Mindfulness maintenance groups: the University of Zaragoza model

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Mindfulness has become a third-generation very effective psychotherapy technique for the treatment of diverse psychiatric and medical illnesses, but also for the prevention of illness and the development of psychological well-being in healthy individuals.

Mindfulness should be understood as a way of life, as a practice that needs to be maintained for life. In fact, one of the greatest challenges for its implementation and expansion is the development of practice groups that enable those utilizing this technique to maintain discipline and motivation over time, so that they will be able to continue to practise regularly.

There is scarcely any literature describing the characteristics and format of these maintenance groups despite their importance. This article describes the practice groups that we have created and are offered at the University of Zaragoza and the Federal University of São Paulo. It describes the importance of these groups, their philosophy and characteristics, and the contents of the programme and structure of sessions. It also includes a timetable for a standard three-month period so that the basic model can be followed by interested individuals, with adjustments suited to a specific setting.

Keywords: Mindfulness, Maintenance, Practice group

Grupos de mantenimiento en mindfulness: el modelo de la Universidad de Zaragoza

Mindfulness se ha convertido en una psicoterapia de tercera generación muy efectiva para el tratamiento de diversas enfermedades psiquiátricas y médicas, pero también para la prevención de las enfermedades y para el aumento del bienestar psicológico en individuos sanos.
Mindfulness debe ser entendido como una forma de vida, como una práctica que necesita ser mantenida a lo largo de nuestra existencia. De hecho, uno de los mayores desafíos para su implementación y expansión es el desarrollo de prácticas grupales que capaciten para la utilización de estas técnicas, de forma que se mantenga la disciplina y motivación a lo largo del tiempo, de forma que el individuo pueda practicar de forma regular.

Pese a su importancia, apenas existe bibliografía describiendo las características y formato de estos grupos de mantenimiento. Este artículo describe las prácticas grupales que han sido creadas y que se ofrecen en la Universidad de Zaragoza y en la Universidad Federal de Sao Paulo. Describen la importancia de estos grupos, su filosofía y características, así como los contenidos, programas y la estructura de las sesiones. También incluye un calendario para un periodo estándar de tres meses, de modo que el modelo básico pueda ser seguido por las personas interesadas, adaptándolo a su entorno particular.

Palabras clave: Mindfulness, Mantenimiento, Práctica grupal

Importance of mindfulness maintenance groups

Mindfulness defines a state of mind that can be described as complete awareness, clear observation or full consciousness. However, in addition to identifying a mental state, mindfulness can be used to describe a specific type of third-generation psychotherapy in which a series of techniques such as mindful breathing, mindful walking, body scan, mindful movement, etc. can be used. It can also be used to denominate certain specific psychological techniques (which can be used within mindfulness therapy or within the framework of other therapies, such as cognitive behavioural therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy and dialectical behaviour therapy) and is characterized by developing metacognition. It can be achieved through the use of different objects of attention.

Whether a single mindfulness technique is used, or mindfulness therapy on the whole, the effectiveness of these interventions bears no relation to our beliefs (whether or not we trust in its effectiveness) or our preferences (whether we like it more or less), but to the time devoted to its practice. Specifically, the aspects that correlate more highly with level of mindfulness are the regularity of practice and total time devoted to its practice over a lifetime, but not the duration of each session or the specific type of practice.

The problem is that after having been trained in mindfulness (whether Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) or any other mindfulness-based therapy), more than 70% of individuals discontinue its practice, with the great majority reducing their levels of practice to a large degree. The consequence of this is that in many studies, the amount of practice only correlates with the post-treatment assessment, but not with follow-up at 6 or 12 months. This is why it is considered necessary to increase informal practice or to maintain regular formal practice by means of groups that create cohesion and are able to encourage individuals to continue to practice at home. These regular practice groups are known as secular sangha, with reference to the groups of formal practice found in the Buddhist tradition. The following describes the formal characteristics of these maintenance groups, their philosophy, structure and main contents.

Formal characteristics of the University of Zaragoza maintenance groups

Our education and research groups are particularly involved with the Spanish public health system, more specifically with primary care. Given this base, our concern has always been to implement mindfulness in primary care in a way that is stable and sustainable. Considering our specific model of primary care (similar to that of other Western countries such as the United Kingdom, Netherlands, Chile and Brazil), maintenance groups should have certain characteristics and a philosophical grounding. Both are described in the table 1.

Philosophy of the University of Zaragoza mindfulness maintenance group model

The main aspects that characterize the philosophy of these groups are:

1. INCLUSION OF COMPASSION, ACCEPTANCE AND COMMITMENT, AND POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY TECHNIQUES: In keeping with the core aspects of the Value and Compassion-Based Mindfulness model, not only are the habitual mindfulness practices included, but also a number of specific practices of compassion, acceptance and commitment, and positive psychology. These are simple practices that are easy to apply informally, and reinforce the effectiveness of mindfulness practices.

2. COMMITMENT TO PRACTISING, PARTICULARLY INFORMAL PRACTICE: Studies suggest that the efficacy of mindfulness correlates with practice, more particularly with informal practice. For this reason, emphasis is placed on tasks to be performed at home, both in formal and informal practice, and on the use of diaries. No emphasis is given to formal daily practice (45 minutes as required in MBSR) because the great majority of participants not only would unable to accomplish this, but would also be made to feel discouraged and/or guilty.
Table 1 Characteristics of the practice maintenance groups within the Value and Compassion-Based Mindfulness Intervention model

1. HETEROGENEOUS: The groups are designed for application in any healthcare setting (e.g. primary care, where patients can present with multiple psychiatric and medical comorbidities), but also in patient associations, workplaces and academic or sporting institutions (where people who are healthy and others with different conditions may be combined). Logically, it can also be applied to homogeneous groups. The only exclusions are psychotic disorders and highly debilitating medical conditions that may hinder the ability to follow this type of therapy.

2. CLOSED, RENEWABLE ON A THREE-MONTH BASIS: The group is closed to facilitate homogeneous learning of the techniques by all participants. However, individuals have the option of leaving the group after three months or staying on for another three-month period. It is structured by three-month periods in order to adapt to the academic year in Spanish universities, which run between September and June. This structuring into three-month modules avoids the risk of weekly repetition of the same practices and of causing boredom. However, in addition to maintaining interest, a repetition of practices every three months gives rise to spiral learning, allowing greater levels of depth to be achieved gradually with each repetition.

3. MEDIUM SIZE. The groups are larger (20–25 individuals) than standard psychotherapy groups (8–12 patients), given that they have a psychoeducational orientation and focus on the learning of practices, with very little room for self-disclosure of conflicts within the group.

4. NO PREVIOUS SELECTION INTERVIEW: Given the time restrictions and/or shortage of staff in a number of settings (primary care, academic institutions, patient associations), and the larger size of these groups, the process for prior selection in order to form groups would be unworkable. The only prerequisite is that individuals should have some sort of mindfulness instruction before joining the group.

5. TWO COMPLEMENTARY CO-THERAPISTS: Given the size of the group, the usefulness of co-therapy was considered. As is usually recommended in group psychotherapy, the professionals are of different gender to encourage different identification processes. Moreover, each of them has greater specialization in a specific field (mindfulness, yoga, compassion, acceptance and commitment, etc.).

Brief practice of 20 minutes is recommended, and informal practice is stressed.

3. EMPHASIS ON THE BODY: Body awareness is one of the basic therapeutic mechanisms in mindfulness\textsuperscript{10}. Integrated practice starting with the body is a main part of the design, which involves a “return to the body”, something that has been greatly overlooked in Western culture. All sessions incorporate exercises of mindful movement, which are specific yoga exercises that allow body awareness to be developed and enable emotions to be dealt with by the body instead of the mind, in order to prevent individuals from becoming overwhelmed by the contents of their mind.

4. INCORPORATING TRADITION: The origins of mindfulness are found mainly in Buddhist traditions, and also in Hindu tradition. Without entering into religious content, the frequent reference to the sense and meaning of the practice in Buddhist and Hindu tradition and psychology\textsuperscript{11–13} often helps to provide a better understanding of why mindfulness works and encourages adherence to its practice.

Structure of sessions

Maintenance sessions are highly structured to increase effectiveness and to prevent unnecessary use of time. The standard structure of the 90-minute sessions carried out with these groups is summarized in Table 2.

Programme content and timetable

The models being applied in mindfulness practice are based on the eight-session protocol by John Kabat Zin, which was designed specifically as an “initiation” to mindfulness. However, as there are no models described for advancement in the practice, initial training is the only type that a patient or non-professional practitioner can receive. The model we describe – conducted over one academic year (18–20 hours/three-month period and 48–50 hours/year), with two optional weekend retreats lasting 20 hours each – aims to be a broader approach that accompanies the advancement that comes with the continuous practice of mindfulness.

The course was developed on the foundations of mindfulness and compassion therapy, in addition to the development of values (based on acceptance and commitment techniques). The entire practice is infused with the pillars of Buddhist and Hindu tradition, specifically teachings of yoga in its different forms, and the Zen and Vajrayana Buddhist traditions. The practices offered take form gradually and enrich the intervention with mindfulness. They are useful for both the psychological well-being of healthy individuals and for application in the treatment of the most common illnesses present in the population, such as pain, depression, anxiety and cognitive impairment.

The design involves a 90-minute weekly session, 70% of which is devoted to formal practice, and the remainder devoted to listening to the group, sharing its experiences.
and introducing a brief and specific theory-based topic. The session always ends with a commitment to daily practice, both formal and informal.

In addition to the weekly group session, the design systematically includes two weekend retreats: one dealing with advancement in mindfulness in general, and the other with compassion. We understand the retreats to provide practitioners with exclusive space and time for interior work, allowing them the opportunity to distance themselves from their daily reality and to perform a more in-depth practice with fewer distractions. The retreat also offers the possibility of experiencing coexistence with others, even in situations that occur rarely in daily life, such as silence, in order to learn how to live with the world and others. It also allows us to become aware of how others show us a reflection of ourselves, of our autobiographical self, enabling us to approach our real or core self through the process of de-identification. The general content addressed in the maintenance sessions is described in Table 3.

The programme content is organized over a three-month timetable, divided into the four and a half sessions that take place on average each month. Table 4 summarizes this timetable.

The basic structure of the session is the same in each three-month period, with the same points being followed, but with modification of the actual practices. It can be observed that each section contains different practices, which can be varied in each three-month period. The only ones that are repeated are the core mindfulness practices: mindful breathing, mindful walking, mindfulness in body movements and 3-minute practices.

### Efficacy of mindfulness maintenance groups

There are no studies on the efficacy of these groups, given very few groups of this type have been described. Our group came into existence at the same time as the Master’s Degree in Mindfulness of the University of Zaragoza, in October 2013, which means that one full year has been completed to date. A controlled trial to study efficacy would not be feasible with a control group and placebo, given that a relaxation group of any other type with the same duration would have a significant rate of attrition, in addition to a high cost. Owing to the characteristics of the group, the only viable control group would be a waiting list, or a pre-post design, which is already in progress.

The general impression gained from these groups is that:

1. Motivation and adherence are very high, given that attrition is very low (less than 5%), and the average number of sessions missed by each participant is a maximum of 2.

2. Satisfaction is high, as shown by written satisfaction surveys and verbal comments given during the sessions.

3. Changes in the level of mindfulness, compassion and reduction of psychological distress are significant in pre and post-intervention assessments, with magnitudes of effect of 0.5–0.7 in the main variables.
Table 3 | General content for mindfulness maintenance sessions

1. MINDFUL POSTURE:
   - Meditation postures according to tradition and mindful posture*
   - The four traditional postures: sitting, walking, standing and lying
   - Astronaut posture*
   - Feeling contact with the floor, feeling the body in contact with clothing*

2. AWARENESS OF BREATHING:
   - Natural breathing (Anapanasati)*
   - Full yogic breathing
   - Feel breathing with the body

3. AWARENESS OF BODY:
   - Body scan*
   - Mindfulness in body movements
   - Hatha Yoga postures
   - Learning to relate to physical discomfort*

4. AWARENESS OF WALKING:
   - Mindful walking*
   - Mindful walking according to Zen tradition (kinhin)

5. AWARENESS OF THE SENSES:
   - Hearing (external noise, mantras, bells)
   - Taste (eating a grape, eating a chocolate)
   - Smell (scented oil)
   - Touch (self-caressing, self-hugging, feeling the touch of another person)
   - Sight (external: candle-gazing; internal: visualization)

6. INFORMAL PRACTICE IN DAILY LIFE:
   - Practice diaries*
   - Routine tasks*
   - Informal practices to perform in daily life*
   - 3-minute practices*

7. AWARENESS OF THOUGHTS:
   - "Hello, thank you and goodbye" practice*
   - Metaphors of the mind: the mountain, the riverbank, the pond, the room with mirrors, bursting balloons*

8. AWARENESS OF EMOTIONS:
   - Feel emotions in the body
   - Non-verbal communication of emotions with touch and eye gaze
   - Shared joy and sadness
   - Awareness and acceptance of opposites

9. AWARENESS OF THE MIND:
   - Observer or witness
   - The mind as an instrument (Antahkarana)
   - Metaphor of room with mirrors*

10. VALUES
    - Ethics in Buddhist and Hindu tradition
    - Epitaph exercise*
    - The old man exercise*
    - Funeral exercise*
    - Eulogy exercise*
    - Practices of radical acceptance*

Table 3 | Continuation

11. COMPASSION AND SELF-COMPASSION
    - Receiving compassion/affection
    - Contacting attachment figures and with style of attachment
    - Mettā towards oneself and others*
    - Tonglen towards oneself and others
    - Compassionate body scan*
    - Informal practice of mettā*
    - Working with envy*
    - Forgiveness*
    - Equanimity

12. SELF-AWARENESS
    - Autobiographical self and core self
    - Identifying the biographical self: Main characteristics
    - Biographical events: differentiating facts from interpretation

Work on on becoming aware of attitudes (balance, inner strength, openness, presence) is also carried out, mainly during the body movement practices, based on yoga techniques.

The practices marked * are described in the Mindfulness Handbook, which is the reference text for students.

Nevertheless, there are aspects that can be improved, such as:

- A common request is for an individual space in which to discuss doubts with the instructors without having to explain the experience to the group. This space could not be structured within the session because it would interrupt group dynamics, which means that it would have to be set up in another time frame.

- Another problem is that of adjusting the pace of the sessions to the different experience of the participants. However, this would mean that the process would be too fast for some and too slow for others. The only solution would be to refine this by means of an individual interview so that the experience of participants might be more homogeneous; however, this would not be in keeping with the philosophy of the group.

Conclusions

Mindfulness maintenance groups are a logical necessity and an essential tool for achieving adequate adherence to the practice of mindfulness over time. Very few descriptions have been given of models involving these groups. We propose a heterogeneous model, which can be renewed every three months. These are highly focused on practice, particularly on informal practice, and include other relevant aspects such as compassion and values in addition to mindfulness. The preliminary results are promising, although
studies designed to assess efficacy and cost-effectiveness are required to confirm the usefulness of these groups and their feasibility in healthcare settings and in the general population.

REFERENCES


Body awareness: mindfulness attitudes

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Table 4

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<th>Month one</th>
<th>Week one</th>
<th>Week two</th>
<th>Week three</th>
<th>Week four</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TEACHING: Basic posture in mindfulness and in tradition</td>
<td>TEACHING: Introduction to breathing</td>
<td>TEACHING: The importance of the body in mindfulness</td>
<td>TEACHING: Difference between relaxation of the body and awareness of the body</td>
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<td>PRACTICE 1: Feeling contact with the floor</td>
<td>PRACTICE 1: Full yogic breathing</td>
<td>PRACTICE 1: Body scan</td>
<td>PRACTICE 1: Mindfulness in motion</td>
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<td>PRACTICE 2: Feeling the body in contact with clothing</td>
<td>PRACTICE 2: Mindfulness in body movements</td>
<td>PRACTICE 2: Mindfulness in motion (Zen kinhin tradition)</td>
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<td>Month two</td>
<td>TEACHING: Anchoring awareness in the present: the body and the senses (I): hearing, smell</td>
<td>TEACHING: Dealing with thoughts</td>
<td>TEACHING: The nature of emotions</td>
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<td>PRACTICE 1: 3-minute practice</td>
<td>PRACTICE 1: Feeling emotions in the body</td>
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<td>PRACTICE 2: Awareness of the senses (II): sight, taste, touch</td>
<td>PRACTICE 2: Mindfulness in breathing</td>
<td>PRACTICE 2: Sharing joy and sadness</td>
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<td>Month three</td>
<td>TEACHING: The nature of the mind according to tradition The observer exercise</td>
<td>TEACHING: Introduction to compassion. Primary and secondary suffering</td>
<td>TEACHING: Autobiographical self and core self</td>
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<td>PRACTICE 1: Mountain metaphor</td>
<td>PRACTICE 1: The old man exercise</td>
<td>PRACTICE 1: Mettā towards others</td>
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