



Learning to let go – the phenomenon of mindfulness

Mindfulness meditation – a practice that teaches people how to step back, be aware, let go of pain and the worries of life – is taking the world by storm. And the storm is about to hit Macquarie, when international mindfulness expert Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn comes to the University in November for a series of talks and workshops.

From its clinical applications in psychotherapy, to the management of anxiety, worry and depression, and helping cancer patients and their carers cope with their treatment, Macquarie University researchers are leading the way in mindfulness research across different domains.

Initiated by the Department of Psychology's Drs Belinda Khong and Andrew Baillie, a Sydney-wide mindfulness research interest group will soon be established at Macquarie to bring together and support researchers who are currently working individually in this area.

Khong believes that Kabat-Zinn's work and research are highly relevant to the issues currently facing many Australians, and that his presence will act as a catalyst for further research and applications of mindfulness in Australia.

From its roots in ancient Buddhist traditions, Khong describes mindfulness as moment to moment awareness.

"We are usually preoccupied with the past or worried about the future, and we mostly only reflect on our experiences in hindsight," she explains. "Mindfulness helps us focus on the present, to let go of the internal dialogue that tends to happen when our minds start to wander. Mindfulness meditation trains the mind to pull back and focus."

Khong's PhD research was on coping with change and the concept of responsibility in Buddhist psychology. Since graduating in 1999 she has been teaching part-time at Macquarie, operating her own counselling practice and travelling the world presenting papers and conducting workshops on the integration of Buddhist psychology and philosophy in psychotherapy. Last month she presented a paper on *Buddhism and psychotherapy: A symbiotic relationship* at the International Congress of Psychotherapy held in Japan.

"One of the reasons that mindfulness has taken the world by storm is because research has shown the powerful effect that a positive mind-body interaction, such as mindfulness, has on healing and personal growth," she says.

"Mindfulness has been shown to have benefits for individuals across different contexts. Mindfulness programs are now used in medicine, hospitals, schools, corporations, prisons and professional sports."

Kabat-Zinn is the world leader in this field. An internationally renowned scientist (his PhD was in molecular biology), he developed the mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program at the University of Massachusetts. Since then more than 1000 studies on the program in peer-reviewed journals have shown that it can reduce chronic pain, high blood pressure, serum cholesterol levels and blood cortisol, and alleviate depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and eating disorders.

In short, Kabat-Zinn has brought what was once considered 'hippy, mystical mumbo jumbo' into mainstream medicine and society.

Khong adds that in the field of psychology, co-researchers from the universities of Toronto, Wales and Cambridge have successfully used MBSR in conjunction with cognitive-based therapy (MBCT)

to help patients prevent the relapse of depression without relying on medication.

“In Australia, MBCT is currently being trialled by *BeyondBlue* for a similar purpose,” she says.

According to Khong the aim of mindfulness is to become continually aware of, and to label our thoughts, feelings and emotions objectively, and to accept them for what they are without needing to change or justify them.

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So how does it work? Khong explains that meditation involves right effort, right concentration and right mindfulness.

“Right effort involves putting the right amount of effort into preventing negative thoughts from rising and enabling positive ones to develop,” she says. “Right concentration means directing attention to one object of focus (such as breath, candle, mantra) to the exclusion of others. The purpose of right effort and right concentration is to quieten down the mind and help the meditator to let go of negative thoughts and feelings.

“However, in order to let go, one has to be mindful of whatever enters the mind. Right mindfulness – the most important factor in meditation – helps people to reduce the internal dialogue and freely observe and experience what unfolds without needing to change or justify it. In this way we learn to separate our reactions to the situation from the situation itself and to respond appropriately.”

Macquarie University PhD student Dolores Foley is investigating the therapeutic use of mindfulness-based techniques for cancer patients and their carers. Foley works as a clinical psychologist at the Sydney Cancer Centre and has been practising mindfulness meditation herself for nine years.

“The biggest change that mindfulness meditation brings for clients that I have noticed is the ability to step outside the patterns that lead to deterioration, anxiety and depression – the negative thinking which then leads to inactivity, lethargy and not feeling well on the inside,” she says.

“By using mindfulness they become more aware of their own patterns and able to step outside that if they want to. This leads to them being better able to cope with their illness and enjoy an improved quality of life.”

Foley’s research is supervised by Dr Andrew Baillie from Macquarie University’s Department of Psychology, Dr Melanie Price from the University of Sydney, and Buddhist psychologist Malcolm Huxter, and funded by a NSW Cancer Institute Psycho-oncology Clinical Fellowship.

In the future, Khong plans to expand her research to look at the ways that mindfulness impacts on our psychological and physical wellbeing through qualitative research, including in-depth interviews.

“Up until now most mindfulness research has focused on quantitative methodologies and while the statistics attest to the efficacy of using mindfulness we need to understand further *how* and *why* mindfulness is proving to be beneficial,” she explains.

“Take the example of stress-related disorders. People who practice mindfulness and have learned to let go of stress report an improvement in their physical and mental health. However, it could also be that by being more mindful of the impact that their behaviour has on others, people are able to communicate and relate to other people more effectively. The subsequent improvement in interpersonal relationships may have contributed to a reduction of their stress level.

“By seeing how people have employed mindfulness in different areas of their lives, and how this has contributed to their reduced stress levels, we will be better able to understand the interdependence between mind and body, and develop specific treatment plans that help them to cope better,” she adds.

Kabat-Zinn will discuss the practice of mindfulness and its far-reaching benefits to the mind, body, health and well-being at a public talk at Macquarie University on November 23 (see page 18 for details).

Story by Kathy Vozella



Dr Belinda Khong