Mindfulness and Meaningfulness with a Twist from an Integrity Model Perspective

Nedra R. Lander and Danielle Nahon.

Abstract

Life’s journey begins with conception and ends with death. It is within this “in-between” that meaning and mindfulness flourish or wither. The respected psychologist O. H. Mowrer (1907-1982) was one of the first to focus on today’s issues of values, morality, mindfulness, and meaningfulness with a different twist from an Integrity perspective (e.g., Mowrer, 1953, 1961, 1964a, 1966; Mowrer & Vattano, 1976). Expanding on Mowrer’s Integrity (Therapy) Group approach, Lander and Nahon have evolved the Integrity model (e.g., Lander, 1980, 1986; Lander & Nahon, 1992, 2005, 2015). A growing empirical and clinical literature based on nearly five decades of Integrity-based therapeutic work indicates that individuals have been receptive to a positive, wellness- and values-based Integrity model of existential psychotherapy (e.g., Lander & Nahon, 2000b, 2008, 2010a, 2010b; Nahon & Lander, 2008, 2014, 2015). Addressing the conference theme of A Positive Global Vision of Healing & Flourishing Through Meaning, this article presents the Integrity model’s understanding of mindfulness and meaningfulness in daily living. Framed around the case study of Matt, an alcoholic grappling with significant cognitive impairment and depression, this article provides a theoretical and clinical exploration of the Integrity model perspective of mindfulness. It offers a differing understanding of mindfulness and meaningfulness through a focus on honouring one’s values, providing a philosophical and existential path for finding a sense of greater meaning and purpose in one’s life.

Keywords: Integrity model, integrity, mindfulness, meaning, psychotherapy, counseling, values

Introduction

Life’s journey begins with conception and ends with death. In our view, it is within this “in-between” that meaning and mindfulness flourish or wither. We see this “in-between” as the equivalent of Buber’s (1961) “between,” where the dialogic intimacy is nurtured as each stands naked and alone, revealed by their behaviours that are fuelled by their value systems. The respected psychologist O. H. Mowrer (1907-1982) was one of the first to focus on today’s issues of values, morality, mindfulness, and meaningfulness, with a different twist.

Addressing the conference theme of A Positive Global Vision of Healing & Flourishing Through Meaning, this article presents the Integrity model’s understanding of mindfulness and meaningfulness in daily living. The Integrity model focuses on the choice of how one perceives

1 Invited presentation, A Positive Global Vision of Healing & Flourishing Through Meaning, at the 7th Biennial International Meaning Conference, Toronto, ON, July 2012.

2 University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

Corresponding Author
Dr. Danielle Nahon, 250B Greenbank Road, Ottawa, ON K2H 8X4, Canada.

www.existentialpsychology.org
and preserves one’s narrative of living, without (a) a denial of death; (b) a blind pursuit of happiness; nor (c) a tendency to deny an affirmation of sorrow (Lander & Nahon, 2010b). It is both a stand-alone therapeutic model as well as one that can be integrated with others in exploring how one can live daily life mindfully and meaningfully.

**Philosophical Underpinnings: The Integrity Model**

While we celebrate the work of others in the role of values in psychotherapy, including (a) van Deurzen-Smith (e.g. 1988, 1996, 1998); (b) Wong’s Meaning-Centered Counselling and Therapy (MCCT) (e.g. Wong, 1997, 1998, 2011, 2012, 2013; Wong & Wong, 2013); and (c) Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) (Hayes, 2005), Mowrer was the first to really focus on the role of values starting in the 1940s, and on today’s issues of morality, mindfulness, and meaningfulness. Hunt (1984) described Mowrer as “one of the major figures in the self-help movement” (p. 913). Mowrer played a “pioneering role in the conceptualization and development of the key therapeutic concepts of therapist self-disclosure, therapist authenticity and the role of morality in psychotherapy—his work preceding that of both Allport and Erikson” (Lander & Nahon, 2005, p. 6).

W. R. Miller (2012) stated:

Toward the end of his life and distinguished career as a learning theorist, O. H. Mowrer was developing what he called “integrity therapy,” a relational approach for helping people to live in conscious accord with their values (Lander & Nahon, 2005; Mowrer, 1966). He was seeking an antidote to the hazards of modern life, a way to live with purpose. A volitional approach to relationship, one that is broadly based on the same principles as MI [Motivational Interviewing], holds real promise in this regard. It can be used to help people align their lives with values and purpose. (p. 5)

As we have previously discussed, Mowrer (1964b) acknowledged that his work had been inspired by Sullivan’s emphasis on interpersonal relationships, and as such was developed in parallel with other frameworks, including Frankl’s “will to meaning” (Frankl, 1955, 1963). These as well as Adler’s (1964) concept of social interest and Jung’s (1933) emphasis on the “importance of ‘human decency’ and the pathogenic dangers inherent in deception” (p. 32) were all based on a break away from the traditional Freudian view, embracing instead the importance of interpersonal relationships and the positive aspects of morality (Mowrer, 1976). (Lander & Nahon, 2005).

Expanding on Mowrer’s Integrity (Therapy) Group approach, formulated from the mid-1940s to the early 80s which offers the first wellness- and values-based model of psychotherapy, Lander and Nahon have evolved the Integrity model (e.g. Lander, 1980, 1986; Lander & Nahon, 1992, 2005, 2010a). This model is based on Mowrer’s view that the human being is a valuing animal. Its basic inviolate principle is that the degree of distress or angst in one’s life reflects the degree of personal violation of one’s very own values. Integrity is operationally defined as a three-legged stool of honesty, responsibility, and emotional closure/increased community. This concept of community really is about relational attachments. Integrity requires all three components to be present in order for Integrity to exist at a given time in a given context. Any interaction, decision by a person, institution or government, product or service can be analysed as to its level of Integrity by the presence or absence of the three components. Guilt comprises a critical component of the Integrity model. We see it as arising from the violation of one’s values and their discrepancies with one’s actual deeds done rather than feared. What psychotherapy
calls for is not new or different values, but rather for an increased fidelity to one’s present values (e.g. Lander & Nahon, 1995, 2000a, 2000b, 2010b; Mowrer, 1953, 1961, 1964a, 1966; Mowrer & Vattano, 1976).

Mowrer directed the Lilly Fellowship program on the psychological and religious study of guilt at the University of Illinois. He spoke of the connection between psychology and religion/spirituality: religion’s root word is the Latin word *religare*, which is also at the root of ligament and ligature; Mowrer suggested that religion (re-ligion) literally means a reunion, rebinding, reintegration, and re-connection (Mowrer, 1961). Mowrer introduced the concepts of both community (1960) and re-*ligare* (1958, 1959) in psychotherapy. For Mowrer, therapy called for a return to community through improved communication with “significant others” (Mowrer, 1958; Sullivan, 1953), and a commitment to a more responsible and mature lifestyle. Mowrer’s early work regarding the role of religion, spirituality, and moral character in psychology and psychotherapy have seldom been acknowledged (Lander & Nahon, 2005).

Mowrer was very fond of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) because he felt that there was a great affinity between AA and his Integrity (Therapy) groups (Mowrer, 1960, 1966). The principles of Integrity Therapy, AA, and many of the related twelve-step programs share a strong conceptual link and a similar vocabulary. For example, the well-worn phrase among twelve-step recovery programs—“you cannot talk the talk without walking the walk”—was one of Mowrer’s pet phrases (personal communication, 1969). (Lander & Nahon, 2005).


**Mindfulness and Mindfulness with a Twist**

There has been an increased interest in the topic of mindfulness and mindfulness meditation in recent years in both the popular and therapeutic literature (Manikam, 2014). Davidson and Kaszniak’s literature review (2015) indicates that over 20 million Americans utilize a form of meditation once a week. Harrington and Dunne (2015) indicate that yearly publications on mindfulness-based psychotherapies have increased from none in 1980 to over 770 in 2014, and that mindfulness practices are today being used in clinical settings for pain relief, eating disorders and weight loss, stress-reduction, performance anxiety, relationship problems, and to relieve symptoms of depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, obsessive–compulsive disorder, and suicidality. (p. 621)

**A Traditional Understanding of Mindfulness**

Baer (2003) defines mindfulness as a way of paying attention that originated in Eastern meditation practices. It has been
The term mindfulness originates from "the Pali word sali, which means having awareness, attention, and remembering (Bodhi, 2000). ... Mindfulness is defined as a moment-to-moment awareness of one’s experience without judgment” (Davis & Hayes, 2011, p. 198). Call, Miron and Orcutt (2014) define mindfulness as “a skill set used to modify one’s experience of stress and anxiety through the development of self-regulation of attention, present-moment awareness, and acceptance of internal experiences” (p. 659), including a mindfulness-based intervention developed for the management of anxiety and stress termed Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 2013). Kabat-Zinn’s MBSR program is based on his meditation training with Zen Buddhist and Vipassana teachers in the 1960s (Brito, 2014). Meditation practices are linked with most world religions, such as the Kabala, the Tafakkur, Christianity, and Hindu as well as Buddhist meditation (Manikam, 2014). Summarizing Swami Vivekananda’s and Akya’s writings, Suneetha (2014) suggests that “meditation makes the mind turn inwards and look at itself. It is considered as an inward path to fathom all levels of consciousness” (p. 172). Summarizing the literature, the key components of mindfulness that have been defined by Baer, Smith, and Allen (2004) are those of “observing, describing, acting with awareness, and accepting without judgment” (de Zoya, Florian, Walsh, & Hutton, 2014, p. 268).

In their review of the historical roots of mindfulness-based therapies, Harrington and Dunne (2015) propose:

Kabat-Zinn was a Dharma teacher first and a therapist second. He was not an outsider to contemplative practice looking to import traditions into the clinic. Rather, he was an insider, who (by his own admission) had brought mindfulness training into clinical contexts with the goal more generally of alleviating human suffering and making the world a better place. In order to achieve penetration into medical culture while still remaining true to his values, he had to walk a careful line. MBSR emerged as a practice that seemed at once medical and spiritual. It was a method of stress-reduction, or a path to brain rewiring, and a means to profound ethical transformation all at the same time. (p. 629)

Furthering the work of Kabat-Zinn and his associates, Segal, Teasdale, Williams, and Gemar (2002) integrated mindfulness approaches with cognitive-behavioural therapy into mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) (Dimidjian & Segal, 2015). Both MBSR and MBCT are “taught to support participants in developing mindfulness as skills or means to personal goals (e.g., prevention of depression or reduction of stress) and, to borrow from Lutz, Jha, Dunne, and Saron (2015), ‘a way of life’” (Dimidjian & Segal, 2015, p. 595). Shonin, Van Gordon, and Griffiths (2015) differentiate between what they term “first-generation mindfulness-based interventions (FG-MBIs) and second-generation mindfulness-based interventions (SG-MBIs)” (p. 1491) as follows:

Compared to FG-MBIs (such as mindfulness-based stress reduction and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy), SG-MBIs (such as meditation awareness training [MAT]) tend to explicitly teach a greater range of meditative and/or spiritual practices (i.e., in addition to mindfulness) and tend to be more overtly spiritual in nature. (p. 1491)

These ranges of practices include “ethical awareness, impermanence, emptiness/non-self, loving-kindness and compassion meditation” (Van Gordon, Shonin & Griffiths, 2015, p. 592). A number of authors have called for a rapprochement between (a) Buddhist meditation and
philosophy and/or mindfulness practices and (b) therapeutic theory and practice. For example, Szczygiel (2015) proposes a therapeutic perspective for addressing challenging emotions based on Buddhist principles. Jooste, Kruger, Steyn, and Edwards (2015) address the conceptual and therapeutic links between mindfulness and Carl Rogers’s humanistic and person-centred theories. Baer (2015) reviews a number of studies that focus on helping individuals to clarify their values, such as in educational settings, and through Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) (Hayes, 2002; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012). She suggests that “mindfulness and acceptance processes in ACT are similar to those described in other MBIs and include flexible attention to the present moment, acceptance of present-moment experiences, defusion from thoughts…and a transcendent sense of self” (p. 959). Fung (2015) explores the connection between ACT and Buddhist approaches; he suggests that the “further development of integrative therapies that can incorporate psychological and spiritual as well as diverse cultural perspectives may help the continued advancement and evolution of more effective psychotherapies that can benefit diverse populations” (p. 561).

**Mindfulness with a Twist from an Integrity Model Perspective**

Based on Mowrer, Lander, and Nahon’s work, the Integrity model offers an existential, Integrity-based understanding of the concept of mindfulness with a twist. The Integrity model emphasizes the importance of holding all individuals responsible for their emotions and for how they choose to express them, emphasizing the roles of moral soundness and of the meaningfulness of life (Lander & Nahon, 2005). It provides a differing perspective of mindfulness and meaningfulness through a practical approach towards honouring one’s values, thereby providing a philosophical and existential path towards finding a sense of greater meaning and purpose in one’s life.

Mowrer’s insightful view of the human being as a valuing animal provides the organizational underpinning for being-in-the-world. The Integrity model proposes that no matter what behaviours one engages in, one must be mindful of the values that these behaviours reflect. It is one’s fidelity to a value system resulting in the behavioural expressiveness of these values in daily life that brings a sense of meaningfulness in one’s daily activities. The Integrity model invites each of us to focus on what we are doing, and to reflect on the whys and why nots regarding any course of action that we undertake. The fundamental question that one must ask oneself is: “Am I walking the talk of my values?” Becoming ever-mindful of our values allows each of us to explain why we took part in a given action, and why we did, said, or did not say something. One can never, like a teenager does, flee from the challenge of answering these questions; the response of “I don’t know” is not an option. Rather, mindfulness asks us to reply: “do you have ten minutes for a quick cup of coffee? If so, I would be pleased to answer your question.” Ironically, teenagers love the Integrity model for the very reason that it allows them to (a) move from the uncertainty, lack of awareness or angst of not knowing why they do what they do; and (b) clarify for them what their values are that they can either accept, reject, or modify.

In Mowrer’s and our view, in order to have a meaningful life, one must be absolutely scrupulous about being mindful that one is walking the talk. In other words, one cannot have a meaningful life unless one mindfully ensures that one is living according to one’s value system. Especially in the initial phases of the process of therapeutic change, this requires that one be focused, or mindful, about the behaviours that one is engaging in, and on how closely they relate to one’s professed values. This is the essence of mindfulness with a twist: that one be committed to being the person one wants to be independent of the environmental cues that surround one. It is this mindfulness that allows one to resist the temptation to fall back into old behaviours that
reflect old value systems.

By living in this manner, one discovers the efficacy and the resiliency of self. This comprises the underpinnings for the sustainability of the Integrity model. There is never the risk of not knowing what our values are; by having come through life’s ordeals, one is able to work on rebuilding one’s life and on gaining a new mastery for being-in-the-world. While simple, this approach is accessible in its simplicity, and the results are dramatic. Adults, teens, and children in therapy, across cultures, love this no-frills understanding of themselves and their dilemmas; the concept of Integrity and its operational definition are appealing as they cut through all sorts of intellectual defenses, allowing one’s choice of actions to become meaningfully value-based. The Integrity model works with anyone with an IQ above 80 and is quite helpful with those of an IQ over 160 as it invites them to bypass their intellectualizing tendencies; they even enjoy being caught out, as they find that it makes their anxiety, depression, and other symptoms understandable as values- and behaviour-violations as to who they are and whom they want to be.

An Integrity model understanding of stress and “stress reduction.” From the Integrity model perspective, mindfulness is achieved from the ongoing awareness of those values that are influencing one’s moment-by-moment behavioural choices, rather than as a function of what has traditionally been defined by Davis and Hayes (2011) as mindfulness’s “moment-to-moment awareness of one’s experience without judgment” (p. 198) as coping styles in dealing with stress. This reflects a profound theoretical difference from the traditional understanding of mindfulness in conceptualizing and addressing the phenomenon of stress. The Integrity model aims to keep stress and angst at bay by knowing what one is saying and doing, and why one is saying or doing so. It is this ongoing awareness of and willingness to have a moment-by-moment awareness of our fidelity to our values that makes life more meaningful and allows one to discover and enjoy a new sense of well-earned self-esteem for an existence well-lived. Consequently, living with Integrity decreases stress and keeps us out of trouble, or allows us to deal with trouble if trouble finds us.

Kabat-Zinn (2014a) states, “our discontent truly is a disease, even when it does not appear as such. Sometimes we colloquially refer to those kinds of feelings and conditions, to that “dis-ease” we feel so much of the time, as “stress” (p. 341). Many years earlier, based on Mowrer’s concept of “dis-ease” (O. H. Mowrer, personal communication, 1969), as we have previously discussed (Lander & Nahon, 2005), Mowrer’s Integrity groups provided one of the first holistic and wellness-oriented approaches in dealing with those crises in mental health which give rise to distressing symptomatology and propel individuals to seek help to alleviate their distress and dis-ease in daily life. The Integrity model proposes that one’s own degree of unhappiness, angst, mental illness, and dis-ease reflects the degree of violation of one’s personal value systems. It is the Integrity to become true to one’s very own values and one’s fidelity to these values that gives one the capacity to transcend difficulties with living (Lander, 1986; Lander & Nahon, 1992, 2000b; Mowrer, 1953, 1961, 1964b, 1976).

Rationalizing our choices reflects denial and external blame, rather than facing one’s Integrity challenges or crises head-on. The Integrity model does not ask individuals in therapy to seek self-soothing nor to engage in stress reduction. Rather, it focuses on Mowrer’s concept of “dis-ease” that arises from the distress of a value violation. Stress is one of those voices that lets us know that a value is at risk of being violated either by our own emotions and behaviours or by those of others. This stress is not to be silenced but rather to be listened to as to the intervention(s) needed for re-grounding and re-centering. The Integrity model addresses the issue of “dis-ease”
through its understanding of stress, angst, and emotional reactions as comprising the internal voices of a boundary violation by self and/or others. In Mowrer’s and in our view, our values comprise both our boundaries and our very identity in terms of who we actually are versus who we want to be. Living life really is about honouring a contract with the self to live by a given set of values. In doing so, one must be mindful—in other words, to have knowledge of who one is and what one is willing to do or not do depending on the context. In order to be mindful, one must be cognizant of one’s value systems, and especially of those values that one must not cross. Furthermore, Integrity asks that we choose the price tags that we are willing to pay for our values. One must also be mindful about what it is that is personally meaningful; consequently, it is difficult to achieve a sense of meaningfulness without a sense of mindfulness. It is these concepts of Integrity that keep individuals mindful as to what they are doing or not doing, for example, by examining whether one is honouring the contracts, overt or covert, that one has made with self and others.

Shonin and Van Gordon (2014a) suggest that

According to Buddhist philosophy, any kind of psychological pain, distress, or confusion arises due to us developing very entrenched and mistaken views about exactly who and what we think we are. In other words, because we continuously reinforce our sense of self and become highly involved with our self-preservation, we construct and then harbour various ideas about what we think will make us happy. Generally speaking, unless we have chosen to fully immerse ourselves in (authentic) spiritual practice, these ideas and plans are often governed by mundane and worldly aspirations and only lead to further suffering. (p. 771)

The Integrity model understanding of mindfulness offers individuals, regardless of age, sociodemographics, or problem type or severity with an accessible path for re-evaluating their “sense of self” through a process of values analysis. It invites individuals to engage in a reflective process of examining the self with the radical honesty that arises from the three principles or legs of integrity—honesty, responsibility, and emotional closure. Integrity invites one to reframe the experience of stress or distress as a gift, and to dare and drag it to the half-full side of the glass. This path invites individuals to discover interventions in addressing their stress that honour the three legs of Integrity, and validate the internal awareness that one’s values have been violated. We are proposing that if one’s value system is well-honed, this awareness moves one into a more meditative state of living life. From the Integrity model perspective, mindfulness possesses a meditative quality and comprises a form of existential mindfulness through the vehicle of Integrity. In our view, this process of listening and reflecting, no matter how brief, comprises a form of existential meditation. This furthers the traditional understanding of mindfulness’s moment-to-moment awareness towards an existential arena via the focus on a values awareness. As one articulates the list of one’s highly ranked values, one is being both mindful and meditative. At some point, this process becomes less conscious as it becomes metabolized into a state and a way of beingness that allows for a sense of serenity in daily existence—until something shatters that state through the emergence of a value clash, and of the ensuing surge of rage that occurs and disrupts one’s sense of harmony. As individuals respond mindfully to this crisis and value clash by taking stock of whether or not a given value is congruent with their current value systems, they are able to discover a new and resilient rallying point. This allows individuals to grow as they work their way through the process of addressing the crisis by resolving this value clash, and are able to return to a state of equilibrium.
The Integrity model in addressing some of the philosophical and spiritual components of mindfulness. Brito (2014) suggests that the broad definition of mindfulness has been understood “in a reductionistic fashion as an attentional technique instead of a mode of being” rather than focusing on its “inherent transformational aspects” (p. 351), thereby failing to focus on the philosophical aspects of an Eastern approach, in honouring “ethics, mental training and the development of wisdom [which] are the three pillars of the Buddhist path (Kapleau, 1989)” (p. 358). Cohen (2014) suggests that the spiritual components of mindfulness are being neglected, and that “it is being taught and talked about as a technique” (p. 324). Brito (2014) suggests that “mindfulness could become a more powerful and subtle practice for therapists and clients alike in the West when the practice is guided by a search for personal transformation and the cultivation of wisdom and compassion” (p. 357). Based on a dimension of mindfulness which stems from Pali and Chinese Buddhist writings, Brito proposes that:

Mindfulness is one aspect of the noble eightfold path taught by the Buddha as a model of spiritual development. In this context, right mindfulness (samma sati) is cultivated concurrently with the other aspects of the path: right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right concentration, right intention, and right understanding (Nhat Hanh, 1998). It is important to note that “right” does not denote a moralistic judgment, but an ethical discernment between what is skillful from what is unskillful in terms of what leads to suffering or genuine happiness. (p. 357)

We propose that the Integrity model understanding of mindfulness provides both an existential perspective towards addressing the notions of “right mindfulness” and “introspective awareness” via its focus on an ongoing awareness of one’s values and value rankings that provides an existential paradigm for the articulation of what is behaviourally right for an individual in going through daily life. One must have a basis for one’s actions and one’s behaviours. The Integrity model is about living in the world, and as such behaving according to some rhyme or reason, which is a function of one’s value system and one’s value hierarchies that seems to get lost by being “non-judgmental.” From the Integrity model perspective, physiology—in terms of symptoms such as anxiety and depression—provides both a wake-up call and a biofeedback loop (Lander & Nahon, 2005) as to the meaningfulness of one’s life. The Eastern models eventually impact behaviours and reflect actions based on awareness of physiological states at some point in living. At some point, awareness leads to action, which means that a decision is made with reference to that awareness; this comprises a judgment call. The Integrity model twist is that it uses both awareness and judgment regarding the choices of action to undertake.

Shonin and Van Gordon (2014b) remind us of the words of the Buddha (2,500 BCE):

Do not pursue the past. Do not lose yourself in the future. The past is history. The future yet to come. Looking deeply at life as it is in the very here and now, the practitioner dwells unshaken and free in heart. We must be diligent today, as death may strike tomorrow, for there is no bargaining with the lord of death. (p. 464)

Shonin and Van Gordon suggest that the Buddhist core teachings, or suttas, on mindfulness have overlooked the focus on “cultivating mindfulness of death and impermanence” (p. 464), and that without the constant awareness of one’s death, one may die with a sense of regret and fearfulness. The authors propose that in order to achieve a mindfulness of death, one might:

Develop, with every single breath and heartbeat, a deep awareness of the uncertainty of the time of death as well as its inevitability. … Alternatively, you may wish to receive guidance from an accomplished mindfulness/meditation teacher about practising the
aforementioned nine charnel ground contemplations. This meditation involves sitting in
equanimity and mindfully visualizing a (or your) corpse as it progresses through the
process of decay and dissolution following death. … Mindfulness of death helps us to
prioritise what is important in life. (Shonin & Van Gordon, 2014b, p. 466)
We propose that the Integrity view of mindfulness provides a theoretical and practical
approach towards addressing these questions of (a) addressing the challenge of death acceptance;
and (b) “prioritizing,” or in the terms of the Integrity model, ranking and harmonizing our values
through a path that circumvents the need for a direct preoccupation with death. As we have
previously discussed (Lander & Nahon, 2010b), the individuals we have worked with resist and
do not fit the mold often encouraged by previous health care professionals, including therapists,
with regards to death and dying. For example, Kübler-Ross’s (1969) patterns of detachment as a
prelude to death reflect a strong, value-laden underpinning to a theory which has profoundly
influenced how we both conceptualize and intervene with the final stages of life.
The individuals that we have worked with have shown us that the way they can resolve
the issue of death anxiety and its avoidance is through finding a personal and unique
meaningfulness in their day to day living. This often means becoming a marginal person in this
process, as they individuate from the self-definitions proscribed by family, friends, society,
culture, or religion. Most of the time, this does not necessitate a complete rejection of the values,
expectations, or definitions of whom and how one wishes to be, but rather a sorting of the wheat
from the chaff by rejecting, keeping, or tweaking one’s values and sometimes excluding others’
values. This process of redefining one’s values and value hierarchies, and the meaningfulness of
the price tags that these values require affirms a sense of life being well lived. Through this
process, individuals earn a new sense of centredness and a true valuing of the self. Many
spontaneously state that they have come to feel that, if they were to die tomorrow, there is a
sense that they would have already redeemed their life. Although they would still have a longing
for living and enjoying a longer life, they would feel that they have now validated their existence.
(Lander & Nahon, 2010b)

Case Vignette: Matt

Matt was transferred to the inpatient unit from a medical ward, where he had been admitted for
complications surrounding a severe cirrhosis of the liver. Although he had been abstinent from
alcohol for many years, multiple organ damage was severe in addition to his liver damage. He
was referred to me [first author] for a neurological assessment and follow-up therapy to help him
achieve “a healthy lifestyle in addition to abstinence.” Evaluation results confirmed that Matt
was suffering from depression and cognitive impairment. As we went through his test responses,
Matt and I would talk, and I would help him understand some of his presenting concerns through
the lens of the Integrity model, which is very much in sync with the twelve-step program of AA.
These dialogues led Matt to realize, quite rightly, that he was in trouble and needed help.
Matt felt that, in the system, I was the only one that he could talk with; thus began our working
relationship. Because of the neurological damage, Matt felt that he needed to see me three times
a week in order to manage his anxiety, his impulsivity, and the fact that his understanding and
judgement in everyday life were often lacking. These difficulties were demonstrated even during
the sessions; for example, Matt bought me a charm, stating that my husband was to buy the
bracelet for it as they were “sharing” me. Matt said that this was the only way that he could show
his appreciation for our work, as his care was covered by the provincial health care plan.
In order to maintain abstinence, achieve a healthier lifestyle, and deal with his depression and cognitive impairment, Matt needed someone to talk with about life’s meaningfulness and its price tags and to curb his impulsivity which, in the past, had put the family close to bankruptcy. We can all acknowledge that we have cravings at times for destructive actions; as Mowrer said, “we are all somewhere on the road to recovery” (O. H. Mowrer, personal communication, 1970). Like any addict, Matt discovered that recovery is one day at a time or even one moment at a time, daring to fight the body’s cravings for the addictive substance or the seemingly addictive allure of the impulsive pressure to act out. Because of the cognitive damage, Matt had initial difficulty following the “Integrity drill” of living mindfully in accordance with the three legs of Integrity of honesty, responsibility, and emotional closure on his own. If the issue was specific to his family or to individual concerns, he could occasionally achieve this, but could not always trust his “take” on this. However, once he understood the complementarity between the components of Integrity and the twelve steps of AA (Lander & Nahon, 2005), Matt was able to apply the Integrity drill more easily. Over the few months we had together, Matt became increasingly mindful of the tenets of Integrity and better at living in this manner. Another part of Matt’s mindfulness was his ongoing choice to seek counsel in the therapeutic relationship prior to taking action—in a manner that is parallel to that of a seeking input from a sponsor, which is critically important as any member of AA would attest to. It is important to note that this does not comprise a dependency, as one seeks counsel and then assumes the responsibility for one’s decisions. Matt managed life’s stresses by putting off decisions until he “talked with me,” and thus dramatically reduced previous impulsive behaviours that drove family and friends to points of near-distraction and financial ruin.

Matt was charming but knew that, as his health was failing, he did not have a great deal of time left to set things straight. His major values were to continue to stay sober and, for the very first time, he managed to build good relationships with his wife and children. Matt remained deeply mindful of these values in his daily life. Consequently, these values were able to dominate his world and his moment-by-moment decision-making for the most part, allowing Matt to sustain a healthier and happier home life with his family. He was able to accomplish this due to his willingness to fight a constant battle to focus, to remember, and to consider the price tags of any and all of his thoughts and impulses to act destructively while being mindful of the impact of his behaviours on his family. At the time, I was not aware as to how well Matt was really doing on the family front while he was working on mindfully not engaging in impulsive actions. The mindfulness regarding his relationship with himself was more problematic and hence Matt’s mindfulness to seek counsel with me before engaging in any behaviours outside of the family became a part of his sense of Integrity and responsibility in his healing journey. For Matt, this represented a level of mindfulness that I had never seen in anyone else prior to this; he was ever-mindful to the point of over-vigilance regarding any internal pressure to act without seeking counsel.

The profound success of Matt’s mindfulness was revealed to me when I was away, having just started my maternity leave, and received news that Matt had succumbed to the cirrhosis. I was very distraught with the news when the doorbell rang. At the door, I faced a humongous bouquet of flowers from Matt’s wife and children, thanking me for having given them a husband and a father for the last eleven months. They felt that during this time, Matt had become committed, involved, honest, responsible and had established a family community for the very first time. This meant so much to them. My mindfulness as an existential therapist was to follow the other where they wanted to go and invest their time and their love. It was to defend
their right to do things their own way, often adding counsel for their consideration, ever mindful of reminding them of their right to choose, while being willing to pay the prices for this right and for the decisions that they made.

I was privileged to work in an environment where I was seen and respected as a non-user of The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and a bit of a renegade that seemed to inexplicably work well with the so-called untreatable and/or unlovable patient. The Integrity model is about being mindful of the individual in therapy as being a unique and valuable entity, and to about inviting them to be mindful of what they value most and the valuing of its price tags. Being mindful means being aware of one’s limitations and daring to work with them. Matt’s journey poignantly highlights the fact that even a burnt-out alcoholic can be mindful. In fact, this is often the role of a sponsor in twelve-step programs: to ensure that an individual in recovery does become mindful of risk situations and dynamics, and chooses to take responsible action in contacting their sponsor, for, as Mowrer so succinctly put it, “Only you can do it; but you don’t have to do it alone!” (Lander & Nahon, 2005).

**Discussion**

We feel the reason Matt’s journey exemplifies mindfulness is that it really reflects why the Integrity model, AA, and other twelve-step models are so successful. Matt is not the usual case presentation and was chosen for this reason. Once one has decided on a value system that one wishes to follow, one must always be mindful of walking that talk through one’s moment-by-moment consciousness of the behavioural choices that one is making as a function of these values. Integrity is about the integrality of one’s being. On the path to recovery, one really does know on an organismic and holistic level that one is on the verge of “slipping” and, thus, that one needs to call a sponsor or mentor in order to help get one back on track, validating Mowrer’s view that one need not walk this journey alone.

Kabat-Zinn (2014b) offers the metaphor of mindfulness as being like a pair of shoes that shield us from the impact of “our own habits of emotional reaction, forgetfulness, and unconscious harming that stem from not recognizing, remembering, and inhabiting the deeper nature of our own being in the moment in which a sense impression, any sense impression, arises” (p. 770). We propose that the Integrity view of mindfulness with a twist provides an existential paradigm towards achieving a moment-by-moment awareness of what Kabat-Zinn refers to as our “habits of emotional reaction”, their potential for “unconscious harming”, and the ability to choose whether or not to act on these. The ongoing focus on being mindful of one’s values—both those that one chooses and those that one rejects—and of one’s value rankings, acts to fuel one’s perceptions and understanding of one’s self and behaviours. One’s mindfulness and fidelity to one’s values provides one with a meaningful existence that is one’s and one’s alone. This process both keeps one out of trouble, and provides ways for getting one out of trouble, should trouble find one.

The Integrity model view of mindfulness is both simple and difficult at the same time; it is a function of the individual’s willingness to focus on the mindfulness and meaningfulness of his/her values, and how helpful these are in traversing the vicissitudes of daily life. The notion of owning one’s 50% of the responsibility in dealing with conflict situations challenges the social and even professional concept of “win-win.” Integrity is not about winning; it is about being both true to the self and being true to the other. It is about the realization that all that one is
accountable for is for one’s 50%, and that one is never responsible for the outcome of a given course of action.

The longer we live, the simpler we find life to be, and the more we are able to appreciate the Integrity model’s view of mindfulness. We would like to stress that this paradigm of mindfulness is not a “dumbing down” but rather a validation of the capacity of individuals across age, culture, sociodemographic variables, cognitive abilities, and problem area to “get” the efficacy of the Integrity model in dealing with the crises in life and living, even in those situations of distress where terminating one’s life is contemplated as a solution. We propose that it is this very simplicity of the Integrity model that is its greatest strength, especially in times of stress, pain, and anguish. The questions of who one is and why one is here are not psychological questions, but rather philosophical and spiritual ones. In its focus on the importance of one’s ongoing mindfulness as to one’s values, the Integrity model provides an accessible paradigm for addressing these questions about one’s identity and about the reasons for why one is this way. It is our position that this focus on our present values does not necessitate a detail-by-detail analysis of the traumas of the past. The past is gone; if one is unable to “drag” something into the half-full side of the glass, for example by making a past tragedy meaningful in the present, one must leave it behind. It must now become a locked Pandora’s box in the attic, and one must resist all attempts—however tempting—to open it up again. Rather, individuals in therapy are asked to dare to develop a more meaningful life from the present onwards.

One of the reasons that we have enjoyed this as well as previous International Meaning conferences is that we find that most issues that presenters offer for discussion can be reframed through the lens of Integrity. It is for this reason that we are able to validate and celebrate the approaches of others, as Integrity provides a profoundly universal and unifying construct. From the Integrity model perspective, our values are ultimately about the essence of our identity and of our beingness. They signify our mindfulness and meaningfulness about how we care for our bodies, for our psyches, and for our souls. Not only do our values reflect the rules and roles to be acted out, but they also provide a test of their tenacity and resilience such that they can virtually emerge as part of our DNA because they have been so deeply metabolized.

References


Mowrer, O. H., & Vattano, A. J. (1976). Integrity groups: A context for growth in honesty,


