



The dynamics of mindfulness in managing emotions and stress

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to review the concept of mindfulness and to show how it can be extended from psychology into management. Also, it seeks to introduce a new model of the psyche which incorporates two types of mindfulness (“meta-mindfulness” and “supra-mindfulness”) which can be used by managers to increase their capacity to handle emotional reactivity and to reduce stress.

Design/methodology/approach – It is proposed that the “meta-self” or Managing Ego plays a key role in emotions management and stress reduction by using meta-mindfulness to actively monitor one’s sub-selves which react with the external world. The current approach also postulates that an individual’s “supra-self” or inner-observer is crucial in reducing stress by passively exercising neutral observation of all psychic activity via the above-mind state of supra-mindfulness.

Research limitations/implications – The paper indicates how the proposed models of the psyche and of the dynamics of mindfulness in emotions and stress management can be tested empirically in future management research.

Practical implications – Mindfulness techniques are recommended for use by managers in practice to avoid emotional reactivity and to manage stress.

Originality/value – The present approach builds on existing theory to provide new constructs and models that help to explain the dynamics of mindfulness in managing emotions and in reducing stress.

Keywords Individual psychology, Stress, Management effectiveness

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Managers have always faced challenges in handling emotions and stress in themselves as well as in their subordinates. In the past decade there has been increasing acknowledgement of the role of emotional competence in effective management (Boss and Sims, 2008; Dulewicz and Higgs, 2000; Dulewicz *et al.*, 2003; Goleman, 2001; Hopkins and Bilimoria, 2008; Riggio and Reichard, 2008). By developing their capacities for recognizing and dealing with their own emotions and those of others, managers can become more effective in the many complex interpersonal situations they confront on a daily basis (Hede, 2002; Solomon, 2007). Also, many occupations today involve increasing demands and decreasing resources with a resultant imbalance producing personal stress (Harris, 2004; Johnson *et al.*, 2005; Schabracq and Cooper, 2000).

Concept of mindfulness

There are two basic approaches underpinning the concept of mindfulness in modern psychology. The main approach derives from the ancient Eastern tradition of meditation practice (e.g. Hanh, 1987), which has been extensively incorporated into Western psychology and medicine in the past two decades (Baer, 2006, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2005, 1994, 1990; Mace, 2008; Martin, 1997). The other approach originated



relatively recently in the US in the area of cognitive psychology (Langer, 1994, 1989a, 1989b; Langer and Imber, 1980; Langer and Moldoveanu, 2000).

The Eastern concept of mindfulness has been defined simply as “bringing ones” complete attention to the present experience on a moment-to-moment basis” (Marlatt and Kristeller, 1999, p. 68). More specifically, according to Kabat-Zinn, “Mindfulness can be thought of as moment-to-moment, non-judgmental awareness, cultivated by paying attention in a specific way, that is, in the present moment, and as non-reactively, as non-judgmentally, and as openheartedly as possible” (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 108). Martin (1997) claims to draw on the literature from both the Eastern and Western traditions in defining mindfulness as “a state of *psychological freedom* that occurs when attention remains quiet and limber, *without attachment* to any particular point-of-view. Mindfulness is a process of looking freshly, of observation that is essentially non biased and explorative” (Martin, 1997, pp. 291-2, italics in original).

A useful analysis of mindfulness is provided by Brown and Ryan (2003, p. 822, italics in original) who first define “consciousness” as comprising both “awareness” and “attention”:

Awareness is the background “radar” of consciousness, continually monitoring the inner and outer environment ... *Attention* is a process of focusing conscious awareness, providing heightened sensitivity to a limited range of experience.

They then proceed to define “mindfulness” as “an enhanced attention to and awareness of current experience or present reality” (Brown and Ryan, 2003, p. 822).

The present paper focuses on the Eastern concept of mindfulness which has inspired numerous workplace and medical programs for stress reduction (Baer, 2006, 2003; Carlson *et al.*, 2003; Cohen-Katz, 2004; Hassed, 2002; Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Kabat-Zinn *et al.*, 1985; King, 2006; Mace, 2008; Marcus *et al.*, 2003; Shapiro *et al.*, 1998; Walach *et al.*, 2007; Williams, 2006). In mindfulness training for stress reduction, trainees are typically given a range of exercises in which they “are instructed to focus attention on the target of observation (e.g. breathing or walking) and to be aware of it in each moment. When emotions, sensations, or cognitions arise, they are observed nonjudgmentally” (Baer, 2003, p. 126).

Mindfulness-based therapies for stress and other conditions have links to other psychological approaches such as cognitive therapy (Baer and Krietemeyer, 2006; Cashion, 2006; Coffman *et al.*, 2006; Ma and Teasdale, 2004; Teasdale *et al.*, 2000; Williams *et al.*, 2007), psychotherapy (Kostanski *et al.*, 2006) and also acceptance and commitment therapy (Flaxman and Bond, 2006; Hayes *et al.*, 1999; Harris, 2006; Roemer *et al.*, 2006).

Despite the widespread psychotherapeutic applications of mindfulness, there have been very few attempts to apply the construct to management and organizational behavior. One limited example is Ucock (2006) who advocates the use of mindfulness in listening at work so as to improve transparency in interpersonal communication. Also, Swanson and Ramiller (2004) provide a framework that distinguishes between mindfulness and mindlessness in organizational innovation using information technology. However, in this case the construct is derived from Langer’s (1989a, 1989b) cognitive perspective and has little relevance to managerial practice. The present paper, therefore, attempts to fill this need for an extension of mindfulness into management.

New model of the psyche

A new model of the psyche incorporating mindfulness is introduced here with constructs derived from Jungian and Eastern psychology (see Figure 1). This model postulates that the psyche comprises four structural components (namely, the sub-selves, the meta-self, the supra-self and the unconscious) operating with three levels of consciousness (namely, self-awareness, meta-mindfulness and supra-mindfulness).

Structural components of the psyche

Sub-selves. According to the present model, the predominant layer of the psyche comprises our “sub-selves” or sub-personalities, each of which has an overt side which we know and accept as well as an opposite shadow side which we are unaware of or disown (see Figure 1). It is the shadow sides of our sub-selves that cause us problems in emotions management and interpersonal conflict at work (Hede, 2007). Most people have a small number of sub-selves influencing their reactions and behavior at any one time (e.g. responsible person, vulnerable person, judgmental critic, needy person, high achiever, lazy person, wise man/woman, etc.). The sub-selves are not posited as ontologically distinct entities. Rather, they are emergent constructs or experientially-created patterns in our mindchatter, that is, identifiable “voices” in our mental stream of consciousness (Stone and Stone, 1989; Tolle, 1999).

It is here proposed that psychological reactivity entails three elements (see Figure 1):

- (1) *thoughts* (experienced as either voices or images in our mind);
- (2) *sensations* (perceptions via the senses and also body responses); and
- (3) *feelings* (immediate emotional reactions and longer-term moods).

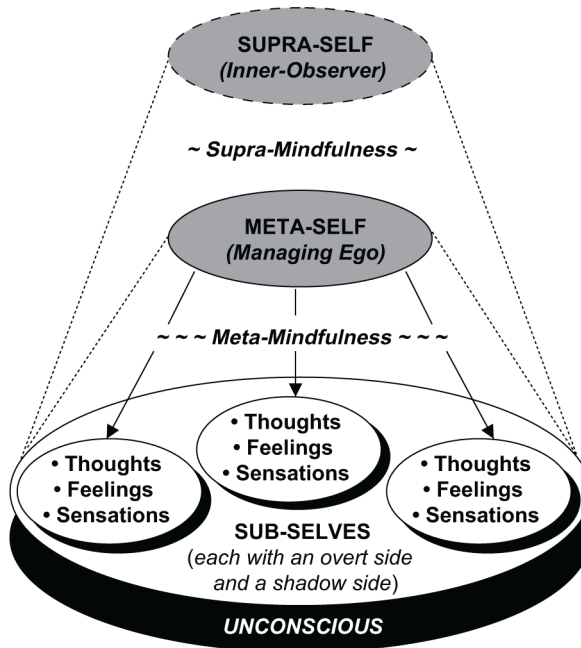


Figure 1.
Model of the psyche
incorporating mindfulness

A core proposition of the current model is that these three reactive elements are always experienced – initially by our sub-selves – which is the level where our “*locus of being*” instinctively resides. In other words, we naturally identify with whichever of our sub-selves is currently reacting with emotion.

Meta-self. In the present model, the “meta-self” (meta = among) is the self we use to interact with the outside world and also to manage our own sub-selves (see Figure 1). The meta-self is postulated to have two functions:

- (1) It has a monitoring function (via the state of meta-mindfulness) which entails being actively aware of the voices in our mind, that is, the thoughts of our sub-selves as well as the sensations and feelings they experience at every moment we are awake;
- (2) The meta-self has an executive function as our Managing Ego charged with processing the sensations, thoughts and feelings experienced by our sub-selves (see arrows in Figure 1). More importantly, the meta-self decides (with varying degrees of competence), which reactions we will exhibit as overt behavior in our interpersonal interactions at work. Thus, it is here proposed that the meta-self is the primary determinant of one’s emotional intelligence.

The less emotionally competent person is prone to be repeatedly identified with and thus swamped by the immediately reactive thoughts and emotions of their currently dominant sub-self. For example, if we experience hurt because someone verbally abuses us, we may find that our vulnerable sub-self has taken control (i.e. has become our locus of being) and that we think and feel as though we are a total victim. However, one’s meta-self can learn to manage these sub-self reactions via mindfulness and to select responses which are effective, particularly for interactions with others at work.

Supra-self. The “supra-self” (supra = above) is here theorized to be an individual’s core being, the subject of one’s consciousness. It is who each of us really is – our true “I”. The supra-self is one’s “inner-observer” who watches everything here and now (see Figure 1). The supra-self operates “above mind” and as subject it is able to observe as objects the activities of the meta-self and the sub-selves. Unlike the meta-self, which has both monitoring and organizing functions, the supra-self engages only in neutral observing (i.e. passive and non-judgmental watching over one’s psychic activity). While all people have a supra-self, most live their lives dominated by their reactive sub-selves or by their meta-self in its Managing Ego role and rarely, if ever, experience their own supra-self as their true self. It is up to the meta-self to allow the mind to quieten so that the supra-self can become operative particularly, as will be shown later, in reducing stress via mindfulness exercises.

Unconscious. As well as the various selves, which are accessible to consciousness, the psyche has an unconscious domain which is normally inaccessible (see Figure 1). Nevertheless, the unconscious can influence the reactions of the sub-selves and thereby determine the manner in which the meta-self inter-relates with other people in work situations.

Experiential aspects of the psyche: awareness and mindfulness

Self-awareness. Modern managerial psychology regards self-awareness as a key, if not the key, competence in emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2001, 1998, 1995; Riggio and Reichard, 2008; Salovey and Mayer, 1990). In the present approach, this involves the

meta-self reflecting on its own processes of monitoring and organizing one's responses to the sensations, thoughts and feelings of one's various sub-selves. Most of the time, most people live in a state of non-awareness, that is, their mind is fully identified with experiencing the various mental activities of one of more of their sub-selves. However, we can train ourselves to increase our self-awareness and thereby improve our psychological functioning and our general sense of wellbeing by practicing mindfulness in its two forms, namely, meta-mindfulness and supra-mindfulness.

Meta-mindfulness. "Meta-mindfulness" is here defined as the process of being aware of oneself actively focusing attention on whatever one is experiencing (namely, thoughts, feelings or sensations) without any interpretation or judgment on a moment-by-moment basis. With maturity, one's meta-self becomes able to recognize the various sub-selves as distinct voices among the ongoing stream of thoughts which fill one's mind (i.e. mindchatter). During phases of meta-mindfulness the meta-self operates as the subject who monitors as objects the mental activities of one's various sub-selves (see Figure 1). Meta-mindfulness is characterized by its capacity for actively directing the focus of one's attention (whether on an aspect of one's thinking, on an emotional reaction or on a bodily sensation) while also maintaining awareness of doing so. It should be noted that the meta-self as the Managing Ego, also engages in executive activities other than meta-mindfulness (namely, by coordinating our responses to others and to external situations).

Supra-mindfulness. The supra-self passively observes the activity of the other selves without engaging in any mental activity itself. "Supra-mindfulness" is the term introduced here to describe the state of being aware above mind and beyond language, whereby the supra-self simply observes passively and with complete detachment on a moment-by-moment basis. Such a state emerges only when there is stillness in the mind, that is, when our sub-self mindchatter has abated, our meta-self has disengaged and our psyche is experiencing "total calm" (Manzie, 2000). Supra-mindfulness can be seen as "consciousness of consciousness" (Solomon, 2007, p. 224) or as a state of passively "observing the observer" by transcending the "busyness" of our mind. It is very much like the state of "no mind" which is experienced as "a discontinuity in the mental stream" (Tolle, 1999, p. 16). According to Tolle, "this sense of your own presence is not a thought. It arises from beyond the mind" (Tolle, 1999, p. 15). Most people find supra-mindfulness difficult to achieve and more difficult to maintain for longer than a few moments, because their other selves continually try to fill their consciousness with mental activity (namely, with the mindchatter of their currently reactive sub-selves or with the active monitoring of mental activity by their meta-self).

Supra-mindfulness entails the supra-self being fully focused on the present moment during periods when the psyche is totally calm, when it is possible to passively observe one's inner world without any limiting mental activity (i.e. in a state above mind). When a thought arises during supra-mindfulness (such as "This inner-awareness really works!" or "This approach is not working for me at all!"), then the neutral psychic state of observing with complete detachment and without language (namely, supra-mindfulness) will be instantly replaced by a mental activity (but at a lower level of consciousness involving either meta-mindfulness, non-awareness or even unconsciousness depending on the type of reaction one is experiencing).

Comparison with other approaches

Comparison with other theories of self

The current model of the psyche draws on several traditions. The construct of the “supra-self” has parallels with the Buddhist idea of “the observer, the one who knows, [and] remains ever elusive, standing outside the field of sense perception, outside the world” (Snelling, 1987, p. 64). The supra-self is here theorized to be above mind because it is experientially distinct from the mind. It is postulated that, as subject, the supra-self detachedly observes mental activities as objects. Once a person comes to a realization of this subject-object relationship then their sense of self ceases to be identified with their mind (namely, sub-selves or meta-self) and their locus of being shifts to their supra-self or true self which is above mind. This notion is comparable to that proposed by Tolle (1999) who asserts that “you are not your mind” and further claims that identification with the mind is the reason why most people suffer from “incessant mental noise” (Tolle, 1999, p. 9).

The closest equivalent concept to the supra-self in modern psychology appears to be the construct of the “observing self” in Deikman’s (1982) model of the self (see Figure 2). In the present model, as in Deikman’s, this core self is the subject of consciousness. However, the present approach contrasts with the view of major Buddhist writer, Thich Nhat Hanh, who states that: “The important thing is to be aware of the thought. This observation is not an *objectification* of the mind: it does not establish distinction between subject and object” (Hanh, 1987, p. 40, italics added). To the contrary, the present approach asserts that disidentification with the mind, including objectification of thoughts, is the critical efficacy mechanism for emotions management.

The meta-self and supra-self constructs as proposed here, both incorporate elements of the Jungian notion of the “inner personality” which Jung defined as “the way one behaves in relation to one’s inner psychic processes” (Jung, 1990, p. 282). The meta-self construct also incorporates features of Jung’s notions of the “persona” and the “ego”. According to Jung (1990, p. 280), the persona is “exclusively concerned with the relation to others” which aligns with the meta-self’s role of interacting with others in the external world, while the ego is “the subject of all personal acts of consciousness” (Jung, 1968, p. 3) which equates to the present meta-self function of monitoring via meta-mindfulness. As Miller *et al.* (1965, p. 161) point out:

If we consider the ideal intrapsychic situation, the function of self-observation connotes a self-objectification including a capacity to rise above the self.

Miller <i>et al.</i> (1965)	Current Model	Deikman (1982)
	Supra-Self (Inner-observer)	≈ Observing Self (Subject of consciousness)
Observing Ego ≈ (Integrative self-observation function)	Meta-Self (Managing ego)	≈ Functional Self (Part of object self)
Experiencing Ego ≈ (Cognition, affect & perception)	Sub-Selves (Thoughts, feelings & sensations)	≈ Emotional Self & Thinking Self (Parts of object self)

Figure 2.
Comparison of the current model with other models of the psyche incorporating an observer construct

The present constructs of the meta-self and supra-self can also be compared with the concept of self in acceptance and commitment therapy which is fast becoming the predominant mindfulness application in psychotherapy worldwide. Here theorists refer to the “self-as-context” (Hayes *et al.*, 1999), which is also called the “transcendent self” (Wilson and DuFrene, 2008). This single construct, like Deikman’s (1982) “observing self”, combines the active monitoring function of the meta-self and the passive observing function of the supra-self.

The concept of the “shadow” is one of the most compelling in modern psychology and derives from Carl Jung’s writings (Casement, 2006; Hede, 2007; Jung, 1968, 1966). In the present model this concept is accommodated at the level of the sub-selves where the shadow comprizes the mirror opposite of each sub-self. In other words, each of the sub-selves that operate in an individual’s psyche is here postulated to have an opposite part that incorporates every feature of the relevant sub-self except in reverse. For example, a typical manager’s “high achiever” overt sub-self would have as its shadow a “lazy person” sub-self. If a shadow part is completely disowned by the meta-self it will repeatedly subsume the person’s identity in moments of emotional reactivity and become the operative self inter-relating with others (ineffectively) in the workplace (Stone and Stone, 1989). Thus, our high achiever may become hyper-sensitive and react with an emotional outburst if his/her work ethic or accomplishments are questioned in any way.

The present notion of the sub-selves is Jungian-based but draws primarily on the “Psychology of Selves” that underpins the psychotherapeutic practice of “voice dialogue” (Stone and Stone, 1989). This approach entails having one’s “aware ego” monitor one’s own sub-personalities by allowing them to speak out aloud in turn with guidance from a facilitator (Dyak, 1999). The different voices in one’s mind can thereby be understood by the individual and their influence on overt behavior can be better managed (Stone and Stone, 1989). The construct of the sub-selves in the present model is comparable to that of the “experiencing ego” in the model of Miller and also the “emotional and thinking self” in Deikman’s (1982) model (see Figure 2).

Finally, the notion of the unconscious as depicted in the present model (see Figure 1) draws on both Freud (1986) and Jung (1990) but places less emphasis on this construct’s relevance for overt behavior at work. Because of the inaccessibility and relative immutability of the unconscious, the present approach concentrates primarily on conscious processes, which can be accessed in the day-to-day management of emotions and stress. The key theoretical point made by the current conceptualization is that the unconscious affects behavior only via its influence on one or more shadow parts of the sub-selves. In practical terms, therefore, it is only when our unconscious manifests itself in our shadow sub-selves that we are able to use our meta-self or Managing Ego to monitor and manage its influence on our overt behavior.

Comparison with other concepts of mindfulness

The present model extends the Eastern approach to mindfulness (Baer, 2006; Hanh, 1987; Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Mace, 2008) by distinguishing between two types, namely, meta-mindfulness and supra-mindfulness (see Figure 2). Thus, when mindfulness involves actively observing the sensations, thoughts and feelings of our various sub-selves (e.g. when fully focusing our attention on a physical activity or sensation or when actively observing a thought or an emotional reaction), it involves the monitoring function of the meta-self (namely, meta-mindfulness. however, we move into a higher

level of mindfulness when our meta-self disengages, our busy mind becomes totally calm and our supra-self becomes operative as a completely passive observer; we then enter supra-mindfulness, that is, the state of pure consciousness above mind (Figure 3).

It is important to note that the present distinction between two types of mindfulness is based on whether the subject of one’s inner-awareness is the meta-self or the supra-self. This contrasts with the view of Martin (2002, 1997) who distinguishes between an “open” attentional form and a “focused” attentional form of mindfulness. According to Martin (1997, p. 300):

The open form is like a space ship that can freely hover and examine a landscape. Once on the surface of a planet, focused-form attention is necessary to identify, spot, or follow a path to an alternate landscape.

Martin’s distinction has a parallel in the present model insofar as the meta-self can be seen as engaging in a focused form of attention using meta-mindfulness to actively monitor close-up the sensations, thoughts and feelings of the sub-selves (see Figure 1). On the other hand, the supra-self can be seen as maintaining an open form of attention, hovering as a totally disengaged and passive observer without any mental activity, namely, in the state of supra-mindfulness which is above mind.

It is notable, however, that the present distinction between meta-mindfulness and supra-mindfulness does not equate to Kabat-Zinn’s (2005) differentiation between “deliberate” versus “effortless” mindfulness. With these two constructs, Kabat-Zinn highlights the fact that the state of mindfulness often requires one to make a deliberate effort to achieve it, whereas with much practice, one can also achieve mindfulness without any effort. He uses the internet as a metaphor to explain the difference:

In deliberate mindfulness, you could think of it as dial-up networking, where you have to make an effort to get connected, where often the connection keeps getting disconnected and you have to reestablish it. In effortless mindfulness, the connection is always present. No dial-up is necessary. It just is. We are already connected (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 109).

Importantly, he notes that “Ultimately, however arrived at, mindfulness is mindfulness” (Kabat-Zinn, 2005, p. 109). By contrast, the present approach asserts that there really are two types of mindfulness depending on which self is the subject of consciousness, namely, the supra-self (passive inner observer) versus the meta-self (active Managing Ego).

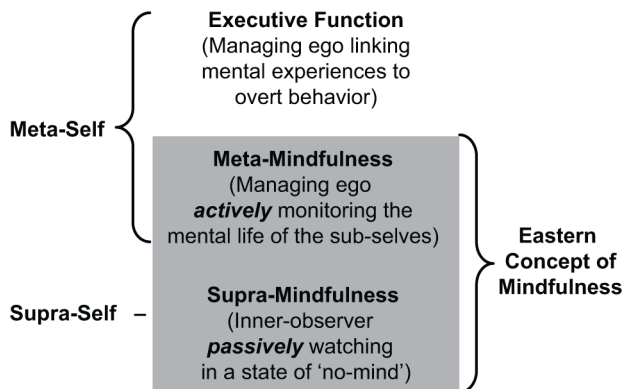


Figure 3. Relationship between the current constructs of meta- and supra-mindfulness and the Eastern concept of mindfulness

The dynamics of mindfulness in emotions management

All human beings have as part of their normal consciousness, the subjective experience of voices (Stone and Stone, 1989) or images in their head or of a mental running commentary (Tolle, 1999). It is our sub-selves who engage in this constant inner dialogue which we experience subjectively as mindchatter (Dyak, 1999). For most people there are usually as many as 6-8 such inner voices although only half of them are typically active in producing thoughts at any one time. Two of the most common members of almost everyone's sub-self family are experienced as a vulnerable inner voice and a self-critical inner voice (Stone and Stone, 1989). We can learn much about ourselves by listening to the different voices that produce our inner dialogue or mindchatter. We can do this by allowing our meta-self to engage in its monitoring role of meta-mindfulness. If you as a reader, are right now having thoughts along the lines of "This is all rather dubious!" or alternatively "This is an amazing new approach!", then recognize such thoughts as generated by one of your own inner voices and the speaker as one of your own sub-selves. Alternatively, we can use the formal technique of voice dialogue (Dyak, 1999; Stone and Stone, 1989) to allow each of our sub-selves to speak aloud successively while our meta-self maintains psychic identity by engaging in meta-mindfulness.

Whenever we experience emotional reactivity, it is postulated here that one of our sub-selves takes over our psyche with what seems experientially like a "flooding of feeling" accompanied by a "firestorm of inflamed thought". During such episodes, our whole psyche identifies with the currently reactive sub-self and its all-consuming thoughts and feelings. Importantly, our locus of being shifts to that reactive sub-self. For example, when we are confronted by someone at work questioning our performance we may observe (if we exercise meta-mindfulness) the thoughts of a vulnerable inner voice within our psyche thinking "That's not fair!" or "How dare you!" together with feelings of being belittled or insulted. Another very common workplace experience is how we deal with failure when a self-critical inner voice admonishes us with thoughts about how weak we are (e.g. "You should have done better!" or "That was a silly thing to do!") accompanied by feelings of shame or guilt. The present explanation of the dynamics of mindfulness in the management of such interplays of reactive thoughts and feelings is depicted in Figure 4.

The main causal sequence theorized in the current model is that external triggers (such as a personal confrontation or the experience of failure as discussed above) stimulate reactive thoughts and feelings which in turn produce emotional reactivity

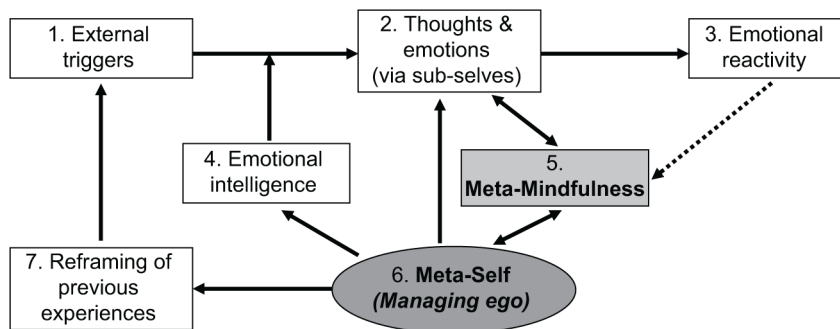


Figure 4. Model of the dynamics of mindfulness in emotions management

(see Boxes 1-3 in Figure 4). It is further proposed that one's emotional intelligence (Box 4) moderates the extent to which a particular external trigger will cause one or more of our sub-selves to react. Thus, someone with high emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1998; Riggio and Reichard, 2008) will experience less intense inflammatory thoughts and feelings in response to external provocation than a person who is lacking in emotional competence.

Both functions of the meta-self are involved in managing emotions. First, the executive function is used to actively intervene in the thoughts and feelings of the reactive sub-self (or sub-selves) (see link between Boxes 6 and 2 in Figure 4). The primary efficacy mechanism in emotions management as proposed here, is objectification of the immediately reactive thought so that one disidentifies with the sub-self and shifts one's locus of being to the meta-self. Second, the monitoring function of meta-mindfulness may be used to observe the thoughts and feelings one experiences in response to provocations from the external world thereby reducing their intensity (see links between Boxes 6, 5 and 2). The meta-self can also increase one's emotional intelligence (see link from Box 6 to Box 4 in Figure 4) particularly the competencies of self-awareness and self-management (Goleman, 2001).

Another causal link proposed in this model is that the meta-self can exert an influence on how we react to external events by means of reframing their meaning and significance in terms of past experience (see Box 7 in Figure 4). In other words, reflection on previous experiences, which may have been emotionally laden or even traumatic, can assist us in reinterpreting their significance so as to reduce their influence on our future reactions. Of course, the opposite is also possible whereby one mulls over previous negative experiences without appropriate detachment (via mindfulness) and thus falls victim to the cycle of escalating thoughts and feelings that makes one hyper-sensitive to similar future experiences.

The final link in the model is that proposed from emotional reactivity to meta-mindfulness (see Boxes 3 and 5 in Figure 4). This signifies the feedback that one can obtain by having one's meta-self observe one's behavioral manifestation of emotional reactivity. Thus, even if one completely loses emotional control in a specific incident, the mindful observation of that behavior can equip one to better manage one's emotions in future.

The dynamics of mindfulness in stress reduction

The present model of the dynamics of mindfulness in stress reduction is illustrated in Figure 5, which has a structure comparable to the model proposed for emotions management (see Figure 4). The key causal link in this case is that between work-life overload (see Box 1) which is postulated to be the cause of the subjective pressure reactions encountered by an individual (via the sub-selves; see Box 2) such that these then cause the experience of stress (see Box 3 in Figure 5) (see Bakker *et al.*, 2005; Jones *et al.*, 2006; Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2007). Stress is manifested in the form of psychological and physical symptoms the details of which are beyond the scope of the present analysis.

It is here theorized that there is a critical moderating influence in stress reduction as with emotions management, this time in the form of the physiological and psychological factors which determine the extent to which an individual can handle a particular level of work-life overload (see Box 4 in Figure 5). The import of this

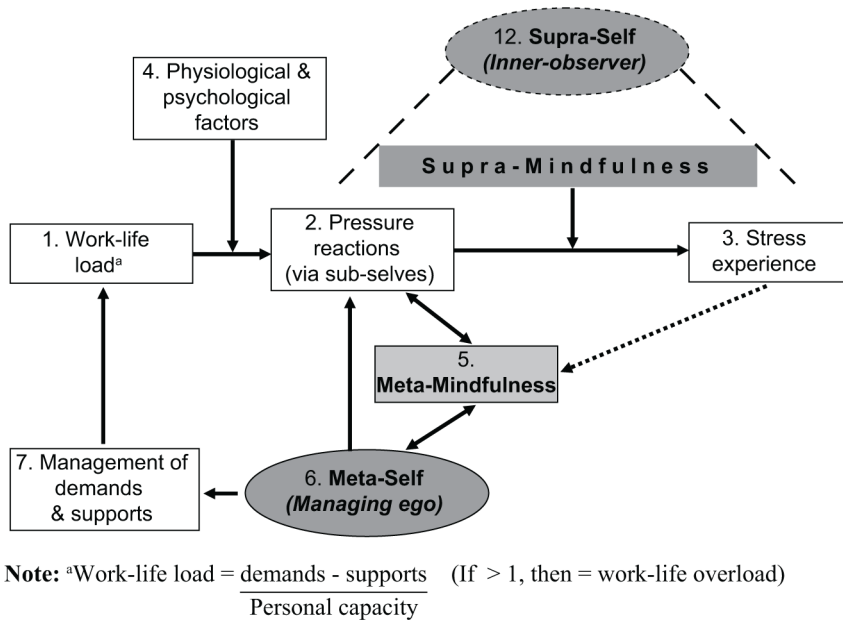


Figure 5.
Model of the dynamics of
mindfulness in stress
reduction

influence is exemplified by the case of someone who is very fit physically and also has a high level of psychological competence manifested in characteristics such as resilience and self-esteem. Such a person would be able to withstand much higher levels of pressure from his/her work and life commitments than someone who is physically unfit and/or psychologically unstable (Rotondo *et al.*, 2003; Wayne *et al.*, 2002). As in the case of emotions management, the meta-self can use its executive function as the Managing Ego to directly influence the pressure reactions one's sub-selves experience because of work-life overload (see link between Boxes 6 and 2 in Figure 5). In this context, it is worth noting that the meta-self can also use its executive function to modify those external pressures by managing the various demands and supports in one's life (see Box 7). Thus, the meta-self can make decisions about reducing the demands on one's time and energy or about increasing the supports one has to help cope with work and life pressures.

In the case of stress reduction, it is here proposed that the two types of mindfulness have complementary roles. First, the meta-self employs meta-mindfulness to exercise its monitoring function over the thoughts and feelings that the various sub-selves experience in reaction to external pressures (see links between Boxes 6, 5 and 2 in Figure 5). The second type of mindfulness, namely supra-mindfulness, is here theorized to come into play as a moderating influence on the extent to which one experiences stress (as manifested in physical and psychological symptoms) as a result of one's reactions to external pressures. The present approach proposes that the supra-self can reduce the impact of stress reactions simply by means of its passive and calming observation of one's whole psychic world comprizing pressure reactions of one's sub-selves as monitored by one's meta-self (see Boxes 2, 3, 5 and 6) as well as one's behavioral stress experience (see Box 12 in Figure 5).

As with emotions management, a feedback loop is here proposed indicating that the experience of stress can be monitored by the meta-self via meta-mindfulness (see link between Boxes 3 and 5). This enables our meta-self (Managing Ego) to manage the stress we experience even if we are not totally in control, and then to mollify or reduce such stress in the future. Finally, the meta-self can intervene actively in reducing work-life overload by managing the demands and supports one has in both one's work and personal lives (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Harris, 2004; Lewis *et al.*, 2003) (see Box 7).

Implications for research and managerial practice

The present models of the psyche and of the dynamics of emotions and stress management are derived from previously published theory and research as outlined above. However, these models need to be subjected to empirical testing in order to confirm their validity. Further, it is necessary to assess their effectiveness in guiding managerial practice.

According to the present approach, the key mechanism by which mindfulness has its effect on psychological functioning is to enable a person to objectify and thereby to separate from his/her thoughts and feelings. Most people identify with their mind and their own mental activity, that is, their locus of being is in their reactive sub-selves. The present model asserts that meta-mindfulness can be used to help people disidentify with their reactive thoughts and emotions. In acceptance and commitment therapy, this process is called "defusion" whereby clients stop being fused or identified with the thoughts and feeling that comprise the content of their mind (Wilson and DuFrene, 2008). However, this is an issue that requires empirical testing as some writers (e.g. Hanh, 1987) claim that disidentification is not essential or even helpful in mindfulness applications.

Specifically, in the case of stress reduction, it would be worthwhile to conduct research to test whether supra-mindfulness plays the critical role claimed here. It should be straightforward to design a field experiment comparing subjects who are trained in the active observational technique of meta-mindfulness with those trained in the "above mind" and passive meditative state of supra-mindfulness. The specific prediction of the present model is that supra-mindfulness will be more effective in reducing stress than meta-mindfulness alone.

The primary implication of the present approach for managerial practice is that individuals can learn to effectively manage their emotions, particularly emotional reactivity which is a key factor in interpersonal conflict at work (Hede, 2007). By learning and then practicing meta-mindfulness, managers can identify the early signs of reactivity and can implement techniques to prevent it from erupting into an emotional outburst (see Figure 4).

It is worth noting that the author has incorporated this approach into an MBA course (Hede, 2008) which has been completed by more than 500 practicing managers over the past three years. Anecdotal evidence by way of course feedback surveys indicates that those who adopt the recommended five-step mindfulness-based emotions management technique, find it helpful in practice. Also, this technique has been offered to professional managers via a commercially successful CD on leadership (Hede, 2005) and again the feedback has been positive.

Further, the above MBA course included downloadable audio files designed to guide enrolled students/managers through various mindfulness exercises to facilitate stress reduction at work (Hede, 2008). Informal evaluation was conducted using self-report

questionnaires on burnout early and late in the 12-week course. Again, the results were positive if not scientifically conclusive. Formal research is planned using executive-level managers participating in a mindfulness-based stress reduction program involving an initial full weekend training with periodic follow-up workshops and assessment.

Conclusion

The present paper has advanced a new model of the psyche that enables managers to use mindfulness in dealing with emotional reactivity and in coping with stress. The present approach develops the Eastern concept of mindfulness which has been incorporated into Western psychology particularly in stress management and in various forms of psychotherapy. The present model introduces a structural distinction between the meta-self and the supra-self as the core components of the psyche. Further, these structural components are postulated to give rise to two distinct states of mindfulness, namely, meta-mindfulness versus supra-mindfulness.

New models have been here proposed to explain the dynamics of mindfulness in emotions management and in stress reduction which are among the most crucial psychological determinants of modern management effectiveness. As has been shown, these models have significant implications for managerial practice and lend themselves to further empirical research.

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