

Introduction of a New, Contemporary, and Developmentally Flexible Mindfulness Metaphor

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Abstract

Mindfulness is described as an experiential state and an intentional practice aimed at enhancing attention to and acceptance of the broad range of human experience. The use of figurative language occupies a central role in the psychotherapy process. This article introduces a new analogy, not currently represented in the literature, with therapeutic utility across age groups for enhancing understanding of and appreciation for the nature of thoughts, their manifestation, and role in psychological functioning. A description is offered, along with instructions for applying it as a mindfulness exercise in a therapy context. Limitations to applicability are discussed.

Keywords: Analogy; Mindfulness; Therapy; Ticker

Introduction

Mindfulness has been described as an experiential state that is at the very core of what it means to be human. As the capacity to be fully conscious, the roots of mindfulness encompass the processes of active awareness, attention, and remembering, while contemporary therapeutic applications of mindfulness incorporate premises of nonjudgment, acceptance, and compassion [1]. Indeed, Jon Kabat-Zinn – one of the foremost pioneers of this work – has described mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” [2]. According to cognitive theoretical conceptualizations, the construct of mindfulness has been defined in some cases as a state variable relating to attention [3], while by others as a more stable (e.g., trait) related feature [4]. As a clinical tool, the goal of mindfulness is to provide a new context with which to understand and relate to the experiences of daily life, particularly those difficult and challenging experiences which contribute to personal suffering.

Mindfulness strategies can help clients understand the relationship between heightened focus on thought content and associated emotional distress. For instance, according to the metacognitive model, extended and prolonged processing of self-relevant emotional information (e.g., via worry, rumination) are principal in the development and maintenance of psychological disorders [5,6]. Indeed, a study by Wells and Roussis [7] obtained preliminary evidence that specific instructions to disengage further processing and “stand back” (p.544) from thoughts may be effective in coping with intrusive thoughts.

To this end, for individuals burdened by maladaptive cognitions, an important lesson is that the thoughts that are often most bothersome – even though they may seem to be ever-present – are only a sampling of the multitude of thoughts that occur over the course of a given day. Such a notion may at first seem fallacious, as tendencies toward rumination on, and cognitive fusion with, distressing cognitions creates the subjective impression of their overrepresentation in the day-to-day experience of one’s thoughts. However, this realization can help clients not only to understand and appreciate the role of cognitive biases, but also to lead to an actual decrease in intrusive cognitive symptomatology. Indeed, research [8] suggests that “individuals who report a greater dispositional level of mindfulness experience negative thoughts less frequently than do those who report a lower level of dispositional mindfulness” (p.771). As such, it is advocated that therapists work diligently to assist clients in developing comprehension of these relationships as a central goal of treatment.

In applied psychological settings the integration of figurative speech can be an invaluable tool [9,10]. Robert and Kelly [11] suggest that “Metaphors may be used to improve counselor training and the counseling process by fostering client case conceptualization and facilitating counselor-client collaboration in intervention development” (p.182). Indeed, the field of psychology has a rich history of utilizing metaphors, similes, allegories, etc. as clinical tools in the therapeutic context. Blenkiron [12] offers a clinical review of the use of stories and analogies in cognitive behavior therapy, helpfully providing specific examples that can be applied to each disorder, while also importantly emphasizing the importance of tailoring use to the individual client. And while the avid reader is referred to Leary [13] for a more complete discussion of the role of non-literal language in the evolution of psychology, an especially poignant quote on the topic for the purposes of this paper can be drawn from Evan [14], who states: “the function of metaphor in psychotherapy expresses more basic truths about the subjective structure of the world and the nature of psychological activity. More specifically, it is argued that by facilitating the use of metaphor in describing one’s experience the therapist is encouraging a part of the psyche that is intimately involved in both stasis and growth” (p.545).

In a therapeutic context, individuals often struggle to connect with aspects regarding their own psychological functioning and the strategies relied upon for improvement. For instance, many evidence-based treatment modalities (e.g., cognitive therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, mindfulness-based approaches, acceptance and commitment therapy, dialectical behavioral therapy, along with others) involve assisting the client to explore how his or her own pattern of thoughts contributes to subsequent emotions and associated behavioral tendencies.

The capacity to do so essentially incorporates the foundational

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construct of metacognition (Wells, 2004) [15,16], which is commonly defined as thinking about thinking. In other words, many therapeutic interventions generally assume that individuals have the ability to consciously examine the content and nature of their thoughts. This is certainly not always the case and must not be taken for granted; instead, it should be accepted that a person's facility for this higher-order mental examination occurs on a continuum, whereby the ability to pay attention to, identify, and understand the effect of thoughts may differ across situational contexts. It must be underscored all-the-more strongly that this variation is especially relevant to developmental level; while adults may struggle with this task under certain circumstances, it is likely to be far more difficult for youth who 1) have not yet reached the peak of their cognitive development, and 2) simply have not had as much experience in the practice of thought examination. It is in cases like these where figurative language becomes such a crucial therapeutic tool. As one example, the ACTION program [17] - a group therapy for 9-13 year old girls with depression - uses a developmentally appropriate metaphor of the "Muck Monster" who fills youth with negative thoughts; this conceptualization aid is then extended to an intervention strategy which involves "talking back to the Muck Monster," as a way to challenge negative thinking in a more concrete and depersonalized way that is intended to assist girls to stop being "stuck in the negative muck" [17].

Such figurative language is especially relied upon in the domain of mindfulness as a central technique for assisting clients with understanding and appreciating the intricate nature of their own mental processes. For example, Marcks and Woods [18] offer the following analogy to illustrate an acceptance-based, nonjudgmental, approach to observing cognitive content:

"I want you to watch your thoughts. Imagine that they are coming out of your ears on little signs held by marching soldiers. I want you to allow the soldiers to march by in front of you, like a little parade. Do not argue with the signs, or avoid them, or make them go away. Just watch them march by" [18].

Examples of figurative language, such as the one quoted above as well as the new metaphor that is introduced later in this paper, can also be a particularly powerful way for individuals to develop a greater understanding of, and appreciation for, their own cognitive processes. Further, to actually progress in therapy, one must be able to retain learned knowledge in order to apply it, and figurative language assists in the achievement of such an objective. Indeed Otto [19] states that the use of stories and metaphors in therapy "provides a method to enhance information processing in session and thereafter. The goal is to help transform therapeutic information into a form that is easy to remember, provides useful guidance, and can be applied in relevant moments in a patient's life" (p.166). Indeed, the role of mindfulness training on dispositional mindfulness has recently been meta-analyzed [20].

In the text to follow, a mindfulness metaphor is introduced that is not yet represented in the literature. It was conceived of by this author through his work as a clinical psychologist and developed according to the process described by Stewart and Barnes-Holmes' [21] in their analysis of how to understand metaphor from a Relational Frame perspective: Specifically, "the creator of a metaphor might first perceive some formal or nonarbitrary similarity between two different environmental events, and then subsequently behave verbally in accordance with a new relational network into which this novel formal similarity has been incorporated" (p.198). It is expected that this analogy will be highly relatable to a developmentally diverse population

in today's media-driven culture, and thus carry the potential to enhance individuals' ability to achieve present-moment awareness of thought patterns.

The "Ticker" Metaphor

Developmentally relatable imagery

Middle-childhood to adolescent clients who are particularly interested in sports can be encouraged to consider the coming and going of thoughts like the ticker that runs along the bottom of the television screen on sports programming (e.g., ESPN, or during a football game) that provides player performance updates as well as game and team statistics. Participation in "fantasy" sports leagues is even more ubiquitous for adults than it is for youth [22], making the above example just as applicable – indeed, likely even more so – for many adults. However, a different application of the "ticker" analogy whose application may be more developmentally unique to adults is that of the stock ticker. Like the Market Site Tower – a rounded building located at the corner of 43rd and Broadway in the heart of New York City's historic Times Square – which boasts one of the largest and most recognizable stock tickers, or any financial cable television channel that continuously scrolls the ongoing market fluctuations of various companies, stock tickers offer another symbolic representation of the manner in which individuals experience their daily constant stream of thoughts.

Use as a mindfulness exercise

I would like for us to do a little exercise together. Please get comfortable in your chair, take a few deep breaths [allow a few moments for client to do so], and close your eyes. We're going to sit quietly for 60 seconds, and as we do, I want you to pay attention to the thoughts you experience in that time. They may arise because of something that comes to you through your senses, such as a sound you hear, or they may seem to pop up randomly. As you notice these thoughts, I want you to picture them as words scrolling across a Ticker that runs along your forehead, just like the one on ESPN that shows the sports scores and player statistics [or, alternatively, if using the financial Ticker option: just like the one on CNBC that shows the day's fluctuations in stock prices]. In the same way as the information comes and goes on the television screen, allow your thoughts to simply scroll on by as the next ones follow. After one minute has elapsed, the therapist may then prompt: So what thoughts did you have during that time? If I were able to read the Ticker that was scrolling your thoughts along your forehead, what would I have been reading?

Varra, Drossel, and Hayes [23] indicate that one of the central applications of metaphor is "Structure Experiential Processes" and that "From an ACT perspective, mindfulness involves acceptance, defusion, a focus on the present moment, and a transcendent sense of self" (p.121). The Ticker Metaphor creates a figurative image that effectively weaves together these four integral ACT processes. The client as "observer of thoughts" reflects self-as-context, with the individual witnessing, though remaining distinct from, mental experience (e.g., observing a thought in the same way that one would -or perhaps should- watch sports scores or stock prices encourages defusion from those thoughts) paying attention to thoughts as they occur in real time achieves a present moment focus orientation; and allowing the thoughts to simply scroll on by fosters a sense of acceptance that is fundamental for mindfulness. In order to ensure this last feature of acceptance without effort to alter the thought experience, the Ticker Metaphor also allows for the application of figurative extension through related analogy:

Specifically, when applying the metaphor, the therapist can coach the client not to attempt to “pause” or “rewind” the ticker stream as one might do using a function of digital video recording (DVR) that today is nearly ubiquitous on televisions. Indeed, it is use of such elaboration of metaphors that Martin and colleagues [24–26] have found is among the more salient features that lead to clients’ enhanced recall of therapeutic content.

Psychotherapeutic application

The Ticker Metaphor possesses a number of useful features for implementation in the therapeutic context. One such aspect is that it offers imagery that can be helpful for facilitating the client’s being able to put thoughts into words. This can be particularly valuable when working with youth who may not have yet developed this capability. Children and adolescents who struggle with all kinds of difficult feelings often fail to recognize powerful effects of the language of thought, and thus this metaphor may also serve as a vehicle for helping youth come to understand the link between cognitions and emotions.

The Ticker Metaphor provides a useful analogy for the phenomenon by which individuals may become cognitively fused with certain thoughts. For instance, the child or adolescent client watching ESPN might latch onto a particular piece of unfortunate information presented on the sporting news ticker (e.g., one’s favorite team has lost a game or a favorite player has been injured) and neglect to attend to, or otherwise forget, all of the other data continuously passing by. Similarly, the average adult watching the financial news likely views the stock ticker and essentially pays no mind to the ups and downs of the multitude of companies in which one has no financial interest. Should the data scroll across, however, that a company in which one is heavily invested has lost 10% of its value, the individual latches on to that single data point, refusing to let it pass by as did all its predecessors and followers. Indeed, so too do negatively biased thoughts attain greater saliency and thus become the focus of worry and rumination for youth and adults alike who are struggling with a variety of issues (e.g., anxiety, depression, anger management, etc.).

To extend each of these analogies further, the noticing of discouraging news as portrayed by either of the “ticker” examples above will likely lead to a stylized pattern of interpreting subsequent or associated information in a manner akin to the distortions of cognitive biases. For instance, the individual who sees that his/her favorite sports team has just been blown out by a supposedly inferior opponent will likely disqualify any seemingly positive/encouraging information (e.g., the running back for the team rushed for career-high 100+ yards and 2 touchdowns; or this is the only game the team has yet lost during the season), and instead focus selectively on negatively congruent data (e.g., the “worthless” quarterback had an interception and a fumble). In a similar fashion, the person whose financial investment is currently down 10% is often not likely to keep in mind and appreciate that even with the decline the stock is still up 20% over the course of the past year, but rather to focus on what seemingly has been “lost” in the immediate moment.

Finally, and perhaps most poignantly, the Ticker Metaphor helps to illustrate the problem with global perspective that the mindfulness approach seeks to help individuals correct regarding their thoughts. A key feature that must be emphasized is that the sports tickers or stock tickers being discussed typically occupy less than 10% of a television screen, however are NOT intended to be the viewer’s main focus. Just as these tickers scroll at the bottom of the screen during the broadcast of the main programming which is intended to be, and for the most

part is, the target of our focus, so too are the ongoing events of our daily lives the “main program” to which we are – or should be – mostly attentive, while our thoughts continue to roll by on an unceasing basis. However, when one of those distressing bits of information streams by (e.g., an upsetting thought occurs), we selectively attend to and over-focus (e.g., tend to become “stuck”) on it, very often and concernedly to the detriment and neglect of the “main programming” (e.g., the living of a value-drive life).

It is acknowledged that this analogy is somewhat similar to the “Leaves on a Stream” [27] analogy and exercise, often espoused in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT); and as well to the above-quote analogy offered by Marcks and Woods [18]. Varra, Drossel, and Hayes [23], however, state that while this and other already-developed analogies are commonly used in ACT, “therapists are encouraged to create their own, similar metaphors in conjunction with their clients” (p. 117). Thus, the “Ticker” analogy is being proffered here due to the belief that it offers unique advantages in terms of the ease and interest with which clients may be able to connect to it. Given the value of visualization to mindfulness exercises, the “Ticker” analogy may be a more easily accessible mental image for certain clients than that of being at the side of a stream or of miniature soldiers marching forth from the interior of one’s cranium. Additionally, by offering the segue of talking to a child or teen about the sports statistics and news that is broadcast in this fashion on programming such as ESPN, the Ticker Metaphor may be a more youth-friendly one with the capacity to enhance engagement in therapy. Indeed, this author has anecdotally found this to be the case during his own therapeutic work as a clinical child psychologist.

Conclusion

To the author’s knowledge, this analogy has not yet been represented in the literature. Using online databases, searches for the combination of terms “ticker” and “mindfulness” by the ‘All Text’ (for PsycINFO) and ‘Text Word’ (for PubMed) field options produced no results. When other related terms (e.g., “stock” or “sports”) were used in place of “ticker,” in order to check if alternative language had been used, the handful of results yielded did not refer to the analogy presented above. Thus, the Ticker Metaphor potentially reflects a new, contemporary, and developmentally flexible mindfulness analogy.

The value of utilizing analogical thinking in the context of mindfulness has been demonstrated numerous times. For instance, Briñol, Gascó, Petty, and Horcajo [28] showed that participants focused on thoughts less and utilized them less in forming judgments if they discarded a representation of those thoughts – e.g., throwing out a written down form – than if they retained them. Further, Wahl and colleagues [29] investigated the use of these types of strategies for dealing with obsessive-compulsive thoughts, and concluded that, “Data offer initial evidence that using mindfulness-based metaphors during brief exposure with obsessive thoughts may be a useful alternative to distraction” (p.752). To this end, it is believed that the above-proposed Ticker analogy will be able to similarly aid clinicians in assisting their clients to better understand and cope with the cognitive content with which they struggle.

Despite the suggested advantages, limitations must also be considered, which focus primarily on the likelihood that this metaphor may not have equal applicability for all clients. For instance, males may relate to this analogy more than females, as childhood and adolescent boys are stereotypically greater consumers of sports media and fantasy sports [22] than females, and empirical research has documented that

men engage in a higher frequency (e.g., up to 45% more) of investment trading than their female counterparts [30]. Additionally, given the technological (e.g., television and internet) foundation on which both fantasy sports and financial investment are now based, more senior client populations who did not grow up as readily socialized to these media forms as today's youth and young adults may not connect as readily connect with the proposed analogy. Finally, this analogy may have greater relevance to an American clientele given the nature of sports media in the United States, as well as to adult clients of greater financial means who have the supplemental assets available to engage in investing. Despite these potential limitations, however, this analogy is presented in hopes that it can serve as a resource to other mental health professionals who advocate mindfulness-based practices with their clients [31,32].

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