



Emergent Mindfulness in Managing Stress

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Abstract

The theme of this study is the path to discovery of emergent mindfulness. Organizations worldwide are continuously increasing spending on health care due to the negative impact of occupational stress. This reveals the absence of an effective method of stress management, irrespective of emotional intelligence training which has been in place for over two decades. Subsequent to a literature review, mindfulness was identified as a possible answer to the problem. Two contrasting study centers were identified. Personal interviews with leaders were substantiated by focus group interviews. Extensive data analysis, coding and categorizing was carried out and reliability and validity established. The findings revealed that a form of mindfulness did exist, but was not exactly the same as that arrived at from the scriptural path of meditation. Hence, this form of mindfulness was termed as emergent mindfulness, a new construct that emerged from grounded theory.

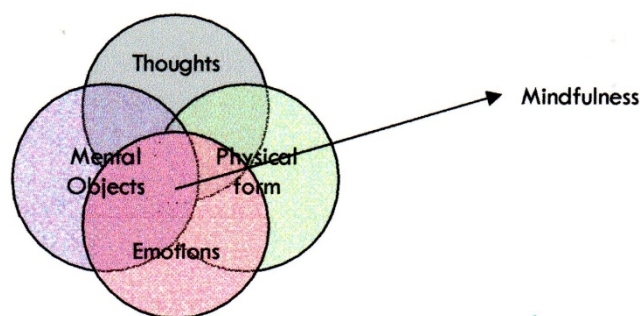
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Origin of Mindfulness

Sri Lanka is a predominantly Buddhist country with a culture based on mindfulness meditation since the 3rd century BCE, when Buddhism was first introduced into the country by the monk Mahinda, son of King Asoka the Great of India (Geiger, 2002). Since the Buddha, the founder of Buddhism was born in India, it would be correct to say that Buddhism and the method of mindfulness originated in India. However, today Sri Lanka is regarded as the world center for Buddhism. Mindfulness as set out in the Buddhist scriptures encompasses body, mind, feelings and mental objects. Mental objects are emotions evoked by prolonged cognitive reflection and can be either positive or negative. Special attention is paid to mental objects in Buddhism, whereas it is mainly treated as a part of emotions in other theoretical areas. For example: Daisy has a conversation with her supervisor in the workplace. Daisy comes away satisfied with the outcome. However, at home, Daisy dwells on the conversation and the more she thinks about

it, the more she is convinced that her supervisor was indirectly insulting her. Daisy's anger grows, and the more time she spends thinking about the conversation, the more convinced she is of the insult. Ultimately, her anger snowballs out of proportion and she harbors vengeful feelings towards her supervisor.

Figure 1. Creation of Mindfulness



Source: created by author

Mindfulness is attained by meditation with a view to achieving coordination between thoughts, emotions, physical health and mental objects (see **Figure 1** above). Mindfulness is further defined broadly, as the capacity to maintain stability in the face of life stressors.

The intelligences

Since thoughts, feelings/emotions, physical management and mental objects manifest themselves in individuals as intellectual capacity (ability to reason, understand, and ability to appreciate or engage in creative arts), research was undertaken into the different forms of intelligence, and intelligence theories. According to Eysenck & Keane, (1990), a quick thought process is required, when an emotion is triggered, thereby validating the fact that emotions cannot work independently of cognition. Ultimately cognitive intelligence and the form of physical intelligence in cognition, emotional intelligence as defined by Goleman, (1998) and spiritual intelligence as defined by Zohar and Marshall, (2001) were researched to assess their impact on mindfulness.

The review of literature revealed that there should be a co-ordination of these intelligences for creation of mindfulness, as that was what was envisaged to take place through meditation. Mindfulness itself had some commonalities with Sternberg's (2005) Successful Intelligence Theory, but there were areas of divergence that led to the observation that mindfulness was a stand-alone theory. One area of divergence was that in Successful Intelligence Theory, the individual moves on to another environment if he or she is not successful in present environment, whereas in mindfulness, the individual has the capacity to adapt to any environment, and in addition has the ability to meet all situations and take on stressors with equanimity. Others around the mindful individual change their way of interacting to deal with this unique personality.

The methodology and the study centers

Subsequent to a few pilot studies, the workplace in the commercial sector in Sri Lanka was selected as the research center, to test the existence of mindfulness. This followed on from the research question: 'Will mindfulness be better than emotional intelligence at managing workplace stress?'. Two top management executives, one from a high performing banking institution, with many local branches and the other, a comparatively low performer, a garment retailer with many local branch offices were selected for the study. The performance rating of these companies was undertaken by the local branch of A C Nielsen, a leading global performance measurement company (nielsen.com, 2012), and published in a magazine, the 'Most Respected Entities in Sri Lanka' (2010).

The research was undertaken as a qualitative study according to the Grounded Theory method initially set out by Glaser and Strauss as adapted by Strauss and Corbin (1997), hence, the use of two study centers at two ends of the performance scale. The relationship between performance and stress is an established one with high performance related to low stress and vice versa. Stress affects performance, as people make more mistakes and are less effective, since their judgment is impaired. (Duyck, 2008). In-depth interviews were conducted with the leaders and validated at focus group interviews with support staff. In addition to this, observations were carried out, both in each study center, as well as in branch offices. Data

collection and data analysis of the interviews and observations, in addition to other secondary data collection and analysis, formed the core of this research. For example: Prior to interviews, the interviewees were given an overview into mindfulness, using graphical illustrations. At NO-LIMIT, the garment retailer, the General Manager in charge of overall operations was interviewed first. He was asked open-ended questions and a few closed questions to elicit personal details. His team of six support staff was interviewed thereafter, using Focus Group techniques (Krueger and Casey, 2000), and they were once again asked open questions to elicit their views of the General Manager to validate the results of the in-depth interview. More than one interview took place and at the end of the study, the results were re-visited with the leader to obtain his views. Prior to this, visits were made to the branch offices at Mt Lavinia, Borella, Nugegoda and Colombo 6, to obtain any relevant observations from personnel there. Secondary material, such as Annual Reports, media articles etc., were also sourced to have an overview of the company culture and initiatives, since the Leader was directly responsible for these areas. Finally, open, axial and selective coding was employed to draw out value statements, categories and key emergent patterns.

Since mindfulness was regarded as an 'under-developed' area in the academic research field, a conceptual framework of 'sensitizing concepts' was drawn up to guide the research in the commercial workplace, as advocated by Clarke (2005). In terms of this framework, the qualities of a mindful manager is expected to be as follows: patient at all times; calm and unflustered in stressful situations; understanding of employee difficulties; slow to anger and aggression; possessing a deeper understanding of self and others; maintaining discipline without being dictatorial; aware that appearance has an impact on the staff and clients and maintains his own; expects high ethical standards from employees; thinks a controversial issue over and elicits opinions of involved parties before taking a decision, and ensures that employee training and development needs are satisfied. Finally, he would also avoid continuously referring to past negative experiences, when dealing with similar situations. His focus would be on the present, the here-and-now.

Managing stress in the commercial world

The research indicated that the General Manager of the garment retailer with comparatively lower performance (at the time), had a good degree of spiritual and cognitive intelligence, but with a lower degree of physical intelligence, and that this failed to create mindfulness and was insufficient to manage his stress levels. He was an eminently approachable man, well respected in the workplace, and he endeavored to teach his staff that the 'customer was king', by employing a 'learning-by-doing' approach. One of his favorite quotes is 'attitude is equal to altitude', indicating that a good attitude can empower one to greater heights, whereas a bad attitude has a negative impact.

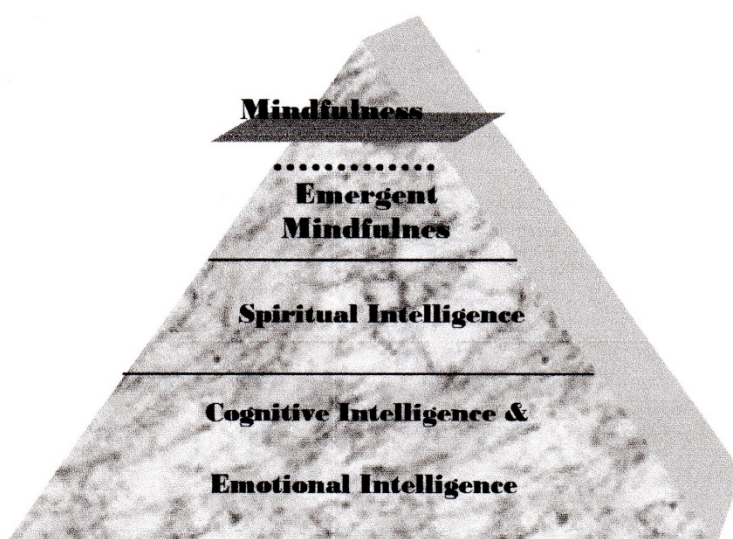
At the time, delegation or empowerment of his personal responsibilities, were minimal and the company was expanding to more outlets around the country. The physical information he provided and the fact that he had too many responsibilities to cover single-handed, and the general situation in office, reflected the fact of high stress levels, with the accompanying danger to his physical health. He was advised of this at the end of the research, and advised to take appropriate action in this regard.

The research further revealed that the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) of the high performing bank was using a form of mindfulness to manage his stress and avoid burnout. He had a high level of cognitive and physical intelligence and a reasonable level of spiritual intelligence. However, he had never engaged in meditation, but hailed from a Buddhist family and had been educated in the Buddhist cultural tradition. An in-depth look at his family revealed that he had been taken to temple up to age 10 and that thereafter he had been given the choice by his father on whether or not to attend temple. He chose the latter. As a child he had observed his grandmother's religious devotions and mentioned this during the interview, indicating that her actions had cemented themselves in his mind. There is some indication here of the intergenerational impact that is discussed in Family Therapy: "Within the context of the family's current phase of development, a host of intermingled and intergenerational transactions occur concurrently." (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013: 29).

A look at the CFO's individuality revealed a calm and stable man, who took time to introspect and had a compassionate understanding of the people who worked for him. At the same time as he was compassionate, he was also a realist and was under no misapprehension that the people he helped would return the favour. He balanced his professional, family and extra-curricular life with great wisdom, managing to meet his demanding workload with equanimity. His focus group of subordinates and colleagues indicated that he never lost his temper and was always calm. They also indicated that he had time to speak to people and that it was not a characteristic of his predecessor who whilst being respected, was more detached in the workplace.

The CFO had no hesitation in empowering his staff, and indicated that he had faith in the competencies of his staff. It is noted here that he would have found it difficult to manage his professional and official workload without stress, if he did not have the capacity to recognize and empower the right people. Overall, he had qualities of mindfulness, but this was not obtained by the path of traditional meditation. Hence, this was called emergent mindfulness to set it apart from traditional mindfulness.

Figure 2. The Mindfulness Pyramid



Source: created by author

Figure 2 above is a representation of the fit of emergent mindfulness in the mindfulness pyramid. Emergent mindfulness had enabled the CFO to avoid stress and burnout and juggle his responsibilities with physical, mental and emotional stability. Emergent mindfulness had enabled him to ensure his company's overall performance remained in the top five ranking, in a largely stress-free workplace.

Your genome, culture, religion and environment

People are shaped genetically and by aspects of their environment to possess better developed mental, emotional or physical aptitudes. "The genomes of all individuals except identical siblings are unique. Like fingerprints, genomes provide a unique personal identification." (Lesk, 2007: 221). Hence, the individuality of each person differs from the other. At the same time siblings in the same family have different intellectual capacities, and possess different individualities, because of genetics, different school environments and different role models (e.g. Gottfredson (1998)) and the new values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors they adopt as their personas develop. This aspect gains importance in view of the studies into the human genome in the last decade.

Cultural beliefs of a community, and often religious beliefs which are intertwined with culture, can influence individual thinking, if not consciously, at least sub-consciously. For example, for centuries mainly Buddhist cultural practices, with an intermingling of Hindu cultural practices dominated the social system of Sri Lanka. The fact that the royal family of Sri Lanka espoused Buddhist cultural practices set an example for the populace, who willingly followed these practices. According to Vajiranana, (1962) the mental culture has had a great impact on everyday life. In Sri Lankan culture even today, the Buddhist and Hindu New Year, the harvest time in mid-April, is celebrated with more enthusiasm than New Year on the 1st of January each year, and it is now called the Sinhala and Tamil New Year since the major ethnic groups celebrate the festival, irrespective of religious beliefs (e.g. Fernando, 2016). In counseling practice too, emphasis is placed on the importance of handling culturally and linguistically diverse groups, with greater sensitivity, thereby acknowledging the impact of culture on

attitudes, beliefs and value systems. As McDaniel and Samovar (2015) maintain, culture does provide us with an identity, establishing to some extent, who we are.

Your Emergent Mindfulness

Irrespective of lifestyle, social status and other factors, people are not all born equal in a genetic sense, excluding exceptions such as identical siblings discussed earlier (eg. Lesk, 2007). Hence, according to the findings from the research, due to various factors such as genetics, religion, school environment and home environment, emergent mindfulness can exist in some individuals and be further developed by training, whilst certain individuals have the innate capacity to self-develop their emergent mindfulness. Certainly, meditation would help development, and so according to our findings, would own initiatives such as self-help: being realistic about oneself and one's actions on others, by setting aside time for introspection; seeking out time for quiet reflection in tranquil surroundings; paying attention to food habits and general health; and not indulging in excesses of any sort.

Avoiding stress, substance abuse and negative acculturation

Stress in daily life has a wide-ranging impact. It is important for managers and others around them to possess the capacity to overcome the impact of work stressors. Aside from the workplace, adolescents, youth and adults succumb to stress, for example, failure to perform well at examinations, loneliness, fear of the unknown etc., and are induced covertly or overtly into substance abuse, in a bid to overcome anxiety and other manifestations of stress (eg. Thombs, 2006).

It is also noted that many children in the absence of validation from parents and others, have succumbed to peer pressure. Lack of validation makes the child more vulnerable to peer pressure as stress is created by the inability to be true to oneself and freely express ones thoughts and feelings (e.g. Hall & Cook, 2012). Relief is obtained by following a group of peers who by their numbers are regarded as strong, and thereby perceived as adding validation to the follower, who is then sometimes led into addiction.

Educational programs are in place, along with other interventions in an attempt to prevent escapes into substance abuse, with minimal success. For example: According to a study by Soole, Mazerolle and Rombouts (2008), School-based Drug Prevention (SBDP) Programs, are regarded as having little success in reducing illicit drug use, though it did record a reduction in licit drug use. It is at this point that we note that each individual has a different level of each of the three intelligences, and the coordination of these intelligences creates levels of emergent mindfulness in certain individuals. Hence, if the emergent mindfulness in an individual is developed, that individual would have the capacity to overcome temptation by managing stress before it occurs, and at a minimum have the capacity to self-correct and maintain equilibrium. The criteria for emergent mindfulness as based on the study would be: a reasonable component of cognitive intelligence (For example: the ability to recognize that there is always a solution), coupled with the capacity to manage one's physique by maintaining moderate food habits and regular exercise, along with the capacity to manage emotions without giving into excesses, negative or positive, and an average level of spiritual intelligence (For example: the ability to realize that one can be better than one's baser self, and aspire to oneness with nature, embracing diversity etc.).

Another aspect that may improve with emergent mindfulness is acculturation issues in migrant and indigenous populations. Acculturative stress was first identified in migrants to the USA. They experienced psychological stress whilst trying to adapt to a culture, vastly different to their own. One of the qualities of emergent mindfulness is the ability to adapt to different environments, as it teaches one to accept new experiences and different views with a balanced mind. Especially in cultures where there is emphasis on mind, body and spiritual experiences, (e.g. Indigenous cultures) people are better equipped to accept and develop their emergent mindfulness. Somatic and psychotic disorders have been identified among the Indigenous communities in Australia. Aboriginal people in Australia relied on their spiritual beliefs, which gave them guidance in their daily activities and knit them together as a community (e.g. Parker, 2010). However, colonization, forced resettlement and other issues changed the fabric of their environment causing among other things, acculturative stress as they tried to adapt to an alien

culture. Hence, emergent mindfulness which attempts to draw on the spirituality which is a part of their cultural beliefs should have a positive impact on eliminating mental disorders that are likely to have originated from acculturative stress.

The way forward

Developing cognitive, emotional and physical skills is the way forward. As each skill is developed, the individual is likely to notice their perceptions stabilizing and becoming well-rounded. Conscious recognition of thoughts as thoughts, emotions as emotions, and bodily fluctuations as just that, developing consciousness or awareness of the total self, will assist in individual progress. Science commenced its explorations into the embodied mind, with studies being undertaken initially by Varela (1998) and later with his colleague Thompson, who carried forward their studies (e.g. Thompson (2010)) after Varela's demise in 2001. These studies are aimed at validating the fact that the mind does not function on its own, but is an organized control center, similar to the cockpit in an airplane, that takes messages from other parts of the whole system to function in the most effective way under pilot guidance.

Non-judgmental attitude is another innate capacity that develops along with degrees of compassion, and loving kindness. According to the research physical intelligence has a major impact on the development of emergent mindfulness, and due attention must be paid to healthy living, inclusive of physical education. Not every person has the capacity to commit to inner change, there are those who need disciplined training and there are those who can develop themselves independently. It is up to the individual to decide which option suits them most. However, prior to this they need to make a self-assessment of their place on the pyramid of mindfulness, to decide if their present progress is a sufficient indicator of their ability to develop self, independently.

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My employment experience spans the commercial sector and multinationals, inclusive of World Bank-funded projects and an Asian Development Bank-funded project. Having moved from Melbourne to Mildura year end 2015, I am presently employed as Company Secretary for MADEC Australia. I possess a Masters' degree in Business Administration, obtained my Diploma in Counselling in 2016 from AIPC and am a member of the ACA and ACIS (UK). At present, I have three academic publications to my credit and completed my doctoral thesis encompassing emergent mindfulness and stress management at the Postgraduate Institute of Management, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka, and made an oral presentation of my thesis at the Qualitative Methods Conference 2015, conducted by the International Institute for Qualitative Methodology, University of Alberta, Canada. The Abstract of the thesis was published in the International Journal of Qualitative Methods, January – December 2016. A further presentation of my work was made at the Australian Counselling Association, 'Kanyini' National Conference in 2016.