



MINDFULNESS FOR THERAPISTS

Practice for the Heart

Eric E. McCollum

ROUTLEDGE 

MINDFULNESS FOR THERAPISTS

Mindfulness for Therapists: Practice for the Heart encourages therapists to embrace mindfulness practice to create presence and depth in their work with clients. Mindfulness helps therapists cultivate compassion, relieve stress, and weather the often emotionally difficult work of providing therapy. In addition, the therapist's own meditation practice is a necessary foundation for teaching mindfulness to clients. Through a variety of exercises and stories from his own clinical experience, McCollum helps therapists understand the usefulness of mindfulness and develop their own practice.

Eric E. McCollum, PhD, is Professor and Program Director of the Marriage and Family Therapy Master's Program at Virginia Tech, where he teaches mindfulness meditation to his students in the Marriage and Family Therapy training program. He has practiced psychotherapy for nearly 40 years and has practiced meditation in the Buddhist *vipassana* tradition for more than 30 years.

This page intentionally left blank

MINDFULNESS FOR THERAPISTS

Practice for the Heart

Eric E. McCollum

First published 2015
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
27 Church Road, Hove, East Sussex BN3 2FA

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group,
an informa business*

© 2015 Taylor & Francis Group

The right of Eric E. McCollum to be identified as the author of this Work has been asserted by him in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McCollum, Eric E., author.

Mindfulness for therapists : practice for the heart / Eric McCollum.
p. ; cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

I. Title.

[DNLM: 1. Mindfulness. 2. Psychotherapy—methods.
3. Burnout, Professional—prevention & control. 4. Self Care—
psychology. WM 420]

RC480.5

616.89'14—dc23

2014014313

ISBN: 978-0-415-89826-3 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-80587-3 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-75193-1 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	vii
1 The Challenge of Presence in a Multitasking World	1
<i>Being and Doing as Therapists</i>	3
2 What Is Mindfulness?	7
<i>A Taste of Mindfulness</i>	7
<i>The Path to Being</i>	9
<i>Misconceptions</i>	9
<i>Mindlessness</i>	11
<i>So What Is Mindfulness?</i>	15
3 What Do We Know About Mindfulness?	
The Research Record	21
<i>General Effects of Mindfulness</i>	21
<i>Mindfulness for Physical and Psychological Problems</i>	24
<i>Outcome Research in Health Care/Psychological Arenas</i>	25
4 How Does Mindfulness Benefit Therapists?	28
<i>Therapists' Stress</i>	29
<i>What Can Mindfulness Contribute?</i>	33
5 Cultivating Mindfulness	36
<i>Setting the Stage for Practice</i>	37
<i>Breath Meditation</i>	40
<i>The Next Step</i>	42
<i>What Is Happening in This Moment?</i>	44

CONTENTS

6	The Complexities of Compassion	49
	<i>What's So Hard About Compassion?</i>	50
	<i>Fears of Compassion</i>	53
	<i>Lovingkindness Meditation</i>	61
	<i>Practicing Lovingkindness Meditation</i>	62
7	Things Get in the Way: Obstacles to Being Present	64
	<i>Desire</i>	65
	<i>Aversion</i>	68
	<i>Sluggishness and Restlessness</i>	71
	<i>Doubt</i>	76
8	Practicing to Be Present	81
	<i>The Psychological Container</i>	81
	<i>Preparing for Practice</i>	85
	<i>The Active Mind</i>	87
9	A Final Thought	92
	<i>References</i>	95
	<i>Index</i>	101
	<i>Resources</i>	105

PREFACE

In the past, when I've written a book, it's because I've believed that I've come to the end of something. A book seems to be the chance to set out definitively what you think you know. This book is different. Rather than a report from the end of a journey, it's more like a lengthy letter written along the way. I don't think of it that way because I don't think I know anything. I do. But mindfulness practice—the subject of this book—isn't something that has an end. It is a challenging journey that can last a lifetime if we choose to let it. Each time I've thought maybe I was near the end, there's always another hill ahead that I'm irresistibly drawn to climb to see what's on the other side.

I'd like you to think of this book, then, as an invitation. I truly believe, and my experience bears out, that mindfulness practice can be an invaluable part of being a therapist. I'll make the case in depth later in the book, but in brief, mindfulness helps us with many of the things about being a therapist that are hard or that get in our way. It helps with stress. It helps us be present. It helps us find the common humanity we share with our clients, so that our empathy and connection with them is genuine. It's a road I've been traveling for a number of years now and I'd like to invite you to travel it with me. It isn't always an easy road, and it certainly isn't a superhighway, but there certainly are rewards along the way.

I decided to write this book because I kept seeing in the professional literature the recommendation that if therapists planned to use mindfulness in their work with clients, it was important that they have their own mindfulness practice. I wholeheartedly agree with that recommendation. Basic meditation instructions are pretty simple and easy to give. That isn't where the skill and experience come in. Therapists need their own mindfulness practice to deal with what comes after you've given the instructions. That's when the hard work begins. That's when it's important to be able to discern when clients are on the right path or when they are losing the way. While conceptual frameworks help with that discernment, experience is the final touchstone. Sometimes this practice takes us to difficult and scary places. Sometimes it gives us pleasures that seem like the end

of the road when they're not. Knowing in our own bones how that feels makes us much more able to help clients as they encounter the same things. And when it comes down to it, I'm really not going to encourage you to try teaching your clients the formal practice of mindfulness, at least not often and not much. I think the real benefit of this practice for therapists is what it does for us both personally and professionally. We help our clients by bringing our own best selves into the therapy room, and mindfulness helps us do that more consistently and fully.

This is a book for practicing therapists and for students who are beginning the professional journey to become therapists. Despite all the recommendations I was hearing about the importance to therapists having their own practice, I didn't find much direction for how to do so that was aimed specifically at therapists. There are lots and lots of good books about mindfulness and meditation and compassion but none focused on how those practices apply to the needs and lives of therapists. So I decided that was the book I was going to write. Why me? I've had a mindfulness practice in the insight meditation or *vipassana* tradition since the early 1980s. My practice has ebbed and flowed but has been part of my life since I was first exposed to it while a staff member at the Menninger Clinic. We were lucky enough to have a skilled practitioner and teacher—Dr. Jack Engler—on the staff who began to teach the practice and organize sitting groups. I honestly don't know what drew me to meditation at that time. I guess it was some sense that life could be different for me, that some of the struggles I was engaged in could be untangled.

My practice ran parallel to my professional life, or so it seemed to me, for many years. Now we have the topic of mindfulness everywhere—on magazine covers, in television shows, in scientific papers, and in the self-help aisle at the bookstore. Mindfulness is taught in universities and public school and to preschoolers. As I write this, there is even a member of Congress—Ohio Representative Tim Ryan—who wants to bring mindfulness to the entire country. It wasn't always so. When I first began to meditate, I recall feeling that it was a bit suspect, a little clandestine. I didn't tell many people that I meditated. And I certainly didn't tell anyone when I went to my first meditation retreat. Who would understand why I would choose to spend 5 days in the woods with a group of strangers, not talking to any of them, not even making eye contact, and meditating from 5 in the morning until 10 at night? Using meditation in therapy seemed like a risky and questionable thing to do.

In this book, I'll talk about Buddhist psychology. This isn't an attempt to convince anyone to take up Buddhist religion. The insights of the historical Buddha as they have been developed and passed down over the past 2,500 years can be useful to us without adopting the religious aspects of Buddhism. In fact, what the Buddha taught was much more like a philosophy or psychology than it was like a religion. The religious

aspect became part of Buddhism only later as it spread throughout India and encountered other religions and spiritual practices.

One aspect of Buddhist psychology that I find useful is the Three Refuges. These are supports for spiritual development and the practice of mindfulness. One of those refuges is called the *sangha* or the community. None of us can really get far in this practice all by ourselves. For me, as a therapist, I began to feel the influence of the community when I started to see the initial studies that explored the usefulness of mindfulness in helping to treat a variety of disorders. The courage of early pioneers like Jon Kabat-Zinn helped to bring this practice into our field. His lead was followed by a growing cadre of researchers and practitioners who are continuing to expand the reach of mindfulness in health care and mental health care. Others are taking it to education. Perhaps it will even make it into our government one of these days.

I took a training workshop from Jon Kabat-Zinn and his colleague Saki Santorelli in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction almost 20 years ago now. It gave me a beginning vision of how this practice might become part of my professional work. Slowly, I began to talk with my colleagues about my meditation experience and how I thought it might be useful. I offered a 1-day workshop to the students and faculty in the marriage and family therapy program that I now direct. To my surprise, a lot of people attended. Also to my surprise, my colleagues were supportive. I began to hold informal meditation sessions after class for those who wanted more experience with the practice. I started attending retreats to deepen my own practice and found a wonderful teacher—Tara Brach of the Insight Meditation Community of Washington. With further support of my colleagues, I began to formally teach mindfulness to our students as they began their clinical training. The response was enthusiastic. I developed and taught a full course on mindfulness. We held day-long retreats and organized a monthly sitting group. At this point, we have truly integrated mindfulness into the curriculum of our program. Not long ago, I got a note from a recent graduate who had just completed a 6-week silent mindfulness meditation retreat. She wrote how much the experience had meant to her and how much she had gained from it. “This never would have happened without mindfulness being such an integral part of the MFT program,” she said.

So I am inviting you along on the same journey as I have made, and my students have made, and generations of people before us have made. Some days when I sit down to meditate, I feel the presence of all of those people, of that *sangha*, around me. I am trying really hard not to say it takes a village. But it certainly is a lonely path if you are all alone.

So many people have helped me along the way that I want to take a moment to thank some of them. Jack Engler first taught me mindfulness at Menninger along with my colleagues Bill Trussell, Marianne

PREFACE

Ault-Riche, Peter Novotny, and Cecil Chamberlain. These people were all part of a regular sitting group that met weekly in the morning before work, and they helped get the ball rolling. Tara Brach has been an incredible influence, both for her teaching and for her manner in the world. She has been an informal consultant to us as we have integrated mindfulness into our training program and has had a profound impact on my personal practice as well. My colleagues Dr. Sandi Stith and Dr. Karen Rosen created an atmosphere at Virginia Tech where I felt safe to begin to talk about my experience and they encouraged me to pursue integrating it into our program even when they didn't exactly understand what I was up to. My current colleagues have continued that support. Dr. Angela Huebner and Kirsten Lundeberg have been amazingly good friends and colleagues along the way. I was lucky enough to have a talented editor and writer—Faye Fiore—help edit sections of the book. My wife Julia Stephens has put up with taking care of all my responsibilities while I sat retreats and has never questioned why I would or should pursue this practice. But in the end I owe the greatest debt to my clients and my students. They have taught me more than they can ever guess about the practice of mindfulness, and about the simple grace of being human.

THE CHALLENGE OF PRESENCE IN A MULTITASKING WORLD

Roger¹ is still on his cell phone as he comes down the hall to my office. His voice is so loud that it is impossible not to overhear.

“Tell them I’ll be back in about an hour,” he says. There’s a pause. “No, I can’t be disturbed.”

A longer pause this time as Roger listens intently.

“Okay,” he says finally. “Tell them to send me an e-mail. Or call if it’s really urgent.”

As he sits down in my office, Roger is still staring at his phone, swiping his finger across the screen.

“Just a second,” he says. “I need to check on one thing.”

I sit quietly while he reads e-mail and types quickly with his thumbs. He is clearly checking on more than one thing. He looks up when he is done.

“What a day,” he says, looking distracted. “Everyone seems to want a piece of me.”

“Just take a moment to leave that all behind,” I tell him.

I guide us both through a brief present focus experience that I do with most clients at the beginning of my sessions: taking a conscious breath or two, feeling our feet on the floor, the chair against our body . . . coming into the present.

“Better,” Roger says. He begins to tell me about his thoughts since I last saw him, how he struggles with a vague, background sense of anxiety that always leaves him feeling unsettled. He doesn’t have panic attacks or frank anxiety symptoms, just a consistent feeling of unease.

As we talk, his cell phone vibrates insistently in his shirt pocket, signaling either an incoming call or an arriving e-mail. We both ignore it as best we can, but finally Roger says, “I guess I better check on that.” He looks at the screen and his eyes narrow.

“Damn,” he says. “It never stops.”

Roger is right. It doesn’t stop. The incoming demands for our attention are relentless, compelling, intrusive, stressful, and seductive all at once. And our cell phones are only the most obvious offenders. Wherever we go, we seem to be connected to “the cloud”—computers sit on our