Mindfulness Simplified: A Review of Modern Applications of Mindfulness and Its Appearance During 'Work from Home'

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Abstract

Mindfulness has been applied differently since its emergence in the modern world. This paper sheds light on the recontextualization and simplification of mindfulness and mindfulness-based applications, particularly with the rise of 'Work from Home' during and after the COVID19 pandemic. This review contributes to the conversation on and understanding of how mindfulness practices have been infused into day-to-day life and simplified to accommodate the fast-paced modern working life. This paper first reviews the definitions of mindfulness over the years from dictionaries and research papers, then covers the emergence of critiques on the contemporary secular context of mindfulness. Lastly it examines the modern application of mindfulness and how digitalizing the practices has supported in time their expansion during times of crisis. The review concludes that the recontextualization of mindfulness seemed necessary to increase accessibility to its theories and practices, even though it has faced its own share of criticism depending on where and how mindfulness was introduced.

Keywords: Mindfulness; Work from Home; Simplification of Mindfulness Practices

Introduction

Mindfulness as a state can be understood as living in the present moment and being fully aware of it. As an action, mindfulness involves an individual or collective exercise to intentionally bring the attention and mind's awareness back to the present moment and accept what is. The contemporary, simplified, and recontextualized approach of mindfulness originates from ancient Buddhist teachings about the importance of paying attention non-judgmentally through living in the now. Why and how this is done differs from one setting to another and depends on the purpose of the action. Mindfulness can still have different definitions based on the setting. For example, in organizations, it is currently known as 'corporate mindfulness' (Kristensen, 2018) (Purser, Ng, & Walsh, 2017) and has emerged as a recommended tool for employees or a training program offered by institutions to improve well-being, support mental health, and enhance performance and productivity. The question of how to be aware of the

now and why it is suggested to live in the present moment is an ongoing conversation with room for exploration from various aspects and different scientific disciplines. Spiritual and Buddhist studies, management, psychology, neuroscience, and sociology each offers a unique perspective and contributes to a broader dialogue on the notion of mindfulness and its impacts.

This paper reviews the definitions of mindfulness over the years and the critique it has faced due to its contemporary secular context. It then considers the modern application of mindfulness and how digitalizing the practices has supported during times of crisis. The review considers one example of the modern applications of mindfulness for workers and employees as 'Work from Home' became the new normal.

The Definitions of Mindfulness

The literal meaning of mindfulness has existed in the English language since 1530, indicating a state or quality of being mindful. "Mindful" refers to being aware or conscious. According to Lexico.com, an Oxford online dictionary, the primary definition of mindfulness is "the quality or state of being conscious or aware of something" (Lexico). This meaning persists but is not connected to the newly evolved meaning and practice. Yet, the Cambridge online dictionary defines mindfulness solely as "the practice of being aware of your body, mind, and feelings in the present moment, thought to create a feeling of calm" (Cambridge).

Mindfulness has gone through different phases and has been associated with various meanings. It was connected to gratitude and appreciation, conveying "an affective quality of love, kindness, care, and consideration of others" (Sun, 2014, p. 5). The English term 'mindfulness' was associated with Buddhist practices in 1881 by Rhys David. It then evolved to emphasize bare attention, non-conceptual, and non-judgmental awareness, forming the basis for the contemporary discourse and its usage (Sun, 2014). Unlike in Buddhism, social and cultural forces have "packaged mindfulness in a particular way: as a secular, individualistic, instrumental tool for personal health and well-being" (Lee, 2015, p. 282).

During the research, it was noted that mindfulness is "being decoupled from meditation" (Sun, 2014, p. 13). Meditation could be a form of mindfulness, but it is not an essential part of it, although it is encouraged to develop a mindful state. The real experience of meditation in its Buddhist origins does not have one specific goal or objective; it is practiced as a journey to enlightenment and pure consciousness, discovering the inner self and nature of human beings through self-inquiry and curiosity (Bernal, Edgar, & Burnes, 2018). In contrast, modern practices often state an aim before commencing the practice, such as 'stress reduction', 'self-management', or 'increasing focus'. An authentic meditator, however, "longs for transcending selfhood" (Bernal, Edgar, & Burnes, 2018, p. 7). Therefore, even though many practitioners and researchers acknowledge that mindfulness and meditation practices originated from Buddhism, the notion has recently shifted into secular mindfulness and been recontextualized for contemporary application. The concept's teaching varies depending on the setting, for example, in a modern working environment, less emphasis is placed on the spiritual side of the practice, and its teaching correlates with the institutional values and culture (Bernal, Edgar, & Burnes, 2018).

The instrumentalization of mindfulness has supported its legitimization for use in various ways without expecting a single outcome. Perceptions of mindfulness include, but are not limited to, a trait, a state of body and mind, a trend (Walsh, 2016), and a reflective practice (Chu, et al., 2022)

Research continues to investigate the terminology of mindfulness. In a paper titled *"Reconciling and Thematizing Definitions of Mindfulness: The Big Five of Mindfulness"*, Håkan Nilsson and Ali Kazemi (2016) looked up, analyzed and presented comprehensive definitions of mindfulness. According to their study, between 1993 and 2016, mindfulness was defined in 308 peer-reviewed, full-length theoretical and empirical articles written in English, from which they extracted 33 different definitions for

the term. They have reviewed the abstract and introduction of each article, and used thematic analysis to identify 10 themes related to mindfulness, extracting 5 core elements: Attention and Awareness, Present-Centeredness, External Events, Cultivation, and Ethical Mindedness. After explaining each theme and showing the definitions they were extracted from, Nilsson and Kazemi's defined Mindfulness as:

> "A particular type of social practice that leads the practitioner to an ethically minded awareness, intentionally situated in the here and now." (Nilsson & Kazemi, 2016, p. 190).

Using an alternative approach, Song and Muschert (2014) found it best to define what could be "mindlessness, or the inattentive, unintentional, and unfocused completion of such activities" (Song & Muschert, 2014, p. 316) to further understand what mindfulness is. As a practice, meditation (focused attention) could be one form of mindfulness. Nevertheless, other forms such as "stillness and generative practices (e.g., meditation and visualization); creative practices (e.g., journaling or contemplative art); activist practices (e.g., volunteering or attending vigils); relational practices (e.g., deep listening or storytelling); movement practices (e.g., tai chi or yoga); and ritual practices (such as retreats or scheduled breaks from activity)" (Song & Muschert, 2014, p. 316) could also be considered deep practices of mindfulness.

Mindfulness Simplified and Mainstreamed

In a paper by Jessie Sun (2014) titled *"Mindfulness in Context: A Historical Discourse Analysis"*, the author covers essential aspects of the development of mindfulness discourse, particularly its modernized and 'secular' forms. The following paragraphs reference Sun's (2014) work due to its importance and relevance to this review.

Sun's paper has reasonably contextualized mindfulness and shed light on the purposes of simplifying and recontextualizing it, leading to the mainstreaming of the concept within several social institutions, including the corporate world. Corporations, in particular, have begun to show significant interest in the discourse. According to the author, this interest has triggered deeper conversations about mindfulness and its implications, despite the criticism faced regarding its secularization and recontextualization. On the other hand, secular mindfulness has made a healing practice available to a broader group of people (Lee, 2015).

The rationalization of mindfulness in corporations, more than in other institutions, focuses on how it could influence performance, productivity, and efficiency (Sun, 2014). It has also been seen as a competitive advantage. For instance, one article by Arianna Huffington (2013), which has faced multiple criticisms, states, "There's nothing touchy-feely about increased profits. This is a tough economy, and it's going to be that way for a long time. Stress-reduction and mindfulness don't just make us happier and healthier, they're a proven competitive advantage for any business that wants one" (Huffington, 2013). Nonetheless, the simplification of mindfulness and the setting of institutional objectives derived from the discourse has facilitated its mainstreaming.

It is worth noting that the critiques of mindfulness are often raised due to the utilization of the discourse rather than its fundamental concepts. The outcomes of mindfulness are not uniform, they are highly dependent on "the social and cultural contexts it is being taught in" (Sun, 2014, p. 21).

The presentation of mindfulness differs from how it is marketed, which has also been an area of criticism. Some argue that it is a private, personal matter, yet it is also a method for satisfaction and self-fulfillment. In a way, mindfulness could produce self-centered individuals focused on personal transformation without paying attention to the transformation that society and organizations require (Sun, 2014).

On the other hand, some believe mindfulness could build a sense of community when implemented 'correctly'. This occurs loving-kindness, compassion and equanimity are embodied in the practice and put forward by instructors. Additionally, how mindfulness is communicated is essential to market the discourse to people, as it needs to meet their expectations to be attractive enough (Sun, 2014).

The impact of mindfulness and its discourse depends on how it is taught, delivered, and communicated. The intentions behind the training and the means of delivery should be transparent to foster a deep conversation on the topic and its potential to invite transformation on both personal and societal levels. As Sun (2014) notes, "the long-term impact of mindfulness will depend on how it continues to be nurtured, taught and applied" (Sun, 2014, p. 28).

Modern Applications of Mindfulness

In the previous sections, I intended to establish the contemporary approach of simplifying mindfulness and its practices to enable the mainstreaming of the terminology (Sun, 2014) and facilitate public access. In this section, I will reflect on mindfulness as a modern tool and its presence in mobile applications. This will build on the topic and later discuss the emergence of mindfulness as a solution in the modern workplace, especially during challenging times like the COVID19 pandemic.

Technological and mobile manufacturers have infused 'Mobile Health' applications into smartphones (Plaza García, et al., 2017), allowing users to track their exercise habits, nutrition, daily steps, sleep quality and other health-related measures. Mindfulness meditation, training, and practice have also been included in this integration (Plaza García, et al., 2017).

Developing mindfulness mobile applications enables researchers to obtain data on the users of the application to assess its use, investigate trends, gather feedback, and analyze demographics (Plaza García et al., 2017). Studies of in-person mindfulness training have shown positive results and improved psychological well-being (Economides, Martman, Bell, & Sanderson, 2018). Currently, the focus is on exploring the viability of smartphones-based interventions and mobile applications. Howells et al. (2016) considered them effective methods to enhance happiness, with practicing mindfulness being a key factor in achieving happiness (Howells, Ivtzan, & Eiroa-Orosa, 2016).

The 'Mindfulness App' has been seen as a cost effective, feasible and well-accepted method among college students compared to face-to-face interventions (Moffitt-Carney & Duncan, 2021). Results after using a mindfulness mobile application daily showed improved stress, reduced burnout and enhanced mindfulness among student pharmacists (Chu, et al., 2022). One of the notable advantages of using such applications is the flexibility to meditate and practice at any convenient time, unlike traditional courses and sessions (Chu, et al., 2022).

Mobile-based mindfulness applications now have a separate category of practices for businesses and organizations. 'Headspace', a scientifically based application consisting of simple programs for mindfulness practices, includes basic concepts of mindfulness for beginners and guided meditations (Howells, Ivtzan, & Eiroa-Orosa, 2016). It is partnering with organizations to provide its services to employees and offer them unlimited access to its programs, promoting a "a tailored program for every workplace" (Headspace).

In the next section, we will further explore mindfulness in the workplace after providing a brief context on the spread of COVID19 and the shift to working from home.

The Pandemic and 'Work from Home'

During the COVID19 pandemic, an unprecedented infectious disease emerged toward the end of 2019 in Wuhan, China, and subsequently spread to other cities in China before being observed worldwide[1]. The World Health Organization declared it a global pandemic on 11 March 2020 (Ducharme, 2020), following more than 118,000 cases confirmed in over 110 countries and territories.

The disease was assumed to be transmitted through person-to-person contact. In response to the outbreak, preventive measures and precautions were announced by local governments, media outlets, and international organizations. Recommendations focused on basic hygiene practices such as frequent handwashing, avoiding contact with individuals showing symptoms, and refraining from traveling to high-risk areas (Sohrabi, et al., 2020). Despite these efforts, the virus continued to spread, resulting in a deadly disease that prompted worldwide lockdowns, quarantines and travel restrictions (Atalan, 2021).

New solutions and stricter processes were considered, including remote work, distance learning, curfews imposed by countries, closure of stores and public facilities, and various other regulations that varied from country to country based on registered cases. Given the widespread impact of these measure on individuals, this research will focus on remote work and how organizations have adapted to it.

From March 2020, 'Work from home' (WFH) has become the new normal, especially for knowledge workers, whenever possible. Organizations had to digitalize operations and use supporting technologies for work and communication (Tønnessen, Dhir, & Flåten, 2021). New platforms were introduced to migrate all work-related information and data online so employees and management could access everything anytime from their homes. Meetings and townhalls became 'virtual', seminars have turned into 'webinars' and 'online workshops', and conferences and others events took place online, if not canceled. This created unprecedented challenges. People were forced to become innovative to survive and continue their work, as many businesses that could not function online had to shut down, causing a serious economic crisis worldwide (Tønnessen, Dhir, & Flåten, 2021).

A state of panic was evident everywhere; during a pandemic and an outbreak of an infectious disease, public distress and difficulties in coping with life-threatening situations are expected (Cullen, Gulati, & Kelly, 2020). People were not only scared of getting infected, but the consequences were also vague, as individuals could not predict how their bodies would react to the novel disease. Anxiety increased among societies and communities as social distancing was enforced, and wearing face masks covering the mouth and nose became compulsory.

Human Resources departments and organizational leaders needed to find ways to reduce the anxiety of workers and employees, as they could not impose further stress on themselves and others amid a global pandemic, lockdowns, general fear, and a world crisis. The situation fueled a state of work burnout and chronic stress (Hayes, Priestley, Moore, & Ray, 2021). At the same time, they were expected to keep the business running, ensure the company's growth, and avoid losses (Tønnessen, Dhir, & Flåten, 2021), with the hope that this would be a temporary situation.

This opened new areas for research and questioning. In the organizational field, concerns were rising about the performance and productivity of employees working remotely full-time without direct

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[1] During the first months of 2020, nearby countries were alerted to a disease causing symptoms such as fever, dry cough, fatigue, and occasional gastrointestinal symptoms (Wu et al., 2020). These symptoms could vary between mild and severe respiratory issues or fatal complications (Sohrabi et al., 2020). By February 2020, thousands of cases were recorded and hundreds of deaths due to the infectious disease caused by the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) virus which was officially called 'Coronavirus Disease-2019' and in February 2020 named COVID-19 by the World Health Organization 'WHO' (Wu et al., 2020). On 30 January 2020 WHO declared an outbreak of a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (Sohrabi et al., 2020).

contact with supervisors and colleagues. Due to the involuntary transition to remote working (Hayes, Priestley, Moore, & Ray, 2021), organizations stepped up to provide employees with the necessary equipment and tools to work efficiently from home and overcome obstacles to getting the job done. Tools for online communication were introduced "including video conferencing solutions (e.g., Zoom, Skype, Google Meet), enterprise social media (e.g., Slack, Workplace), and file-sharing tools (e.g., SharePoint, Dropbox, Google Drive)" (Tønnessen, Dhir, & Flåten, 2021, p. 2).

Being at home for days, weeks and months began to affect the mental health of individuals. People became aware of the psychological side effects the pandemic caused (Atalan, 2021) and decided to take action. Organizations put in place measures and best practices to manage the crisis and improve resilience (Boiral, Brotherton, Rivaud, & Guillaumie, 2021) after realizing the emerging societal, environmental, and economic issues. Consequently, organizations began to implement various virtual programs and online tools to support employees and their families, including mindfulness.

Discussion and Conclusion

While mindfulness has appeared in different areas of modern life, criticism has followed. From literature, it is evident that mindfulness has been criticized for its recontextualization and contemporary usage, not for its core principles. Although the positive impact of mindfulness is being researched and proven, the oversimplification of the practices and their use to serve purposes opposing their origins have sparked conversations about the implications of mindfulness, leading to criticism from many mindfulness teachers and advocates.

While this is understandable, the simplification and the digitalization of mindfulness practices as mobile applications and online tools have allowed broader access to mindfulness and its teachings. Previously, people could learn about mindfulness through retreats, guides, and teachers, but these are not available to everyone. Mobile applications have facilitated a wider reach. Companies and organizations have used this to their advantage by extending access to these tools for their employees. The reasons why organizations decided to do this are beyond the scope of this papers; however, this has been beneficial during a time when employees were forced to perform their duties from home under unprecedented circumstances.

'Work from Home' (WFH) existed prior to the COVID19 pandemic but became mainstream during that time. Many companies continued to operate remotely or adopted a hybrid model (a mix of home and office) even after the pandemic. A growing body of literature has emerged on WFH and its impact on various aspects such as employees' productivity, engagement, and stress (Galanti, Guidetti, Mazzei, Zappalà, & Toscano, 2021); work engagement and employees happiness (Mehta, 2021); work-life balance (Pathak, Bharathi, & Mala, 2021); and work satisfaction and efficiency (Rožman, Zabukovšek, Bobek, & Tominc, 2021). Mindfulness was one of the solutions offered to employees and workers, and without the digitalization of these tools and practices, it would have been a bigger challenge to share these concepts with people working remotely and online. So, even if mindfulness has been criticized for its modernization, it is worth reflecting on and accepting that to reach as many people and share the practices with the public, a new approach was needed.

Further research on how institutions introduce mindfulness to stakeholders and members of the society is suggested to explore the practices and why they are introduced in different settings. This would enrich the understanding of modern applications of mindfulness and how an ancient theory and practice, mainly focused on the present moment and slowing down, became in demand in a fast-paced modern society focused on digitalization, development and productivity.

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