour, and – last but not least – developing a positive attitude towards oneself and others. What should be considered particularly valuable in mindfulness training is the possibility of regulating one's own emotions, directing attention, extinguishing memory processes (especially the negative or ruminating ones), and working out a decency that allows one to take a glance at oneself, rejecting negative, self-judging perspectives.

The popularisation of this concept should be attributed to Jon Kabat-Zinn,⁴ who understands mindfulness as an judgment-free consciousness of what is happening at a given moment. In this context, James M. Dunn writes about 'bare

² Holas, "Mindfulness a depresja" 35.

³ Germer.

⁴ Kabat-Zinn.

attention',⁵ which allows us to experience our own thought processes without changing, categorising, or valorising them. For the sake of mindfulness, it is important to try not to reject or deny one's own emotions, whatever they might be. Rather, it is about looking kindly at them, accepting them in an affirmative way, without expressing any valorising judgment or referring to oneself and one's 'Self'. Thoughts and emotions, even if they concern the Self, neither have to specify nor define it. In other words, one should not immediately make a negative use of them and contribute to a pejorative self-valorisation.

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The process of decentration, which means the ability to refrain from identifying with one's thoughts, feelings, and experiences, is very important in achieving mindfulness.⁶ Decentration allows one to separate one's own thoughts and feelings, which involves deep insight and self-reflection. In other words, mindfulness is an experience that allows one's own thoughts, feelings, and impressions to be accepted with openness and curiosity⁷ without experiencing a valorising automa-

⁵ Dunn.

⁶ Kuyken et al. 1105–1112.

⁷ Bishop et al. 230–241.

tism. We can say that mindfulness allows cognitive distance. It allows us to experience what we might call a 'childlike delight' inherent in the early stages of child development, but generally absent in the later stages of life, through ubiquitous attitudes of certainty. John Keats interestingly described this state as a 'negative capability', which means accepting uncertainty and doubt without having to immediately seek facts and a cause. This creates an accepting attitude towards what is happening, creating such an important space between the stimulus and the reaction to it, freeing us from the negative automatism of reaction.

There are many definitions of mindfulness. We will refer to a few of them in order to better understand the essence of the key category for our deliberations. There are explanations that treat mindfulness as an invaluable observation of an emerging stream of stimuli (both internal and external);⁸ others specify an awareness of current thoughts, feelings, and surroundings and an acceptance 'of this awareness with openness and curiosity, without judging'.⁹ Others in turn indicate a full awareness of what is happening at the moment 'without any filters or assessment lenses. It can be used in any situation (...) mindfulness is cultivating mind and body awareness and living here and now'.¹⁰ Finally, it can be described 'as awareness and acceptance of a current experience'.¹¹ A review of the definition of mindfulness allows one to differentiate between three of its key dimensions: intentionality, which means an intentional directing of attention, underestimating acceptance, and focus on the present (topicality).

It is important to point out that there are significant differences between people when it comes to the distinction of mindfulness – some have it as a matter of course, while others who are a bit less attentive can acquire it through mindfulness training. It turns out that people who have high levels of mental well-being, self-esteem, and a positive assessment of their quality of life are usually more attentive.¹² Research indicates that being attentive increases our ability to regulate our emotions and our self-acceptance.¹³ People who are attentive to stressful situations deal with them more neutrally, tend to avoid them, and try to resolve

⁸ Baer 125–143.

⁹ Hawn and Holden.

¹⁰ Stahl and Goldstein.

¹¹ Siegel.

¹² Brown and Ryan 822–848.

¹³ Jimenez et al. 645–650.

them constructively once they appear.¹⁴ Equally important is that practising mindfulness makes it possible to stop the so-called flight of ideas and general anxiety.¹⁵ Having said that, a low level of attention is usually associated with high levels of stress and general individual psychopathology.¹⁶

Almost half the time our mind is functioning in a state of 'being busy', immersing itself in the uncontrolled thinking that I propose to call 'thinking diarrhoea' by analogy to the phrase 'verbal diarrhoea'. An important practice developed in mindfulness training is rejecting the drifting narrative of the mind, which always finds an object of reflection. Such a 'talkative' mind usually works in a habitual way, using cognitive scripts known to it. This unstructured, free thinking usually directs our thoughts towards the negative, guiding our consciousness towards ruminative ruts.

Different kinds of associations, feelings, and thoughts (*wandering minds*)¹⁷ constantly recur through the mind and field of attention of every person, which is appropriate for the standard mode of the mind (*default mode*). The inclination of the mind to 'wander' is a natural process and affects 46.9% of our time on av-

¹⁴ Weinstein et al. 374–385.

¹⁵ Gu et al. 1–12.

¹⁶ Cash and Whittingham 177–182.

¹⁷ Herbert Simon pointed out that the wealth of information implies a poverty of attention. Attention, although crucial in the process of assimilating new information, is a poorly developed resource. The abundance of information reaching us makes the human mind seek ways to deal with excess stimuli. This entails indifference to this information, which it treats as over-programmed. For more on this subject, see Szpunar.

erage.¹⁸ Therefore, almost half the time our mind is functioning in a state of 'being busy', immersing itself in the uncontrolled thinking that I propose to call 'thinking diarrhoea' by analogy to the phrase 'verbal diarrhoea'. An important practice developed in mindfulness training is rejecting the drifting narrative of the mind, which always finds an object of reflection. Such a 'talkative' mind usually works in a habitual way, using cognitive scripts known to it. This unstructured, free thinking usually directs our thoughts towards the negative, guiding our consciousness towards ruminative ruts.

The ability to recognise negative patterns and thought processes within oneself, such as rumination, allows one to nip them in the bud, shifting one's attention to what is happening at a given moment,¹⁹ and not to what we are currently thinking, not letting ourselves be overwhelmed by negative thinking. As research shows, excessive reflection and anxiety can easily lead to a variety of mental problems, with depression and anxiety behaviour at the forefront²⁰ – hence the importance of focussing not on thoughts, but on the body and its sensations in terms of attention.

Depression is usually attributed to two factors – cognitive responsiveness, understood as reacting to small mood changes combined with negative thinking,²¹ and the previously mentioned ruminative style of thinking. Rumination is usually defined²² as persistent, negative thinking which is repetitive, intrusive, and beyond our control. People characterised by ruminative thinking tend to assume that it will solve their problems, although the exact opposite happens.²³ Ruminant people tend to worry too much; they repeatedly and persistently analyse many life situations. In each of these situations, they find fault or misconduct in themselves, and self-blame is their dominant thinking strategy. It is important for such people to 'switch' from thinking about to experiencing directly – their body, for example. In their carefulness, therefore, it is important to be more deeply rooted in the body, not in what they think. Thoughts should not be treated as facts or dogma relating to the Self, but rather as certain events in the mind that do not

¹⁸ Killingsworth and Gilbert.

¹⁹ Piet and Hougaard 1032–1040.

²⁰ Querstret and Crolley 996–1009.

²¹ Segal et al. "Mindfulness-Based".

²² Brinker and Dozois 1–19.

²³ Lyubomirsky and Nolen-Hoeksema 176–190.

necessarily valorise the Self. Even if they are negative, they should be seen as mere thoughts, not an image of oneself.

Attention training studies show that it improves the mental well-being of people with depression, and by developing their ability to enjoy life and see the positive aspects of everyday life, it minimises the negative effects of depression.²⁴ It is worth noting that the meta-analysis, which covered over 12,000 patients, has proved²⁵ that attention training in the treatment of depression has proved to be as effective as psycho-education, cognitive-behavioural therapy or pharmacotherapy.

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²⁴ Geschwind et al. 618–628.

²⁵ Khoury et al. 763–771.

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) uses a mindfulness-based stress reduction method combining elements of Jon Kabat-Zinn's concept²⁶ and selected elements of cognitive-behavioural therapy.²⁷ It integrates observing breathing, body scanning, elements of yoga or meditation, psychoeducation, cognitive-behavioural therapy techniques – which are characteristic of mindfulness²⁸ – as well as informal mindfulness practices, which may be manifested, for example, by the careful performance of domestic activities. In the course of training, it is crucial to develop a greater awareness of one's own feelings and thoughts, as well as to learn new ways of responding to them, mainly through acceptance and compassion, rather than fighting against or rejecting them.²⁹ As Paweł Holas aptly puts it, 'An accepting, compassionate, and open-minded attitude towards all experiences, including the painful ones, has a paradoxically transformative power – it gives space and the possibility to change a habitual response'.³⁰

MBCT training allows people with a tendency for depression to avoid self-blaming strategies that can induce depressive thinking.³¹ As a result, habitual reactions, known as 'mental ruts',³² are replaced by conscious responses to the emotions concerned. In other words, we can say, following Krystyna Pospiszyl, that mindfulness helps to 'straighten faulty thinking'.³³ Zindel V. Segal et al. perceives this category similarly, and considers that it allows 'disconnecting from useless modes of mind when necessary and turning on more useful ones'.³⁴ The reduction of the automatic response allows an awareness of choice and a space to respond to occur, which is the result of reflection, not the effect of automatism resulting from a stimulus and a thoughtless response to it.

²⁶ Kabat-Zinn 33–47.

²⁷ Beck et al.

²⁸ Cognitive-behavioural therapy is one of the most effective methods of therapy, willingly used by psychotherapists in Poland as well. It is this type of therapy that proves to be the most effective in the fight against depression and also anxiety disorders. The key techniques for CBT include the safe place C technique. Herbert, J. Young's change protocol, working with the List of Important Life Events, reconstruction and reparenting.

²⁹ Holas, "Mindfulness a lęk" 35–38.

³⁰ Holas, "Wstęp" 20.

³¹ Feldman and Kuyken 143–155.

³² Williams et al. 275–286.

³³ Pospiszyl 92.

³⁴ Segal et al., "Antidepressant monotherapy" 1256–1264.

Mindfulness allows one to 'be above the situation', which is referred to in the literature as the ability to self-distance,³⁵ self-distance,³⁶ self-disconnecting,³⁷ or prescind from being oneself.³⁸ These processes, however, have nothing in common with dissociation, which means dissociation, which means dissociating or detaching one's own experience from consciousness.³⁹ This fact of being above the situation means taking a distanced attitude that is appropriate for an observer, being rather aside than in the middle of a situation. This state of 'being alongside' makes it easier to distance oneself and engage less intensively, which is particularly important in difficult situations. It is important to focus on what one experiences rather than on what one can intellectually work out and interpret.

Neuroscience research clearly indicates that the human mind works in two modes – the (narrative) action mode and the 'being' mode.⁴⁰ The mode known as being is considered more useful for practising mindfulness. In this mode, the mind focusses on perceiving and accepting a given moment. The mode of being makes sure that

feelings do not immediately trigger automatic sequences of actions in the mind or body to stop pleasant feelings and get rid of unpleasant ones. This necessarily entails a greater capacity to tolerate unpleasant emotional states, which is not accompanied by the immediate activation of habitual patterns of mental or somatic action to avoid or alleviate these states.⁴¹

In opposition to it is the action mode, also known as the narrative mode, which enables planning, action, and verbalisation as well as comparison. The action mode causes the mind to see the difference between what it sees as desirable and how it assesses a given situation. This implies the automatic induction of negative emotions, as well as certain habitual scripts that allow for the reduction of this discord.

³⁵ Wolicki 77.

³⁶ Popielski.

³⁷ Frankl.

³⁸ Szajda 35.

³⁹ Drat-Ruszczak 623.

⁴⁰ Farb et al. 313–322.

⁴¹ Segal et al. 66.

What we call the neuroplasticity of the brain is responsible for the process of changing our modes of thinking. This means the brain is constantly able to produce new neurons and neural connections up to the stage of old age.

According to research, every episode of depression shifts the threshold for it to occur. In other words, as time goes by it takes less and less to lower one's mood and thus cause depression. People who have had episodes of depression are more likely to think negatively about themselves and their future than people who have not experienced depression at all.

In recent research, it was pointed out that the brain is developing at all ages and that people practising long-term meditation can change the structure of their brain and how it works.⁴² For example, the disappearance of grey matter, which is specific to ageing, can be stopped precisely by systematically practising mindfulness.⁴³

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There is quite a general consensus among psychologists to recognise mindfulness training as a stress buffer and for dealing with difficult situations. It should be remembered that social support plays an important role in reducing stress, as it

⁴² Dunn.

⁴³ Doidge.

⁴⁴ Post 149, 999–1010.

⁴⁵ 46

⁴⁶ Teasdale et al. 615–623.

reduces the negative aspects of difficult experiences.⁴⁷ Therefore, if we perceive the people around us as supportive and helpful, emotional tension in a difficult situation will be reduced quickly, which is conducive to overall health.⁴⁸ Therefore, *mindfulness* is thought to be of great importance in such situations, which allows one to perceive a given situation as milder, with some distance to it, and, consequently, one can be less negatively involved in it.

People suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder experience a reduction in the volume and density of grey matter in the hippocampus, due to excessive and prolonged cortisol secretion.⁴⁹ Eight-week stress reduction training contributes to a significant increase in the density of grey matter, the left hippocampus, and the anterior cingulate, which is associated with pain and depression.⁵⁰ In the case of meditation practitioners, changes have been identified in the part of the brain responsible for observing internal sensations. Meditation prevents the negative impact of stress on the brain 'which has important consequences for many mental disorders in which the hippocampus structure and function play an important role'.⁵¹

There are a number of studies confirming the effectiveness of attention in reducing overall stress, alleviating both mental and physical pain, and minimising the negative effects of depression, thereby increasing an individual's overall mental well-being and self-complacency. Mindfulness allows us to look at ourselves from a distance, from the point of view of an observer, freeing ourselves from negative mental ruts and overwhelming ruminative thinking. The human mind functions almost half the time in a state of drifting thinking diarrhoea, so mindfulness allows one to calm down and free oneself from the cycle of thoughts and the intrusive rethinking of the same thing. Mindfulness allows one to recognise negative patterns of thinking, redefining them so that they no longer play a self-destructive role. Mindfulness allows us to correct even what we usually consider automatic and impossible to change. The mere perception of excessive thinking made possible by practising mindfulness is valuable, because it usually leads meandering minds to self-blaming and negative self-valorisation and, consequently,

⁴⁷ Cohen and Wills.

⁴⁸ Creswell et al. 560–565.

⁴⁹ Bremner et al.

⁵⁰ Holzel et al.

⁵¹ Lazar 327.

to depression. Mastering the ability to regulate one's own emotions, to direct attention, and to extinguish memory processes, especially the negative, ruminating ones, allows one to function more cheerfully and kindly towards oneself and others.

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