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Befriending Death: A Mindfulness-Based Approach to Cultivating Self-Awareness in Counselling Students

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The importance of self-awareness in counselling education is widely recognized; however, strengthening this vital aspect is often left to educators' discretion. The author addresses this deficiency by first exploring four theoretical constructs: mindfulness, emotional regulation, death anxiety, and relationship dynamics. Then, she outlines a practical learning activity on the topic of death. The main exercise involves a guided meditation in which students imagine both a worst-case and best-case scenario of their own death, while practicing mindfulness, followed by a debriefing period and a written self-reflection. This activity can be used by educators to promote greater self-awareness in master's level counselling students.

Counselling education requires examination of personal values and practices along with its implications for clinical practice (Osteen, 2011). Even though self-awareness is essential in the cognitive and emotional development of an effective counsellor (Skovholt & Jennings, 2004), students in Canada are not required to work with a counsellor to ensure they have well-developed self-awareness prior to seeing clients directly. The current counselling education system is designed to provide various theoretical frameworks and practical orientations for counsellors (Pompeo & Levitt, 2014); however, strengthening self-awareness through instruction and direct experience is often left to an educator's discretion (Urdang, 2010).

Students have various levels of self-awareness and unresolved personal issues. This combination often results in difficult group dynamics in the classroom. If left unaddressed, some students can hijack the learning environment leaving other students troubled (Edmunds, Edmunds, & Hogarth, 2012). Although these situations offer "teachable moments," future counsellors need assistance in better understanding their emotions and the impact on others in the class. Setting up a safe environment with clear guidelines is critical to help students reflect on and feel comfortable to disclose their inner experience. At the very least,

self-awareness should be considered essential components for counselling education (Urdang, 2010).

A lack self-awareness and self-reflection skills becomes even further complicated when teaching a course that is inherently evocative, such as trauma, grief, and loss. For these courses, educators must address both the students' fears about working with clients experiencing grief alongside their own fears and unresolved issues of loss and grief. I have read many personal reflection papers in which students discuss significant and at times traumatic losses in their journeys through grief. They also express challenging aspects of being with other people's grief, including intense anxiety, anger, and fear of death. These pedagogical experiences raise the following questions: How can educators create the necessary conditions to teach self-awareness and regulating emotions in the classroom? How can we foster students' self-awareness while negotiating classroom dynamics effectively? How can we include pedagogical approaches of self-awareness training in counselling master's programs? I address these questions by first exploring four theoretical constructs: mindfulness, emotional regulation, death anxiety, and relationship dynamics. This is followed by practical learning activities that can be used by educators to foster these abilities in counselling students.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

First, I provide an overview of mindfulness as a foundation for self-awareness in counselling education. Next, I explore

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how the complexities of emotional regulation and death anxiety play a role in students' development. Finally, I examine how paying attention to relationship dynamics act as a technique to further encourage students' self-awareness.

Self-awareness is the counselor's capacity for awareness of feelings, thoughts, and behaviors in the immediate experience of the counseling relationship (Richards, Campenni, & Muse-Burke, 2010). It is the ability to examine and reflect on one's verbal expression, demeanor and values. Similarly, *mindfulness* is a technique that allows individuals to become aware of their ways of being within and in relationship with others.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is both an ancient and contemporary Buddhist practice. The Tibetan Buddhist meditation practice *shamatha-vipashyana* (Sanskrit) referred to as mindfulness-awareness is designed to help individuals focus attention, increase awareness while they become familiar with their state of being (Sakyong & Mipham, 2003). It is an active process of paying attention to the present moment by attending to external stimuli—sights, sounds, smells—and internal body sensations, thoughts, and feelings—in a way that is nonjudgmental, accepting, and compassionate (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). Mindfulness practice allows an individual to notice internal reactions and look into habitual patterns of repetitive thoughts, emotions, bodily postures, and gestures. Through practicing mindfulness, individuals begin to recognize how these patterns arise as ways of avoiding unpleasant experiences such as fear and anxiety. Recognizing impulses to avoid particular emotions and then practicing not turning away from these emotions allows people to gradually be able to experience intense emotions directly, instead of storing them away as unexpressed feelings (Stella, 2010).

Pedagogically, students' unexpressed feelings in the classroom are often displayed in avoidant behaviors such as blank staring, withdrawing effort, and resisting novel approaches to learning. Unless students become aware of their relationship with emotions and consequent behaviors, they will continue to unconsciously act out their habitual patterns. Until students learn how to attune to their own avoidance patterns, these behaviors will manifest in their professional lives, hindering their ability to establish an effective therapeutic relationship. Thus mindfulness can assist students in developing self-awareness, a core skill for their journey of growth and change as professional helpers (Saunders et al., 2007).

A number of scholars have begun to integrate mindfulness into higher education curricula (Barbezat & Bush, 2014) to enhance self-awareness and foster students' emotional regulation. Increasingly, mindfulness is recognized in Western psychology as an effective way to reduce stress, increase self-awareness, enhance emotional

intelligence, and effectively handle painful thoughts and feelings (Britton et al., 2013; Goyal et al., 2014; Siegel, 2007).

Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation is defined as the process of controlling one's emotions through applied strategies (D'Avanzato, Joormann, Siemer, & Gotlib, 2013). Current research suggests that practices such as mindfulness techniques and meditation improve emotional awareness (Hill & Updegraff, 2012), which is essential for healthy emotional regulation (Siegel, 2007). Attunement and regulation of emotions occurs as individuals learn to work with intense emotions such as fear, shame, and grief with acceptance and kindness (Germer, 2005).

In therapeutic settings, emotions can be seen as a valuable indicator of what is most important to the client's process. Being present with clients enable openings for insight, growth, and changes to occur (Yalom, 2002). However, people often give little attention to the emotional content of their experiences and readily try to suppress or deny such feelings. To the extent that counsellors are personally comfortable working with intense emotions, they will then be able to support clients (Winokuer & Harris, 2012). Therefore, teaching students self-awareness practices, such as mindfulness, holds significant potential for enhancing students' ability to attune to internal processes, triggers, fears, to then guide clients through the same journey.

Pedagogically, it is often most helpful to present and discuss how anxiety functions at a time in a course (such as mid-term exams) when many students will be experiencing some form of anxiety. An anxious person experiences a state of heightened tension described as readiness for "fight or flight." If the threat passes or is overcome, the person returns to normal functioning (Levine, 2008). Anxiety has therefore served its purpose in alerting the person to a possible danger. Unfortunately, sometimes the autonomic nervous system (ANS) is on constant hyperarousal (Porges, 2011); the individual continues to behave as though in constant danger. Such prolonged stress can disrupt the person's life, distort relationships, and even produce life-threatening physical changes (Levine, 2008). It would be quite appropriate to choose any intense emotion such as anger, sadness, or shame, but for the purpose of this article, I will draw on experiences teaching grief and loss and focus on students' anxiety. Is the prospect of dying the alarm that never stops ringing? Is death anxiety the source of people's most profound uneasiness? Or is death anxiety a situational reaction that occurs when coping skills are overwhelmed?

Death Anxiety

In the past few decades, research on death anxiety has proliferated providing many models of understanding.

One model suggests that there is a basic underlying anxiety about dying and much of human behavior consists of attempts to deny the inevitability of death and thereby keep this anxiety under control (Becker, 1973). Another model, terror management theory (TMT), is based on studies that found people who felt better about themselves also reported less death-related anxiety (Jones & Fischer, 2006; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2000). Another approach, regret theory, focuses on the way in which people evaluate the quality or worth of their lives (Tomer & Eliason, 1996). This theory validates an increase in death anxiety in people presenting past-related regrets, possibly as they do not feel good about past actions as TMT suggested. Based on these theories, it can be expected that the prospect of death is likely to make people more anxious if they feel they have not—or cannot—accomplish something good in life.

Recent research related to anxiety and emotions demonstrates a connection between emotion awareness, emotional regulation, and anxiety (Eastabrook, Flynn, & Hollenstein, 2014). There is a fundamental connection between the ability to identify, label, and express emotions and anxiety. The lack of emotional awareness and the inability to regulate emotions combined with an increase in emotional suppression has been found to increase levels of anxiety (Kashdan & Farmer, 2014). The inability to label unwanted emotions may make certain experiences seem more threatening, often causing individuals to avoid emotions; thus increasing anxiety rather than diminishing it. This behavior may manifest in the classroom with students refusing to participate in experiential activities. Students tend to act out unwanted emotions through avoidant behavior or aggressive behavior.

Relationship Dynamics

The last construct of importance within the classroom and professional helping practice addresses emotions and the dynamics of relationships. Denial and/or suppression of emotions tend to result in unexpected negative emotional responses that increase the likelihood of experiencing past hurt. These responses are enacted in relationships between family members, teacher/student, and counsellor/client. A failure to understand the dynamics underlying all relationships often makes it difficult for people to resolve conflicts and take responsibility for unresolved hurt. Relationships often involve three basic dynamics: power, affect, and respect (Millar & Rogers, 1987). Relationships usually involve issues of power and control where typically people like to be able to control what others do, but they do not want to be told what to do. Relationships also involve issues of liking and disliking: how we feel about another and the way we communicate with another person. Respect is significant as it demonstrates degrees of respect or disrespect for another person, their ideas, values, and differences. These dynamics are always present and constantly influence one's behavior.

Acknowledging relationship dynamics and accepting personal vulnerabilities is critical for healthy classroom dynamics and interpersonal relationships. In a supportive classroom setting, students can work through their unresolved issues of their original family in a productive manner, essentially healing past wounds. Mindfulness can enhance the capacity for observing facial expressions, body posture, and nonverbal communication that provide clues about others' internal states. Once students recognize what is occurring, the dynamic could be labeled and alternative responses could be developed. It is possible to train to observe what is happening, as the right brain is dominant for the implicit, nonverbal, holistic processing of emotional information and social interactions (Schore, 2014). While noticing nuances in behavior, watching nonverbal cues, decoding underlying meanings beneath the surface, one can make accurate assessments and informed choices about which interventions to choose to promote conditions for growth and change. This process is at the heart of self-awareness.

In summary, I propose mindfulness as the foundation for developing self-awareness and acceptance in students. Through mindfulness, students learn to care enough and pay attention to their present responses while increasing their receptivity to what is occurring internally and in their environment. Applying this technique allows them to work with intense emotions, in particular to befriend death and the anxiety it may evoke. Moreover, by paying attention to nonverbal cues students discover early childhood relationship dynamics, still causing painful behaviors. Drawing from teaching experience, in the following pages I will provide practical examples of using mindfulness to support emotional regulation, uncover relationship dynamics, and thereby encourage self-awareness in students.

PRACTICAL ILLUSTRATION

On a neurological level, mindfulness increases activity in brain areas associated with attention and emotion regulation altering brain function and structure to support behavioral changes (Mind and Life Education Research Network (MLERN) et al., 2012). Mindfulness builds the neural capacity for focusing and taking in new information and for supportive caring relationships (Siegel, 2007). Building on a foundation of mindfulness to cultivate self-awareness in students, I have found a combination of guided meditation practices, in-class debrief and discussion, and written self-reflection provide a useful mix to support learning. I use this process as I lead students into a contemplation of their own death that is explained below. Death awareness can foster open-minded and growth-oriented behaviors to build supportive relationships and increase a sense of altruism and helpfulness in people (Vail et al., 2012). The following learning activity illustrates how contemplating

the nature of death allows students to become acquainted with death while working on their self-awareness skills.

Activity Instructions

An outline of the step-by-step activity process is provided to students and identifies mindfulness practice, guided meditation, dialogue, psycho-education, group discussion, and ending with self-reflection.

1. To begin the activity I instruct students to take care of themselves; if at any time the guided contemplation becomes too overwhelming they can get up and move around the room. I ask students to notice their emotions and reactions throughout the exercise while contemplating their own death.
2. Following these instructions, the students are lead through mindfulness practice using a script: "I invite you to find a comfortable posture with your eyes closed, spines straight and relax. Take a deep breath; be with your breath now... The most important element is relaxing; relax your mind/body within the awareness of your breath... Notice how you're experiencing the breath... Inhale/exhale... Be aware of your breath; relax with your breath for a few minutes.
3. After about 5 min when students are settled and relaxed, a guided meditation on cultivating awareness of death follows:

I will now guide you through a process of imagining your own death. If at any time you feel overwhelmed by this experience, please tune out my instructions and bring to mind something that helps you relax and be present. Feel free to also get up quietly and move during this guided meditation.

- a. Close your eyes... Think about your own death and call to mind what would be the worst-case scenario for you... Where are you? What is the situation like? The environment? Are you alone? Are there others with you? Pay attention to how you feel... Now open your eyes, let it all go, bring your awareness to this room; notice this space the people around you, and your own body.
- b. Now, close your eyes again... Take a moment to think about your own ideal death—a best-case scenario... Where are you? What are the circumstances surrounding your death? The environment? Are you alone? Are there others with you? Notice how you feel... Now open your eyes and let it all go; came back here, notice this room, the people around you, your own body... Let's stand up and move together finding some rhythm in the body and connect to this rhythm for a few minutes while paying

attention to your thoughts and emotions and carefully tracking sensations in your body.

4. Subsequently after a few minutes, students are instructed to break into pairs and dialogue about their experience. The process of talking and listening can bring assumptions about death and fear into personal, direct experience. I invite students to listen deeply, with an open heart and nonjudgmental mind. I also ask them to refrain from making any comments or suggestions to their partner. This is a practice of learning to listen mindfully. Students learn to become present with someone while noticing their own habitual reactions. After each student has spoken they can debrief together. Often, it is the listening without responding that is most insightful and challenging. Students' self-awareness is usually heightened as they discover their ideas about death, what causes them to worry, and how challenging it is to listen fully to another without interjecting and commenting.
5. After debriefing, the students return to the large group and discuss the activity while I provide an interpersonal neurobiological context in order to integrate theory with practice (psychoeducation). The discussion has a three-fold purpose that includes emphasizing students' ability to witness and process their intense emotions, understanding the relationship of emotional experience and the autonomic nervous system, as finally to point out any group dynamics present in the room (Stanley, 2016). What follows is a summary of theoretical content that accompanies this learning activity.
 - a. ANS PsychoEducation Component: Polyvagal theory claims that the nervous system uses a hierarchy of strategies to both regulate itself and to keep us safe in the face of danger (Porges, 2011). The highest-level strategy, social engagement, is a system connecting the social muscles of the face (eyes, mouth, and middle ear) with the heart, which is regulated through a myelinated branch of the vagus nerve. The next level down is the fight-flight strategy with sympathetic accelerator activation and readiness for action. This strategy is evoked when social engagement does not work. Ultimately, if the fight-flight response is not effective, a freeze occurs with parasympathetic firing creating a sense of collapse (Siegel, 2007). These strategies or responses work one behind the other. The social engagement response puts the brakes on the fight-flight-freeze strategies, thus keeping the heart and body active while we work through fear.

I ask students to track specific bodily sensations as they shift and change. Tracking allows them to become aware of internal ANS reactions

associated with fear and intense emotions that might have occurred during the guided meditation. For example do they feel their heart rate accelerate and have a feeling of wanting to run away? Do they experience tightness, heat, cold, spaciness, vibration, or tingling? Also, are they able to shift their experience from fight-flight-freeze strategies to social engagement during work in pairs or large group debrief? Because the social engagement strategy of the ANS is myelinated, changes come about faster while fear and intense emotions are processed. For example: a student may feel at ease and relaxed while practicing mindfulness. This student feels safe. As the guided meditation on death begins the student imagines being murdered in the streets. Her fight-flight instinct kicks in and the sympathetic nervous system stops everything that is happening (i.e., digestion) in her organs and gut. The gut passes the feeling of blockage as alarm to the brain. This translates in the brain to fear and her body reaction is set in motion. During the pair dialogue, the student explains what happened during the guided meditation and the pair begins to share their stories, including fears and intense emotions. They smile at each other. The social engagement strategy puts the breaks on the fight-flight response of the student and also calms her heart. This sends a sense of relief to her gut and it in turn sends a warm feeling to her brain. The heart is still pounding a bit, but the responses are guided by compassion. Almost any activity will involve the combined interaction of the various strategies as we are constantly adjusting ourselves to meet the world.

A supportive caring relationship allows the nervous system to remain in social engagement where a sense of safety is created and learning between teacher and student is supported. This two-way communication through facial expressions and other nonverbal cues regulates each other's internal biological state tends to lead to more meaningful learning. The teacher's ability to tune into students creates "a biological state in the brain that makes it better to incorporate new information" (Cozolino & Sprokay, 2006, p. 14). However, there can be a rupture in this relationship when emotional disconnections between the teacher and students create a negative shift in the quality of the interaction. This situation often results in overt power struggles and relationship dynamics. Schore (2014) suggested that these dynamics or "enactments are seen as powerful manifestations of the intersubjective process of expression of complex, though

largely unconscious, self states and relational patterns" (p. 393). Both student(s) and teacher fear memories are triggered by stress and the level of intensity is often either repressed/avoided or acted out with either—or both the teacher and students going back to a fight-flight-freeze response. For example, while teaching I may experience a sense of speedy agitation in my voice as I want to get through the material quickly. I unconsciously register some anxiety in the room. I notice a spacey, confused state is taking hold in the environment. The effect on most students is evident as they mirror my experience to varied degrees. Some students get pale and distant (a sign of freeze), some students leave the room (a sign of flight), others exhibit aggressive behavior (a sign of fight). This can be explained through the next theoretical component.

- b. The second PsychEducation Component addresses the right-brain-to-right-brain interactions. The right brain holds representations of emotional states associated with autobiographical events experienced by the individual. Implicit right-brain-to-right-brain communications are nonverbal (facial expressions, prosody-tone of voice, eye gaze) emotional interactions that occur in relationships that revive earlier memories (Schore, 2014). Contemplating and discussing death or/and the manner in which it is done can trigger fear from historical memories. Further, adult learners can be triggered by past failure and shame experienced in school settings. These triggers result in relationship dynamics where students (consciously or unconsciously) refuse to partake in classroom activities, become angry toward the teacher, or stare blankly into space pretending to be present—to name a few. The most effective way to address these reactions is to bring them into awareness as teachable moments. This process can result in interactive repair—a fundamental mechanism of therapeutic change. A teacher can learn to empathically receive and express bodily-based nonverbal communications by tracking her own while noticing very slight changes in students' expression and emotion (Stanley, *in press*). In attending to these changes, with an immediate awareness of the teacher's own subjective and intersubjective experience, emotions can be regulated and processed (Cozolino & Sprokay, 2006; Schore, 2014).

Returning to the previous classroom example, as I teach about traumatic deaths I recognize that my confusion is a sign of freeze or mild dissociation in the room. I stop my lecture and address this feeling by naming it, working with

students' reactions/emotions then shifting to group activities including some way to address traumatic experiences from the past. This process can change the brain by gradually teaching it not to be fearful of the current education environment as students and teacher remain in social engagement creating a feeling of safety in the environment. Students' self-awareness is sharpened through mindfulness practice as they begin to learn about the subtle working of the ANS, emotional reactions, emotional regulation, and their interactions with others.

6. The class ends with a 10-min written self-reflection using the following instructions. I invite you to recall your experience today and journal about it, writing in present tense as if it is happening right this moment. How is your experience affecting you personally, professionally, or/and academically? What is most uncomfortable? How do you work through those feelings? What is most surprising to you? At the end of today, what new information have you acquired about yourself? How does this insight affect your sense of self? How can you use this learning?

The final step is to facilitate a discussion of students' reactions to the activity and to summarize how this process may develop students' self-awareness.

Activity Discussion

While processing the activity students often share they were able to befriend their feelings about death. Students frequently compare the physiological responses to imagining the worst-case scenario death (fight-flight-freeze ANS) with those evoked by the best-case scenario (social engagement ANS). Many state it is difficult to stay with images of murder or accidents instead of images of dying old surrounded by family members. Several students note that they managed to move through anxiety-provoking reactions and intense emotions while discussing the guided meditation. Some students become aware of relationship dynamics similar to those of their original families, such as extreme anxiety resulting in strong critical stands. A few find this activity difficult, especially those with a history of traumatic death in their family. Overall, students report the activity as helpful to expose their feelings about death and fear about counselling grief clients. Through this process, students often learn to befriend death and become more empowered as future counsellors.

In summary, this entire activity encourages students' self-awareness. Formal mindfulness practice helps students focus attention in a nonjudgmental, accepting, and compassionate way throughout the course; thus creating conditions for uncovering relationship dynamics and working

with intense emotions. Mindfulness teaches that all emotions are transitory and some students learn to recognize and tolerate their intensity. The psychological process of being mindful allows students to notice response habits while in conversation with another and to listen fully with an open heart. Moreover, students learn to observe their ANS reactions by tracking bodily sensation in formal meditation practice and social settings. Students' self-awareness is finally enhanced with a journaling activity that allows them to further reflect and take away any insight. Working with emotions and understanding group dynamics can be empowering for students. As they learn to apply mindfulness techniques they become more comfortable with these deep intense emotional states and will be then able to facilitate clients work in this arena.

CONCLUSION

The cultivation of self-awareness and reflection are vital for developing effective therapeutic relationships and therefore should be experientially integrated into counselling education curricula. Through mindfulness and emotional regulation a safe environment can be fostered to promote social engagement that is essential for change and growth. The working of the ANS provides an understanding of the neural activity within the brain and body that link human beings in relationship. This knowledge can help us appreciate the importance of approaching teaching in ways that promote students' optimal conditions for learning and fostering interpersonal relationships.

A mindfulness-based approach to teaching also requires teachers to practice some form of mindfulness. A teacher can then use mindfulness to shape the activity and growth of the parts of the brain responsible for relationships, emotional life and physiological responses to stress both in themselves and in their students.

Future research on self-awareness is needed to determine the degree of efficacy of these techniques incorporating both left-brain conscious cognition and right-brain unconscious, relational, emotional functions. Many research avenues are possible. For example, examining the effectiveness of learning activities such as the one described to foster emotional regulation in the classroom. Also, developing teachers' capacities to track students' expression of emotions and relationship dynamics to notice any change throughout the duration of a course. In addition, monitoring changes in the ANS may help illuminate these changes and shed light on this process.

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