The Practice of Personal Meaning Cultivation

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Abstract

This article explores Franklian psychology as it relates to personal meaning and mindfulness practice. Meaning cultivation is seen as a principle outcome of mindfulness practice, and happiness is seen as an organic experience that emerges from meaningful living. Recommendations for clinicians are discussed, with mindfulness presented as a meaning-based intervention that holistically addresses both meaning through doing and meaning through being. The article concludes with questions for further inquiry.

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We Just Want to Be Happy

A quick peruse of the self-help section of any book store will prove that people today are obsessed with finding happiness. Today’s Western wisdom teachers, such as Sharon Salzberg (2011), are teaching that happiness is not a switch that you can simply turn on and off. Rather, the attainment of happiness involves a moment-by-moment practice of paying attention, also called mindfulness practice. Salzberg’s book Real Happiness provides an excellent primer to mindfulness practice. Research has provided evidence which links mindfulness and happiness.

Hollis-Walker & Colosimo (2011) demonstrated that there is relationship between mindfulness and psychologically adaptive variables, such as happiness, though self-compassion is a crucial attitudinal factor to get from mindfulness to happiness. A study by Choi, Karremans & Barendregt (2012) showed the people who practice mindfulness are perceived as being happier than people who do not. There is also anecdotal evidence, such as an article by Amy Gross (2012) entitled, “Your Brain on Happiness,” which provides further qualitative data for the link between practice and happiness.

The Meaning Behind Mindfulness

Through first-hand mindfulness practice experience of this author and instructive clinical texts, such as Segal, Williams & Teasdale’s (2002), the function of mindfulness practice can be seen as a combination of awareness, acceptance, self-distancing, and compassion. We will see in the continuation of this article how Viktor Frankl’s (1962; 1973) understanding of personal meaning is at the core of these functions of mindfulness practice with its potential to point towards happiness. It is the cultivation of meaning through mindfulness that creates the potential for happiness.

The first step of mindfulness practice is paying attention to and learning to accept one’s own internal and external world. In the most basic practice, one sits and tracks each breath with their attention. If one stays present one will notice that the awareness naturally shifts to the thoughts and feelings that are part of the individual’s mental sensations. These mental sensations occur automatically and the individual understands that what arises is basically automatic. One can accept the thought or feeling that presents itself and it will quite naturally pass. Thus, one will learn that awareness and acceptance are the stance of least resistance to moving through difficult memories, emotions, and critical evaluations.

With awareness and acceptance one will come to know the Franklian concept of self-distancing (Grabber, 2004). An individual cannot be simply reduced to their feelings, thoughts, and actions because mindfulness teaches us that these three facets of our humanness can simply arrive and retreat much like waves breaking on the shore and then flowing back out to sea with the tide. The ability to self-distance is the key ingredient in Frankl’s idea of realizing the noetic, or spiritual self (Frankl, 1972). The noetic self is the level of the individual that is connected to freedom. It allows us to choose an attitude of meaning even when all other access points to meaning have failed. Thus, mindfulness not only cultivates awareness and acceptance, but allows a practitioner to discover their spirit.

According to Frankl, and similarly seen in mindfulness practice, when a person learns self-distancing and connects with their spirit they become more compassionate and embrace responsibility as the most authentic expression of this newfound freedom. As practitioners learn that they are at the mercy of their thoughts and feelings, they understand that so is everyone else. From this insight, compassion arises. With compassion one learns one’s most basic freedom – to respond with wisdom, rather than react briskly, towards another. Freedom is not simply doing whatever one wants to do. Rather,
freedom is seen in the choice to interact with the world in a way that demonstrates one’s core values, in other words, to respond with a meaningful attitude. This brings us full circle back to Salzberg’s (2011) emphasis that happiness cannot be directly pursued. In the exploration presented in this article, meaning can be cultivated through mindfulness practice. Delle Fave, Brdar, Freire, Vella-Brodrick & Wissing (2011) provided empirical evidence that meaning leads to happiness, and below is a survey of research which point to the link between meaning and mindfulness.

Empirical evidence for the meaning-mindfulness link

Sealy (2012) showed how breast cancer patients cultivate meaning through meditation. Jacobs, et al. (2011) reported that mediation retreat participants experienced greater purpose in life, which resulted in longer term cellular viability. Pruett, Nishimura & Priest (2007) demonstrated how mindfulness practice can aid people in recovery by helping them experience life as more meaningful. Thus, one can work towards meaning cultivation through mindfulness practice which may organically lead to greater happiness.

Recommendation for Clinicians

As seen in Bellin (2013), meaning can be created and discovered in what we do (meaning through doing) and in who we are (meaning through being). Therapists are challenged to come up with creatively unique meaning interventions for clients who might struggle with meaninglessness and other noögenic pathologies. Mindfulness practice is a valuable practice that deserves more attention as a meaning-based clinical intervention. As seen from the exploration above, mindfulness engages both doing and being modalities of the individual, as it relates to the themes of compassion, choice, and freedom. It can also be tailored to an individual lifestyle and situation as the practice of paying attention, moment-to-moment can be done while sitting, walking, eating, communicating, or during any creative activity.

Next Steps and Conclusion

Moving forward from this preliminary exploration, a next step would be to directly explore, through empirical and qualitative inquiry, the following questions: How does mindfulness practice impact the experience of personal meaning? How is meaning cultivated from mindfulness practice different and similar from meaning experienced through other modalities? How can we further understand and make use of the natural emergence of happiness from meaning? These questions would benefit the clinicians’ work and also the daily experience of clients who are searching for more happiness in their lives. Further research is needed to answer these empirical and practical questions.

In conclusion, the search for happiness seems futile. A more promising venture is the cultivation of meaning through mindfulness practice that can organically blossom into a happier lived experience. Clinicians can benefit in exploring mindfulness as an intervention for clients who struggle with meaning and/or happiness. Given the relationship between mindfulness, meaning, and happiness, further research into the relationship between the three seems warranted.

References


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