

# The Impact of Mindfulness on Counselling Sessions in High Schools in Bhutan – as seen through the therapists' lens

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Fibromyalgia is a chronic illness characterized by musculoskeletal pain, pain Mindfulness meditation has been an integral part of Buddhist practice for over 2600 years (Shapiro & Carlson, 2009, Germer, 2005). It is deeply rooted in the spiritual and cultural fabric of Bhutan. Recently, it has become a significant aspect of Counselling education in Bhutan. Counsellors trained there are well-informed about the synergy between western counselling and eastern contemplative psychology. Mindfulness is integral to contemplative psychology offered by the Royal University of Bhutan in collaboration with Naropa University, Colorado in USA. Once in the field, counsellors are expected to practice mindfulness meditation and offer mindfulness-based counselling interventions to their clients.

The proposed study will explore how six counsellors in Bhutan make sense of their lived phenomena of mindfulness meditation in general, and how this experience influences the dynamics of their counselling session with the clients. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was the methodology used to collect and analyze the data from the six participants. Semi-structured interviews were used.

**Keywords:** *mindfulness, Bhutan counsellors, contemplative psychology, school counselling*

## Introduction

The Counselling profession was fully recognized by the Royal Government of Bhutan in 2009, and 68 School Counsellors were approved by the Royal Civil Service Commission of Bhutan (CECD, 2010). Subsequently, the Ministry of Education recruited 12 fulltime school counsellors, who later became the first group of a new generation of Bhutanese Counsellors. The Royal University of Bhutan started a Post Graduate Diploma in Guidance and Counselling course in 2011. A requirement of the training was a course in mindfulness meditation. Thinley (2012) claims that mindfulness meditation has been part of Bhutanese religious and cultural fabric for many years. However, with the commencement of the counselling course in Bhutan, mindfulness meditation broadened from its traditional religious role. Initially mindfulness was only practiced by the Buddhist monks within the norms and discipline of their monastic way of life, whereas today it is widely practiced everywhere, including schools. The concept and practice of mindfulness has become universal today, and though its root is in Buddhism, mindfulness also plays a secular

role and it is all-inclusive and all-expansive, meaning that it is taught as self-discipline for students, enabling them to cope with behavioural issues.

Since Bhutan did not have expertise in this new paradigm shift to mindfulness meditation, the Government, through the Royal University of Bhutan, sought assistance and collaboration with the Naropa University of Colorado, USA. This initiative also brought a shift in Bhutanese outlook toward counselling psychology, which was initially viewed as a western intrusion and meant for 'correcting spoiled brats' (CECD, 2010). Stigma existed around the notion that counselling was only for wayward children, and students and parents would either refuse, or show reluctance to engage with school counselling services. This was a huge challenge, for the counselling educators especially, the first group of school counsellors recruited by the Ministry of Education in 2010. As the counsellors continued to advocate mindfulness as an important part of counselling interventions, more people began to see it as part of Bhutanese's own culture, thereby bringing about a gradual change concerning the prejudice that most counsellors had for western counselling.

The blend of western counselling psychology with mindfulness-based contemplative psychology heralded a marriage between the two. Today, there are over 83 school counsellors across the country who embrace this new approach to counselling. Many teachers in Bhutan are trained in basic mindfulness cultivation techniques. Several schools adopted a

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culture of starting a day in school with at least 3 to 5 minutes of mindfulness meditation, either during their morning assembly prayers or before they began their first lesson of the day. This was part of national initiative to improve the psychological-wellbeing of the teachers and students, so as to effect the national goal of Gross National Happiness (Wangmo, 2012). Psychological well-being is one of the core domains of Gross National Happiness, a philosophy propounded by the Forth King of Bhutan in 1972, which debunks the idea of Gross Domestic Product as the indicator of national well-being and happiness (Thinley, 2007).

As Mindfulness-based contemplative counselling interventions were a pilot program for the Government and the Royal University of Bhutan from 2011, this research offers a rare opportunity to explore the proposed phenomenon through the lens of the therapists' perceptions. While there have been stories of success through these interventions, no research has been conducted to date to demonstrate that success.

This pilot study is an opportunity to set precedents and establish the foundation for other scholars and researchers to delve deeper into the proposed topic

This research explored individual counsellor's experience and perspective of mindfulness-based counselling intervention, with special attention on how the mindfulness qualities, such as a non-judgmental attitude, awareness, empathy, acceptance and compassion, are generated through mindfulness and how these have an impact the counselling session.

The proponents of client-centered theory, like Rogers and Wood (1974), suggested that a therapist's function is to be 'immediately present and accessible to his or her client and rely on this moment to moment experiencing in the relationship to facilitate the therapeutic movement' (p.214). Mindfulness meditation on the other hand offers an opportunity to be aware of and embrace one's own moment-to-moment experience (Kabat Zin, 1990, p.2). Hence, it would help to know how the counsellor, who has had constant mindfulness practice experience, influences his or her counselling session in the therapeutic setting. This knowledge will also enable the counselor educators to improve building the 'counselling intervention' with the clients through a 'mindfulness' perspective, while training and preparing their counselling students for their personal and professional development.

The primary aim of the study was to explore and unravel how the phenomena of mindfulness meditation is experienced and interpreted by counsellors in Bhutan. It also aspired to explore how their background and practices of mindfulness meditation at the professional level influenced their counselling session with the clients, which many humanistic therapists claim as the most important factor that will determine the client therapeutic outcome (Watson, 2002)

## Review of literature

Mindfulness meditation originates from Buddhist culture and dates back more than 2600 years (Shapiro & Carlson, 2009; Germer, 2009). It is an essential part of Buddhist teachings. The term 'Mindfulness' is derived from a Pali word, Sati, and it means in English, awareness, attention, discernment, and remembering. (Carlson & Shapiro, 2009; Germer, 2005). In contemporary psychology, mindfulness has been defined differently by various authors. Kabat-Zinn (2003) defined mindfulness as, "the

awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment" (2003, p.145). Bishop et al. (2004) explain that, it as an approach for expanding awareness through a skilful response to any mental process that stimulates emotional distress and maladaptive behaviour (p.230). Further, Germer (2005) describes mindfulness as being wakeful and recognizing the happenings in the present moment (p. 24). Thinley (2012), former Vice Chancellor of the Royal University of Bhutan, shares that it is a process of knowing whenever one's mind remains in the present, as against when it wanders into the past or the future (p.100).

Despite these variations of the definition of the mindfulness meditation, the common themes that almost all the definitions share are: "awareness, attention, present moment, empathy, intention and non-judgmental", which are also necessary for positive therapeutic alliance (Rogers & Wood, 1957).

Mindfulness intervention was propounded by Kabat-Zinn as part of his Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction program and it is today the most widely investigated mindfulness intervention in the psychological studies (Dean, 2009). Over the past 20 years, the practice of mindfulness has been increasingly used to treat a range of mental health disorders including depression, anxiety, substance abuse, as well as eating, attention deficit, and personality disorders (reviewed by Baer, 2003). Aspects of mindfulness practice have been incorporated into Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999), Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (Segal, Williams & Teasdale, 2002), Addiction Treatment and Relapse Prevention (Marlatt & Gordon, 1985), Dialectical Behavior Therapy (Linehan, 1993), and Mindfulness-based intervention for Eating Disorders (M-BEAT; Kristeller & Hallett, 1999; Wolever, 2009). In addition to the practice of mindfulness in mental health treatment, there is evidence from a recent randomized controlled trial, that clinicians, who develop mindfulness through the practice of meditation, have clients with better outcomes compared to those who do not practice meditation (Grepmaier et al., 2007).

The mindfulness program taught to the counsellor-trainees at the Royal University of Bhutan shares similar mindfulness cultivation techniques with those of the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Therapy (MBSRT). MBSRT is a structured eight to ten weeks program for a group of 15 to 30 participants. The methods used for cultivating mindfulness are, sitting meditation with body scan and mindful movement, three minutes breathing space and loving kindness meditation (Kabat-Zinn, 1982). Except for three minutes breathing space technique, the other methods are taught and practiced by the student-counsellors at the Royal University of Bhutan. However, this program is not taught as part of MBSRT, but in general as Mindfulness meditation or Mindfulness Based Counselling Interventions.

Besides these structured formal mindfulness techniques, counsellors are also taught informal techniques like mindfulness during eating, walking, working, swimming and driving. These are also part of unstructured programs carried out for the participants for the MBSRT Program (Baer, 2003). Despite differences in the practice of each skill or method, the goal of every technique is to bring awareness of the present moment with purposeful intention and without judgment (Dean, 2009). However, Greason and Cashwell (2009) concluded from their review of literature, that counsellor education training has focused on external and

observational behaviours, such as mirroring and reflection of feeling, rather than cultivation of internal habits of mind needed to control attention and respond with both cognitive and affective empathy. In addition, other counsellor educators have noted that the students' development of cognitive complexity has been a haphazard process (Choate & Granello, 2006; Fong, Borders, Ethington & Pitts, 1997).

Eliot (2004) states that the foundation of a positive therapeutic alliance in a counselling session depends on Rogers' three core conditions: congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathy. There are studies which show the connection between those core conditions with that of mindfulness-centred compassion, and non-judgmental and purposeful attention to the present moment with the client, within the counselling session (Meccollum & Gehat, 2010, Hick, 2008). There is also the view that mindfulness meditation may have an impact on the therapeutic alliance in a counselling session, when practiced by the counsellor. Some recent studies show that mindfulness meditation can improve a counsellor's level of empathy and help develop overall self-care (Sehure, 2008). Several studies have looked specifically at the experience of mindfulness practiced within the sessions. Bien (2008) suggests that, as therapists adopt a mindful presence, they will also convey warmth and empathy toward their clients. Unfortunately, there are only a few studies that considered the counsellor's mindfulness background and consistency of practice in relation to his or her experience of the impact of mindfulness on a counselling session. Most studies focused on mindfulness interventions within the session, rather than the experiences that a counsellor takes into the session. This study aspires to fill that missing dimension of the counsellor's experience and the impact of mindfulness on a counselling session.

Lambart and Barley (2001) postulate that the idea of empathy has gained immense attention in psychotherapy literature. Carl Rogers was one of the first to infuse the idea of empathic understanding into psychotherapy. He posits that empathy is the capacity of a therapist to communicate with awareness and understanding of the client's moment to moment experience within a counselling session (Rogers, 1961). In other words, empathy is the foundation on which therapists can connect with their clients in a counselling session with understanding, but without judgment, of the client's current frame of reference. Aiken (2006) conducted a study that demonstrated the effect of mindfulness on a therapist's ability to sense their client's sufferings in more authentic way. There are several studies which show that mindfulness meditation can have a positive influence on a psychotherapist's capacity to offer presence, acceptance and empathy to their clients (Bibeau, et. al., 2015). There is no literature which shows how these qualities of mindfulness hinder the counselling session.

The Counsellor training program in Bhutan also uses two specific guided mindfulness meditation techniques called Loving-Kindness and Compassion meditation. Salzberg (2011) mentioned that, "Loving-kindness mindfulness meditation opens our hearts to loving ourselves genuinely for who we are, with all our imperfections and that's the gateway to loving others" (p.28). Tirch (2010) thinks that such progression of loving-kindness from self to others through mindfulness meditation sows the seeds which cultivate compassion. However, there are no studies which show the influence of loving-kindness and compassion on the counselling session, so that this study will explore that missing relationship in the context of a counselling session.

In conclusion, within the last two decades there has been great interest in mindfulness meditation amongst clinicians, scientists and scholars. Pickert (2014) states that mindfulness is growing in popularity as a practice in daily life, that is apart from Buddhist insight meditation and its application in clinical psychology. A substantial number of studies on mindfulness are available, yet there are very limited studies around the therapist's mindfulness background and experiences and its influence on a therapeutic setting. More importantly, there are no studies regarding these issues, as they are practiced in Bhutan. This research sought to explore the overall impact of mindfulness practice on counselling sessions through the Bhutanese counsellors' lived experience of mindfulness. The study also explored how relevant it is to include mindfulness meditation into their counselling sessions, especially since Bhutan is mainly a Buddhist society.

## Research Design

Cresswell (2009) states that, it is useful to be aware of the researchers' assumptions and beliefs about the world, because these influence the way in which the researchers conduct their research. It also makes the researcher and others aware of how our beliefs may influence the methods that we use. An individual's worldview which is underpinned by his or her beliefs and assumptions is referred to as a paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). It is our worldview which influences the specific research paradigm that we align to, which in turn is likely to influence the methods that we use to collect and interpret data (Maxwell & Mittapalli, 2010). It is important that we, as researchers, must understand our own worldview and the assumptions on which it is founded. Denzin and Lincoln (2005), claim that our worldviews are based on ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions.

An ontological stance shows the relationship between the world and our human interpretations and practices relating to that relationship. It determines whether or not the reality exists entirely separate from human practices and understandings, or that it is simply a part of human existence and practices and it cannot exist on its own (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality and focuses on understanding what is real (Cresswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Sparkes and Smith (2014) state that realism and relativism are two predominant ontologies which determine our views of reality.

The perception of the phenomenon of mindfulness meditation varies from person to person and the truth about mindfulness meditation depends on how each individual experiences it and develops their own perspectives about it. For instance, the way counselling is seen in Australia is different to that in Bhutan. The way mindfulness is viewed in a Buddhist context varies from the way it is perceived in a psychotherapeutic context. This proposed study does not intend to seek to confirm the truth about mindfulness phenomena, but rather to reflect on the experience of each individual participant, as he or she makes sense of that experience in a Bhutanese setting.

Epistemology refers to the study, theory, and justification of knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Crotty (1998) says that, it is a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know. It entails explaining how individuals formulate knowledge about the world around them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The epistemological approach for this research is that of

social constructivism. Social constructivism is a philosophical stance that considers personal experience and meanings as constructed and shaped by culture and language (Burr, 2003). A researcher who uses this lens will believe that meaning is constructed by the individual based on their interactions with the world, and that different meanings can be assigned by different individuals to the same scenario (Gray, 2009). All knowledge and meaningful reality are constructed by an interaction between human beings and their world, and are developed and transmitted within an essentially social context (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). A researcher approaching from this perspective, will focus on gaining an understanding of the participants' interpretations of their reality of mindfulness meditation, which has been derived from their social interaction and interpersonal relationship. It also means that the knowledge and the reality of the subject under study will be constructed through the researcher's interaction with and perception of their interpretations of the phenomenon under study (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

Crotty (1998) describes this theoretical perspective as an approach to understanding and explaining social and human world that is grounded in the assumptions that researchers bring to their methodology of choice. He states that it relates to the researcher's underlying philosophical assumptions about the human world and the social life within that world. As a researcher coming from a constructivist epistemology, with the aforementioned intention of proposed study, and the research question posed, the theoretical perspective underlying this study is that of interpretivism. In this study, the researcher will take a position that 'all research is interpretive and guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied' (Denzin & Myers, 1999).

## Methodology

This research project incorporated Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the methodology for the study. This is because the outcome of this study is not a generation or confirmation of truth or knowledge about reality, but a deeper exploration of the phenomenon of mindfulness meditation and its particular impact on mindfulness in a counselling session. IPA is chosen as it offers a fitting study design that fits in well with ontology, epistemology, the theoretical perspective and the research aims, as determined by the proposed research question.

IPA is an approach which is dedicated to the detailed exploration of personal meaning and lived experience (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Smith and Osborn also posit that IPA aims to explore in detail how participants make sense of their personal and social world, and the main currency for an IPA study is the meanings that particular experiences, events, and states hold for participants (2015, p. 25). IPA is underpinned by its three fundamental principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography.

Phenomenology originated from Husserl's philosophical science of consciousness with hermeneutics, and with symbolic-interactionism, that is based on the premise that the meanings an individual ascribes to events are integral and are accessible only through an interpretative process (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Smith & Osborn, 2015). Phenomenology emphasizes an exploration of the lived-world of the participants and understanding how participants make sense of that particular

experience (Crotty, 1998). Smith and Osborn (2015) mentioned that IPA is phenomenological as it entails the detailed examination of the participant's lived experiences and attempts to explore that professional experience. It does not attempt to produce an objective statement of event itself.

According to hermeneutics one needs to understand the mind-set of a person and her or his language which mediates that experience of the world, in order to translate his or her message (Freeman, 2008). IPA researchers try to explore what it is like to stand in the shoes of their subjects, and through an interpretative process, bring understanding to their experience (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). This means that IPA is a dynamic process, in which a researcher plays an active role and has access to the participants' experience, through which to make sense of how they find meaning in that experience, in the context of their professional world (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The analytical process of IPA is called a double hermeneutic or a two-stage interpretation process. It means that the participants are trying to make sense of their world and the researcher is trying to make sense of how the participants are seeking to make sense of their world. Thus, IPA is intellectually connected to hermeneutics and theories of interpretation (Packer & Addison, 1998; Smith, 2007).

The third and final theoretical foundation of IPA is its use of ideography. This refers to an in-depth study of single cases and the examination of the participants' perspectives in their unique contexts (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The idiographic approach requires the exploration of every single case before drawing any general conclusion. The researcher's focus is on the particular rather than universal (Smith, Harre, & Van Langenhove, 1995). It does not eschew generalizations, but works painstakingly from individual cases very cautiously to more general claims (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

## Method

As a researcher using IPA to explore and analyse how participants perceive and make sense of their experience with mindfulness meditation, a flexible method for collecting the data is required (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Semi-structured interviews were used for this research, as these allow the participants to enunciate their professional experience through responses to open-ended questions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). It also enabled the researcher and participants to engage in a dialogue, whereby initial questions could be changed according to their responses, and the interviewer will be able to probe into any interesting and significant areas that might come up during the interview (Smith & Osborn, 2015). This will generate rich and relevant new stories, which otherwise would be missed in structured interviews. The following draft questions were used in the semi-structured interview:

- i. Could you tell me what is your overall experience of mindfulness as a counsellor?
- ii. What is your experience like when you are using mindfulness in counselling sessions?
- iii. Could you say something on how mindfulness helps or hinders a counselling session?
- iv. How has mindfulness helped or hindered you as a counsellor to develop acceptance, compassion, empathy, openness, a non-judgemental stance and moment to moment awareness while sitting with your clients?
- v. How does mindfulness impact on your therapeutic

relationship with clients?

- vi. How do you think mindfulness could be used with clients?
- vii. Tell me some examples of how mindfulness has impacted counselling sessions.
- viii. Are there any differences you find when using or not using mindfulness in counselling sessions?
- ix. If there is anything you wish add, I would be very happy to hear that.

A purposive sampling was used for the proposed study, as it allowed the researcher to collect important information from the participants who share a similar experience and understanding around the research questions (Guarte & Barrios, 2006). Six Bhutanese counsellors (3 male/female) working in Bhutan were included. Guarte and Barrios (2006) state that the selection of the participants in purposive sampling is subjective to researchers' experience and characteristics of interest. Since the researcher shares a similar professional, linguistic, cultural, and religious background with the participants, that will enable the creation of a level of comfort and understanding and a more open conversation with them during the interview.

The program officer from the department of school education, Ministry of Education was asked to correspond with counsellors from six districts inviting them to participate in the study. Once they responded positively, a participant consent form was sent via email. The interviews took place via skype or zoom. An audio recording device was used to record the interview, which was later transcribed and the recorded audio was destroyed after the data was fully analysed. A copy of the transcript was shared with the participant for their cross-checking.

## Data Analysis Strategy

As per Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), for an IPA researcher, the first step towards data analysis was multiple reading of the transcripts and making notes. The literature says that 'doing this will enable the researcher to immerse in the data, help recall the atmosphere of the interview, and the setting in which it was conducted' (p. 12).

The next step involved the transformation of notes into emergent themes. At this stage, the researcher will have to work more with the notes and comments made in the first stage, than with that of the interview transcripts. The aim at this stage is to draw emerging themes from the notes and more focus should be on psychological conceptualization (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Osborn & Smith, 2015; Smith, 20017). It is also at this stage that IPA researcher is involved in the process of the hermeneutic circle.

The third and final step the researcher needs is to seek relationship between and clustering of the themes arising from the data. This stage entails looking for connections between emerging themes and grouping them together according to conceptual similarities, and the researcher is required to produce each cluster with a descriptive label. The final list of themes will have numerous super-ordinates and sub-themes (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Osborn & Smith, 2015). Based on this final list, the writing will be done as the basis for further discussions and the findings.

Participants were given full information about the study: the purpose, phenomena under study, and objectives and methodology incorporated for the research project. At the end of the project, a summary of the findings was shared with the

participants and the data was stored with the University of the Sunshine Coast at least for next five years.

## Findings

The current finding sets promising confirmation that therapists' regular mindfulness enables positive therapeutic alliance in counselling sessions, which could be very valuable for Bhutanese counsellors. All the participants claimed that their regular mindfulness practice brought change in their approach to therapy, which made them at ease and aware of the unhealthy verbal and physical clues while in a counselling session with clients. They could connect better with the clients and managed to be more aware of their limitations and that prevented them from emotional entanglement with the clients. All the participants agreed that sometimes not thinking about answers or the result of the therapy, and by simply listening to clients with more openness, acceptance, empathy and authentic presence, helped clients heal better than offering solutions in counselling sessions.

Participants also pointed out that being mindful in sessions helped them to recognize experiences of counter-transference within the moment of here-and-now during the sessions. They said that their counter-transference led to judgment of clients, biases and were harmful to their therapeutic alliance with the clients. They said that their improved ability to practice "letting go" made them more comfortable to free themselves from emotional entanglement or force themselves to stand back from certain negative experience and emotions. The current study also pointed out that a heightened sense of awareness amongst the participants was the reason for their resolve to re-think their approach to therapy, which they claimed has redefined their counselling and psychotherapeutic style.

## Conclusion

The proposed study will explore the phenomena of mindfulness meditation and how it influences the dynamic of the counseling session in high schools in Bhutan. Despite mindfulness meditation attracting immense interest from clinicians, researchers and scholars over the last two decades, and with a great deal of literature available, there are very few studies done on the impact of mindfulness meditation practice by the therapists in their work with the clients. This study will be the first of such kind ever attempted in Bhutan, especially in the context of counselling interventions. The researcher approaches the proposed study from his relativist ontology, constructivist epistemology and interpretivist theoretical paradigm. IPA will be the research framework that will guide the research process and outcome. The primary reason for choosing IPA is aligned with the aim of the proposed research; that is, to explore the lived experience of mindfulness meditation on the part of Bhutanese counsellors.

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