

Can mindfulness set us free?

Opinion

In spring of 2015 I was in Naivasha (the largest maximum security prison in Kenya) sitting in a circle with 50 inmates. We were doing Mindfulness training together. Many of these men had very long sentences and some even faced death penalties. When the training was over some inmates declared “I may be in prison for the rest of my life, but I am now free”. The following week, I was assessing the coursework of successful people who were doing a Master in Business and Administration in a UK university. I was reading their personal development portfolio (i.e., a piece of work in which they had to enhance their self-awareness). Reading their words gave me great sadness. These future leaders were imprisoned by their beliefs, thoughts, emotions and habits. Internalised expectations had determined the square meters of their own cell. Then, a few months later, I was receiving some deep inner self development training in the mountains, when someone made me see my own dark and compressing inner prison.

If mindfulness can make prisoners feel free can it also make those of us outside an institution feel free from our own chains and self-imposed walls? There is now a robust and extensive body of research from many different disciplines that shows, among other things, that mindfulness can rewire our brain, enhance our mental wellbeing, and reduce our depression, etcetera. In theory mindfulness could be the key to achieve our inner freedom, but in practice the reality is more complex.

Does mindfulness meditation always lead to positive outcomes?

No, it is important that people do not jump to meditating without the appropriate guidance or experience. For instance, one of the meditative practices is to imagine you are in the middle of a busy road and observe your thoughts as if they were cars, buses, trucks. The key is to remain in the middle and not engage with any of the vehicles (i.e., thoughts), just observe them from a neutral place. BUT, for many of us this is extremely difficult and we may jump into the middle of the road because we want to stop that bus, or we jump onto that truck. This can be absolutely exhausting and after 5 minutes “meditating” we may feel more drained than when we started. Thus, it is very important that not only we know how we need to meditate, aka: fully accepting what it is, without judgment and from a neutral place, but we also have the guidance or the capacity to do so.

Is mindfulness always about meditation?

Mindfulness is associated with meditation, but it doesn't have to be. Meditation is a great tool and it has been shown to have fantastic neurobiological impact on our brain. But meditation is not for everyone and it may not be fast enough in some contexts. For instance, busy people and those living in extremely precarious conditions may need something quicker with the essence of mindfulness. For that reason, Mindfulness Techniques on the Go have been developed. Those are cognitive training techniques that can be used at any time, they are quick and do not require a meditative environment.

How can we make mindfulness kind to us?

Mindfulness enhances self-awareness and in that process we can suddenly be confronted with a negative side of ourselves we did

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not know existed. In many instances that proves very challenging. The mindful journey is long and some people report feeling worst after they start practicing mindfulness. To avoid that, we need to develop a kind, loving approach towards ourselves. For that, I always recommend to use the 3Cs and SoH rules:

1. *Curiosity* with a childlike openness for what is within us.
2. *Courage* to see what is really happening when the time is right.
3. *Compassion* for ourselves like the one we feel for a child that is learning how to walk.
4. *Sense of Humor* not to take our thoughts and ourselves too seriously.

These can become essential tools on our mindful adventure. You wouldn't leave a person in a jungle without appropriate tools to move forward, would you? Many times our mind is like a jungle and we can get lost in it if we do not know how to deal with its beauty and its traps.

Can mindfulness invite us to actively change things within our mind?

In many traditions mindfulness is about observing with full acceptance and without judgment what emerges in our mind and around us. Once again the benefits of that are enormous and well documented. But in some contexts people may need something more pro-active. In Mindfulness PLUS training I have developed a way in which we do not only observe without judgment, but we do so from a place of self-leadership. And from that place we actively decide whether we choose something different than our current thoughts or emotions. For instance, if we imagine our mind is like a radio, then observing the different inner channels in an accepting and non-judgmental way could be considered a mindfulness technique. A Mindfulness PLUS technique is one in which we become the manager of our own radio.

Coming back to the initial question: can mindfulness set us free?

Maybe! If you are determined, disciplined and also have the right training you will increase the chances of liberating yourself from the beliefs, thoughts, emotions and habits that imprison you. But there is something very important to ponder upon: how likely is it for someone to escape from a prison without help of anyone else? It's similar in this case too. Having people around us who either use or value mindfulness and other inner practices will help. For that, we can ask ourselves, who do I have around me who can join me in this journey?

This is the key element of the mindful leadership training offered in Kenyan prisons which is liberating people (see [conversation](#) article and see [report](#)).

So, if you want to liberate yourself, “welcome to the club”. It’s great you have decided to take your life in your own terms. Be kind, disciplined and also have fun.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.