

Tapestry of MBSR: The Art of Interweaving Transformational Elements

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In this article, I explore the warp and weft of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) to elucidate the subtle depth and multidimensionality of this program as it was originally conceived. The analogy of warp and weft is used to illustrate the core elements which synergistically interact creating a tapestry, unique to each MBSR program around the world, while also deeply aligning and unifying the program as a whole. I describe the ethos and ethics embodied in the course, the structures and principles that form the vision, curriculum and attitudinal foundations. Additionally, I outline details of the various exercises and practices in the program while acknowledging that the living experience of each MBSR program taught in different cultures and languages is influenced by the particular group of participants. I share learnings and accounts from participants who have benefitted from the course. Finally, I conclude by describing my own vision for the role of mindfulness and MBSR in the future. I hope that this tapestry provides a better and more nuanced understanding of what the MBSR program truly involves, and also the aspirations and visions of its creator, and the many MBSR teachers and community throughout the world.

Keywords: mindfulness-based stress reduction program, MBSR, mindfulness, participatory medicine, experiential education

Over 25 years of teaching and learning MBSR, instructing and mentoring MBSR teachers, and cultivating and guiding MBSR teacher-trainers, I have used, and heard many teachers use the metaphor of weaving to describe the processes of teaching and learning within an MBSR frame. In this article I apply the metaphor of warp and weft to highlight the interconnectivity, relationality, and synergy of foundational processes inherent in MBSR that contribute to the potential for greater freedom and transformation. I also discuss the step-by-step process of the program. In my view, the MBSR program is a skillful means that supports participants in becoming more intimate with life in its wholeness. MBSR's trans-diagnostic approach has served to highlight the unifying element of mindfulness as the means of meeting and working with varieties of stress or suffering.

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The Warp and Weft of Mindfulness-Based Programs

In a seminal paper, [Crane et al. \(2016\)](#) employ the metaphor of warp and weft to clarify the “fabric” of Mindfulness-Based Programs (MBP):

In weaving, the warp is the term for the fixed threads that run vertically through the cloth, while the weft is the term for the transverse threads that make each tapestry unique. The warp threads are set up on the loom, forming the fixed structure of the fabric, while the weft varies patterns and color. The essential, constant and integral threads that define an MBP regardless of population or context make up the warp; they are what make it a mindfulness-based program. Each adapted MBP then introduces a unique weft that seeks to target the training to a particular population and/or context. (p. 4)

To put it another way, the fixed threads of the warp represent the essential processes that define an MBP regardless of the context or population that it is intended to serve. According to [Crane et al. \(2016, pp. 4–5\)](#), these threads:

Are informed by theories and practices that draw from a confluence of contemplative traditions, science, and the major disciplines of medicine, psychology and education.

Are underpinned by a model of human experience which addresses the causes of human distress and the pathways to relieving it.

Develop a new relationship with experience characterized by present moment focus, decentering and an approach orientation.

Support the development of greater attentional, emotional and behavioral self-regulation, as well as positive qualities such as compassion, wisdom, equanimity.

Engage the participant in a sustained intensive training in mindfulness meditation practice, in an experiential inquiry-based learning process, and in exercises to develop insight and understanding.

The MBSR curriculum is infused with all of the abovementioned warp threads, as well as the flexible elements (weft threads) that define it as a transformational stress reduction program. In an adaptation of MBSR or MBP, the warps are integrated with the wefts, and “tailored to specific contexts and populations. Variations in program structure, length and delivery are formatted to fit the population and context” ([Crane et al., 2016, p. 5](#)).

The Loom and Threads of MBSR: An Overview

Weaving is a craft or art of forming cloth or fabric by interlacing two distinct sets of yarns or threads. Whether made of wool, silk, cotton, or linen, the involvement of the weaver is intrinsic to the fabric. Fabric can clothe, absorb and protect. In the same way, the MBSR program clothes and protects by training attitudes and behaviors that expand the possibilities, understandings and ways to address life’s challenges.

Weaving also expresses interrelatedness. For example, the metaphor of Indra’s Jewel Net is often used in Buddhist teachings to illustrate the interpenetration and interconnectiveness of all phenomena and beings ([O’Brien, 2018](#)). The net is infinite and spreads in all directions with no beginning nor end. At the cross threads is a jewel which reflects and is reflected by every other jewel. Similarly, the grounding threads of MBSR are the cultivation of awareness and kindness, where each human being is valued and respected as a whole and capable of learning, growing, and healing. MBSR is relational and transformational. As individuals learn with and from one another, each person is capable of reflecting and being reflected in the light of awareness.

The loom used in tapestry involves the physical presence of the weaver in engaging and repeating the pattern. The experiences of a teacher and student weaver are merged in the making of the material. Like the making of a tapestry, building a daily meditation practice demands intention, engagement and repetition, and the process of MBSR includes the commitment and practice of both student and the teacher.

Intention and Participation in MBSR

The two important guiding principles of MBSR are intention and participation. These principles involve willingness and commitment. The open attitude and interest in exploring one's life while practicing mindfulness is strengthened by curiosity and a meditation practice. Interwoven, they lay the groundwork for the weaving of the warp and weft of the curriculum and experiential learning into a coherent whole.

Intention

“The primary intention of the MBSR curriculum is to create a structured pathway to relieve suffering and increase wellbeing for people facing a host of challenges arising from a wide range of medical and psychological conditions and the demands and stressors inherent in the everyday lives of human beings”(Santorelli, Meleo-Meyer, & Koerbel, 2017, p. 4). This pathway involves awaking people to life as it is lived, and to know and experience the knowing with curiosity and compassion. The step-by-step training in mindfulness meditation offers an opportunity to inquire into and deepen understanding of the unifying presence of mindfulness. Weaving mindfulness into our daily lives helps to cultivate attitudes and behaviors that contribute to a way of being that is intimate with the whole of life.

At the Bravewell Pioneers of Integrative Medicine Awards, Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of MBSR, expressed his vision and intention in the creation of this program:

. . . I wanted to search out a deeper right livelihood, work that might be more meaningful to me and perhaps of direct use in the world in ways that were not being addressed by more conventional pursuits, no matter how worthy. I knew it had something to do with the relationship between my love for art and my love for meditation; they all seemed to be different ways of knowing. When talking about how human beings develop health, wellbeing, balance, energy and so forth, science has something to say about our biological lives. Art—whether it's painting or poetry or music—has a great deal to do with it as well because art speaks to other aspects of our being and our hearts, such as our emotions and passions, as well as our raw senses and longings and how we understand and express them. And meditation speaks to it because it's all about paying attention in a particular way and cultivating an aspect of our minds that we usually ignore—that is, our amazing capacity for awareness—in favor of discursive and analytical thinking. So over the course of many years of meditating on what my real job on the planet might be, I was led to these insights and to the path that ultimately led to my starting the Stress Reduction Clinic in 1979. (Kabat-Zinn, 2007)

Participation

As a skillful path for mobilizing innate human resources for healing, growing and learning, MBSR rests on the participant's commitment to participate. This involves attending classes, engaging with home practices, meditating, and learning from direct experience. Participatory medicine is patient-centric as it transforms patients from being passive recipients of medical care, to being partners in their own healing. It is a process

in which choices for one's health care are made jointly by the professional and the patient. From the outset, participants are informed about the challenging nature of the program, and the involvement expected of them to make lifestyle changes by dedicating time for formal and informal practice, and learning to attend to the experience of the present moment. At its core, MBSR invites one to inquire into, and investigate how one is living and how investing in one's life with skill and heart, can make a difference in the quality of being alive.

Fundamental Threads in MBSR: Embodied Ethics and Ethos

The threads of ethics and ethos are fundamental to the MBSR program. They ground the practices, attitude and interpersonal relationship of the teachers and participants. While these threads are integral to MBSR, there appears to be less explicit knowledge of what these principles truly involve and what they seek to nurture. In my view, this could partly be a function that these principles are subtly woven into the spirit of the program itself, and partly because people are more familiar with the benefits of the program, than the embedded culture that upholds the program's intrinsic value and purpose. In this section, I describe these fundamental threads at greater length.

As the MBSR participants gather for the first class, a clear foundation of ethical guidelines is established to support harmonious interactions within the group (Santorelli, 1999). These guidelines are agreements that are reviewed collectively to offer support and a safe space for participants to explore with confidence. Rather than adhering to a set of rules, each participant embodies the guidelines as a way of living with awareness, respect and commitment. The agreements include a commitment to engage with mindfulness practice, class attendances, and respectful behavior within the group. Respect entails setting clear boundaries regarding confidentiality, advice giving, cross talk, self-promotions, or private romances during the 2-month course. Ethical agreements engender an atmosphere of trust that allow individuals to take risks, explore, share their experiences and make personal choices and decisions.

Respect for the wholeness of one's life and that of others; the recognition that everything is interconnected; and, the understanding that living unethically causes more stress and suffering, are elements of the ethos of MBSR. MBSR fosters an embodied ethics, one that is lived with awareness and kindness (Kabat-Zinn, 2018a). According to Aristotle, ethos, pathos and logos are the three essential elements needed to make a persuasive argument (Ethos-pathos-logos, n.d.). Ethos includes ethical appeal and credibility as well as character; pathos refers to emotional appeal, meaningful language, emotional tone, stories and meanings; and, logos includes facts and statistics, written words, inward thought and its expression. Pathos is expressed in MBSR through the heartfelt poignancy of turning toward what is difficult in our lives. It is also expressed in the engaging, interactive, expressive teaching of MBSR. Logos is expressed through the articulation of research, science, and pedagogy.

MBSR is a whole life program that builds continuity and cohesion through building a learning community. The unifying characteristics of MBSR, the ethos, flow through the entire course and facilitates a multifaceted learning experience. These ethos are expressed in a number of elements that could be found in any moment of the program. While many of these elements are explicit, some others are more imperceptible, providing the subtle scaffoldings of the program. The ethics of MBSR are codes of behaviors intended to engender respect, discipline and generosity within the group. The ethos in MBSR are

intended to “support the development of self-awareness, resilience, and compassion”, while the ethical and moral principles and the domains of “nonharming, compassion, and wisdom” ground mindfulness practice and MBSR ([Mindfulness-based–stress reduction in medicine, practice-science, n.d.](#)).

Some of the key elements or characteristics that form the ethos of MBSR are described in the following.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness, the innate capacity to know what is happening as it is happening, is an integral component of the whole MBSR program. This knowing is so much part of our lives that we overlook it most of the time, like fishes not recognizing the water they are swimming in. The 8-week program provides the process and the pathway for participants to cultivate access to this inner resource. As we refine and deepen our relationship with awareness, this increased awareness becomes an embodied way of living with greater sensitivity to the unfolding moments of life. Mindfulness, or awareness provides us with the capacity to unify our experiences. With greater awareness, the experience of suffering can be known more clearly and held more spaciously and wisely. Adventitious mental patterns that add to stress or suffering can be mapped and seen more clearly. Hence the very name of the program: mindfulness-based stress *reduction*. As [Kabat-Zinn \(2013\)](#) describes it:

We introduce them to ways that they can use to listen to their own bodies and minds and to begin trusting their own experience more. What we really offer people is a sense that there is a way of being, a way of looking at problems, a way of coming to terms with the full catastrophe that can make life more joyful and rich than it otherwise might be . . . we call this way of being *the way of awareness or the way of mindfulness*. (p. 5)

Engaging this innate gift of awareness with kindness and curiosity supports the capacity for mindfulness to mediate a stress response. Inhabiting the present moment, which is truly the only moment we are alive, and, the only moment we can make wise choices, leads to an inquiry of simplicity—just this, just now. Infused with seeds of kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity, mindfulness of thoughts, emotions, sensations, views, perceptions, values and wishes, enables the practitioner to be the scientist in the laboratory of his or her life.

Present Moment

A key element in MBSR is the invitation to be awake in the moment of experience. “Ultimately . . . we are asking even more of our patients and ourselves, than time for formal meditation practice on a daily basis. For it is only by making the practice a ‘way of being’ that its power can be put to practical use” ([Kabat-Zinn, 2013](#) p. 33). As Kabat-Zinn puts it, “In the meditative context, practice means ‘being in the present on purpose’. The means and the end of meditation are really the same. We are not trying to get somewhere else, only working at being where we already are and being here fully” ([Kabat-Zinn, 2013](#) p. 17). As discussed earlier, the MSBR program is geared toward helping people to allow their experiences to unfold spontaneously. Hence the program emphasizes the importance of appreciating and acknowledging the present moment. This is because the only moment we are alive, is now, and the present is the only time to know that knowing of life. The past is a memory while the future is often projected fantasy. According to [Kabat-Zinn \(2013\)](#).

The present is the only time that we have to know anything. It is the only time we have to perceive, to learn, to act, to change, to heal, to love. That is why we value moment-to-moment awareness so highly. While we may have to teach ourselves how to inhabit this capacity of our own mind for this kind of knowing through practicing, the effort itself is its own-end. It makes our experience more vivid and our lives more real. (p. 16)

MBSR fosters practices and exercises that facilitate participants' inquiries into the quality of the mind, the emotional tone within the heart, the sensory experience of the body, as well as the quality of curiosity and interest through direct experience.

Embodiment

Many people long for peace of mind and a more peace-filled world, but often do not have clear direction on how to explore one's relationship with life. Mindfulness is a birthright gift that is nourished with a long term, whole life practice. And, as an introduction to mindfulness, the MBSR program has the potential to extend beyond the 8-week classes to a lifelong course where individuals independently, continue to examine their own lives. As a way of being, one practices embodying mindfulness in daily living. Embodiment points toward evoking and inhabiting innate resources of wisdom, kindness, balance and awareness. Embodiment is alive and flexible, while expressing alertness, authenticity and integrity. For centuries wisdom and guidance has been offered, and, available to seekers who were determined to discover pathways toward greater freedom. While not taught overtly in the MBSR class, contemplative principles underpin the life learning within MBSR. The underlying principle that each individual is already whole and complete, and also part of a larger wholeness of interconnection, (Kabat-Zinn, 2018b, p. xi) forms a radical foundation from which one can begin a journey of self-discovery and refinement. The simplicity of nonconceptual awareness of direct experience, is aligned with a zen approach. (Kabat-Zinn, 2018a p. 93) From this, a firm base is set with exploration of experience articulated in the Buddha's teaching on the "The Four Foundations of Mindfulness" (Rahula, 1959, pp. 109–199). This teaching experientially focuses awareness of the body as the body; of feelings; of mental formations; and the teachings (*Dharma*) for collecting and maintaining awareness. For example, with the first foundation of mindfulness—awareness of the body as the body—the wisdom of the body is engaged. The body is a vehicle to the present moment as bodily sensations are only knowable in the now which they occur. With this sensitivity, the body functions as a stress detector. Hence embodiment is living with and as awareness.

Love

Love infuses every cell of aliveness in MBSR and is the centripetal force of the program. Love inspired the original vision, and infuses the years and years of dedication and unfolding from Kabat-Zinn and from MBSR teachers and colleagues all over the world who followed in his footsteps. When we ask honestly, what motivated our choices in life—responses are often love and the longing to be happy, to have peace of mind and of heart. Hence mindfulness is also called heartfulness. Heartfulness is an attitude of receptivity, warmth, and affection toward being with life as it is unfolding.

Love is healing and is not weak. It is capable of mending wounds, and nourishing wholeness. Love as a crucial ethos of MBSR speaks to a vision of greater freedom and love for many, and it serves this way today. It is love for the life each of us is given that inspires the choice to engage with the body, mind, and heart. Choosing to embrace life, invites one to wake up to the full spectrum of the journey-including the sunshine and

shadow. MBSR cultivates wisdom, strength, and freedom to be with life as it is, knowing it is constantly flowing and evolving.

Meeting Suffering and Cultivating Resilience

MBSR is designed to train participants to acknowledge and investigate the reality of suffering, stress, dissatisfaction, and challenges in life. It is also designed to create conditions for participants to access their innate awareness, wisdom, and compassion to work skillfully with what is present. By encouraging skillful life choices grounded on awareness, strength and wellness, participants learn to reduce their own suffering, and to respond to their experiences with awareness, curiosity, and kindness rather than react in habitual ways. By responding, rather than reacting, participants cultivate the resilience to meet ongoing life challenges.

Principle of Nonharming

Physicians vow to abstain from doing harm to patients as they profess the Hippocratic Oath. This is a key precept of all health care. Mindful awareness of our direct experiences enables us to see more clearly the harmful impact of choices we make individually and collectively in real time. A curious, compassionate attitude cultivates greater stability to courageously investigate the impact of thoughts and actions. The invitational direction to bring a nonjudgmental attitude to experience, may involve seeing judgment as a habitual pattern itself, it is not advising inaction or complacency. To begin the process of healing, it is important to be able to perceive with sensitivity what actions might be harmful—diminishing, automatic and habitual, and what actions are skillful, beneficial, and supportive. An attitude of acceptance can increase the likelihood of making wholesome life changes. MBSR provides support for participants to develop mindful awareness practices and cultivate the strength to inquire and explore moment to moment experience with kindness and care. As the field of mindfulness continues to develop, current information regarding trauma is impacting the care needed when working with traumatic stress. This is aligned and consistent with the principle of nonharming. Trauma sensitivity has grown with refined understanding and skillful approaches to meeting participants in their development of mindful awareness. More clear choices and normalization of potential difficulty with meditation are expressions of compassionate care (Britton, 2017; Treleaven, 2018).

Nonduality and Inclusivity

A central value embedded in the MBSR program is the appreciation and respect of the innate wholeness of each individual regardless of what challenges that person may be encountering. Wholeness includes multiple facets of a person or an experience. The essence of nonduality involves seeing beyond the limited perception of a problem including knowing and not-knowing; doing and nondoing; intimacy and expansion; here and now; everywhere and always. The wisdom underlying the concept of nonduality is an appeal to leave nothing out, to consider a situation wholly as it is, and to see its multidimensionality. This is in line with the renowned Buddhist sayings: “form is emptiness, emptiness is form; emptiness is not separate from form, form is not separate from emptiness, whatever is form is emptiness, whatever is emptiness is form” (Red Pine, 2004, p. 2).

Nonduality also reflects the ethos of inclusivity in that it opens the individual to all aspects of the experience, and learning from oneself, others, and all things. The group learning experience of MBSR rests on the development of a learning community that can

access collective wisdom as well as support the individual's developing meditation practice. And, as the group cocreates a community, there is also recognition of social locations and of those who are not in the room. Inclusivity is honored and diversity is recognized.

Wholeness and Authenticity

Wholeness is connected to holism healing, authenticity, and wholesomeness. Wholeness is that vast awareness that can hold opposites and the complexities of experience, and it provides the potential for human beings to engage in their lives and, contribute to their own health and wellness. The importance of wholeness to the ethos of MBSR is well articulated by [Kabat-Zinn \(2013\)](#) who assures participants at the outset of the program “As long as you are breathing, there is more right with you than there is wrong, no matter how ill or how hopeless you may feel” (p. xxciii). Wholeness allows us to recognize the interconnectivity of all of life, and the intimate workings of the heart, mind, body, community, and environment. G. B. Devaney, an MBSR participant inspired by his growing understanding of life, shared his poem with his MBSR class (personal communication, 1998):

For I Awaken
 Because I breathe, I am enough.
 Because I breathe.
 For I awaken to each new day, I am enough.
 For I awaken.
 Since I am alive, I am enough.
 I am enough.
 And, I can sit without moving!
 Without doing.
 Because I am enough.
 And I am whole.

Mindfulness meditation is a systemic process of knowing directly, the actual state of things, including that in us that knows. This way of being strengthens familiarity and trustworthiness to inquire into direct experience and can support greater freedom. As MBSR participants get in touch with their innate awareness, there is greater confidence and agency to author one's life based on informed choices and authentic actions.

Curiosity and Interest

Curiosity, we say in MBSR, is one of the greatest supports to integrating mindfulness into one's life. Being interested in what is happening internally and externally orients a person to being a learner or a scientist. It is a powerful antidote to conditioned responses, being judgmental or concrete ways of thinking. With curiosity, questions such as—“What is this?” “What can be known directly?” “What thoughts, emotions and physical sensations are present now?” “What is called for now?”—allow time and space to build the capacity to respond rather than react to challenging experiences. As the 9th Century Chinese sage, Hongzhi Zhengjue extols students to “wander into the circle of wonder” ([Tworiverszen, n.d.](#)), similarly, MBSR sessions seek to ignite interest and curiosity in participants so that they can reside in the “circle of wonder.”

Hospitality

Welcoming what is, is a way of being that is strengthened in MBSR. It is a practice, an attitude, and an embodiment of hospitality. The attitude of befriending is expressed as courage and kind-heartedness. In MBSR, mindful awareness reveals many of life's gifts and challenges—"strangers" that have been neglected or ignored. As these strangers are befriended and acknowledged, new patterns of relating to them develop. In his poem, "The Guest House," Rumi (2004) teaches the truth of constant change, "every morning a new arrival," and gives guidance on skillful ways to meet the "unexpected visitors" to "[w]elcome and entertain them all . . . even if they're a crowd of sorrows" (p. 109).

Relational

MBSR is highly relational. Through the unifying practice of mindfulness, one explores one's relationship with one's health, mental patterns, emotions, body sensations, judgments, capacities, vulnerabilities and strengths, relationships with others, social identities, environment, nature, and communities (Kabat-Zinn, 2018a). The various MBSR practices and exercises described in this article demonstrate the opportunities afforded to participants to explore being in relationship with one's deepest values and intentions.

The individual and the group as a whole learn experientially and relationally. Listening to each other individually, the whole group builds relational attunement. In MBSR, the dynamics of moving from individual to community offer the richness of insight available from a multitude of views and experiences and connecting everyone in the shared bond of the human condition. The African expression, *Ubuntu*, is a belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity; it is an embodied humanity toward others and translates as, "I am because you are" (Mugumbate & Cherani, 2019; William, 2018). The *Ubuntu* recognition of interconnection and relationality shines light on the urgent need for collective global cooperation to address current challenges that do not stop at country borders. Humanity as a whole, is impacted by climate change, global health, emerging pandemics, economic inequity, racial justice, and nuclear proliferation. Approaching solutions to these problems, and others, requires engaging diverse perspectives that evoke knowledge, skill, innovation, and action. The universal bond of sharing expressed as *Ubuntu*, extends to the pressing need for world-wide recognition of the shared responsibility facing humanity today.

Distinctive Threads of MBSR

Apart from the fundamental threads in MBSR described in the earlier sections, there are distinctive threads of the program that give it its unique character and quality. In this section, I explicate some important threads in MBSR, which despite the program's evolution through the years retains its distinctive features.

Structure and Form of MBSR

For more than 40 years, MBSR has maintained the structure established by Kabat-Zinn. While the program was set up under the clinical system of the University of Massachusetts Medical Center as an outpatient clinic, it was like no other clinical program offered at the hospital. The MBSR program comprises an 8-week course with an orientation session, and an all-day class. Early in its history, individual interviews were held with each participant prior to, during and after completing the program. In later years,

group orientations were held and teams of teachers briefly interviewed potential participants.

The classes are of 2.5–3.5 hr duration. Through the 2-month period of learning, participants are guided in meditation practices engaging the body and mind. Each week, a new topic is explored such as perception, automatic habitual stress reactivity, mindfulness mediated stress response, interpersonal mindfulness, and ways to continue to grow a meditation practice in one's life. This structure and form has remained largely consistent in most current MBSR programs with some variations in class duration depending on the type of participants involved.

Attitudinal Foundations of MBSR

Initially Kabat-Zinn (2013) highlighted seven attitudinal factors that facilitate the development of mindfulness in the MBSR program. These are: nonjudging, patience, beginner's mind, trust, nonstriving, acceptance, letting go. Later, he added gratitude and generosity. All these factors are subtly promoted in the practices that anchor the program and are introduced in a way that the participants can experience these qualities for themselves during periods of sitting and self-reflection. Through shared dialogue of experiences and insights participants may recognize an attitude that supports their unfolding, self-development.

The Underpinnings of MBSR

MBSR is infused with elements that permeate the intention, structure and contents of the program. These elements are at times clearly articulated, while at other times, they are woven intrinsically into the fabric of the participant's experience. The six main elements of Buddhist principles, contemplative methodologies, medicine, psychology, neuroscience, experiential education, and collective wisdom are the key underpinnings of MBSR.

Taking a closer look:

Buddhist principles. The wisdom from foundational principles grounded on the Buddha's teachings (*Dharma*) flows through the entire MBSR program. The first Noble Truth of Suffering as taught by the Buddha (Rahula, 1959) is evidenced in the very title of the program using the word "stress." Stress is perceived as an acceptable synonym for the persistent sense of things not being quite right or satisfactory, even when times are joyful. In the language used by the Buddha, he referred to this sense of things not being quite right as *dukkha*. The realization of suffering is apparent in the first MBSR class as participants shared their individual reasons for attending. Stories of loss, of surprising changes and challenges emerge in the group. For example, some participants relate that they chose to attend because they had just received a serious medical diagnosis, were caring for a sick relative, lost a job, retired, wanted to address feelings of anxiety or depression, felt they just were not deeply in touch with their own lives, wanted to be proactive about their health, or had been sent by a doctor or therapist to enhance their own healing.

In the MBSR classes, principles derived from Buddhism, are also employed to help participants to experience and discuss themes such as perception, impermanence, attachment, aversion and reactivity. For example, in the initial classes, the 9 dots puzzle (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, pp 181–183) which encourages drawing 4 lines to connect all the dots without lifting the hand is used as an exercise to assist individuals to "think outside the box," and not to be bound by their conventional and habitual ways of relating to their difficulties and the world.

The Buddha's teaching on experiencing feelings (*vedana*) is another guiding principle. When participants experience pleasant and unpleasant events, they are encouraged to reflect for themselves: "What makes this experience pleasant, unpleasant or neutral?" "How does the automatic reactivity to wanting more pleasantness, and less unpleasantness, leads to grasping, clinging and more suffering?" Themes on attachment, aversion and tuning out are brought out for discussion. Participants are encouraged to turn toward the unwanted, and to develop skill in meeting and relating to physical and emotional pain. In this way, the focus opens to the body as one living organism, and the meditation practice invites a broader awareness of the body as a whole, rather than as distinct parts. This inclusivity is expressed and practiced with meditation in class 5 where instead of focusing on a specific object, participants are encouraged to bring awareness to changing experience with an open focus with choiceless awareness or open presence. Participants are also encouraged to pay attention to familiar patterns of reactivity and to discuss their observations. Bringing greater awareness continually supports participants' exploration of skillful ways to respond and to feel more at ease with themselves.

The 8-week program normally closes with cultivating awareness of impermanence or the flux of things—the beginning is in the end, and the end in the beginning; a review of learnings throughout the MBSR journey, and affirming the intention for cultivating mindfulness through continual practice. Reflections in the closing class often speak to the participants' deepening understanding of the fluidity of self—from the person who first began the journey of self-discovery to the person who is evolving in every moment. Participants discover an easing of the bounded, identified, sense of self into one who shares in the collective wisdom and common bonds of humanity. Participants learned that kindness, compassion, and shared joy are the essence of this program, and support strengthening equanimity.

Contemplative practices and principles. The MBSR program incorporates a number of important exercises from contemplative practices and principles. These practices include mindful movement with yoga throughout the entire eight weeks. All movement in MBSR is a meditation and focuses on knowing what is being experienced as it is happening. This includes experiences of sensations as well as thoughts and emotions. Another important exercise is the practice of the "council circle" ([Council Circle, n.d.](#)). This exercise which is practiced at the opening and closing of each class involves the teacher sitting in the circle alongside the participants while also assuming responsibility to fulfil the role of guiding the class. The council circle encourages the cultivation of the attitude of equality, respect, and deep listening.

Another contemplative practice in MBSR is the practice of mindful inquiry which is embodied in the teacher's curiosity about a participant's experience, and the participant's learning about and internalizing his or her own experiences. Mindful inquiry in MBSR is a process of investigating present-moment experiences using qualities of wonder, interest, kindness, and not-knowing about one's self and others. This practice can lead to less reactivity, and, potentially, to a rich experience of life. According to [Rockman \(n.d.\)](#):

Using inquiry in our mindfulness practice is about getting comfortable with not having answers or knowing how it will all turn out, but instead tracking experience as it is occurring in the moment versus getting lost in the story about it. When we inquire, we ask, "What am I noticing in the body, in thoughts and emotions?" We turn toward our physical sensations, disrupting the tendency to ruminate, compare or obsess. We can step back and observe what is happening rather than being gripped by turbulent emotional states. It's about being

interested in whatever is showing up, whether it is desired or unwanted. It means being compassionate to yourself.

Medicine and meditation. Kabat-Zinn (2013) describes how the shared root of “meditation” and “medicine” points to its Indo-European root meaning, “to measure” (p. 188). With reflection, this lends meaning to the combination of medicine and meditation in the MBSR program—in medicine *to restore one to one’s full measure* and in meditation, *to recognize one’s full measure*. In MBSR, the participant is offered training to become familiar with one’s innate resource of awareness and, by doing, to begin to recognize one’s full measure with practices and perspectives that strengthen engagement with his or her own health and well-being, and to the restoration of greater balance.

MBSR was first conceived as a public health intervention that could improve the lives of individuals experiencing stress. Stress plays a devastating role in the diminution of resilience and health. In MBSR, the physical impact of stress on health, and the emotional and psychological patterns that manifest in bodily symptoms are investigated through an exploration of the mind-body connection. According to Loucks et al. (2015), MBSR is an evidence-based modality that shows possible impacts of mindfulness on cardiovascular risk factors and is a cost-effective approach for stress reduction. In this participatory medicine, participants collaborate with health care providers simultaneously receiving professional care and mobilizing their innate resources for good health. With the focus on the wholeness of each individual and the individual learning to take responsibility for his or her own health, MBSR serves as an integrative and preventive medicine incorporating ancient tenets of healing in contemporary settings.

Neuroscience. The field of neuroscience has been helpful in demonstrating the effects of mindfulness practice on the brain. While it was previously accepted that the brain affects experience, cutting edge research has shown the ways the brain changes in relation to experience, especially mindful experience (Siegel, 2007). According to Davidson (Goleman & Davidson, 2018) “Neuroplasticity shows that repeated experience can change the brain, shaping it” (p. 50). While more research is needed to study the impact of the 8-week MBSR program in shaping the brain, research by Davidson (2003); Farb et al. (2007); Hölzel et al. (2011); and Brewer (2019) have already made major contributions to this field.

Experiential education. According to the philosopher John Dewey (1938), experiential learning flourishes with reflection. MBSR participants practice meditation in class and are advised to practice outside of class to build independence. Weekly class discussions explore the often shared challenges, learnings, and surprises discovered with the continuity of practice, building interdependence. MBSR is less of a lecture class than a laboratory, where each participant is the scientist in her own life, and the experiment is “What is happening now?” From class one, participants are encouraged to integrate mindful awareness into their routine daily activities as informal practices while also dedicating time each day to formal meditation practice.

The learning processes described by Vela (2000) of engaging the learner in dialogue about the content, and transformative learning by Mezirow (1997) can be applied to participants’ experiences in MBSR. For example, the opening inquiry, “What brings you to this program?” allows participants to listen to each other, discovering differences and resonances in their reasons for attending. As participants engage in the practice and discipline of mindfulness meditation, they are learning new ways of relating to the world. Additionally, bringing interest and investigation to ways of knowing help participants to

understand the pivotal role of perception in reacting or responding to stress; and to make choices about overcoming automatic, habitual, limiting patterns of the mind.

Collective wisdom. As the group develops from a class of relative strangers to being cocreators of a transformational learning, healing and growing community, a sense of isolation eases. Initially, beginners naturally identify strongly with their own stories and suffering, and the personal pronouns, “I,” “me,” and “mine” dominate. Through weeks of interacting with the group—practicing meditation, engaging in dialogue and inquiry, participants find their own questions and discoveries spoken and answered by others in the group. From this flows an easing of isolation, and a greater sense of belonging to a human family with its ensuing joys and sorrows. A rigid, bounded sense of separateness begins to dissolve.

The group becomes an important teacher for each individual in the program, offering companionship on the journey. Here, in direct contact with each other, a larger well of experience and wisdom becomes an available resource to draw from, one that is greater and deeper, wider, and richer than what might be experienced alone. In this way, the group emerges with a life of its own, as individual participants move through developmental phases of change during the eight weeks, living and experiencing the value of diversity and inclusivity, and drawing upon the collective wisdom to move toward wholeness.

Re-Visioning MBSR

I have been involved with the development, evolution, and expansion of MBSR for many years. In my current role as Assistant Professor of the Practice at the Mindfulness Center, Brown University, I work closely with MBSR teachers and teacher-trainers worldwide and am inspired by the potential of MBSR to impact global health and well-being when taught by teachers trained with rigor, depth, and cultural sensitivity. The intention, form, attitudinal pillars, underpinnings, ethics, and ethos of MBSR synergistically interweave art, science, and meditation. Meditation practice reveals the multidimensional nature of experience and points toward the preciousness of life.

My vision for mindfulness, and in particular, the role of MBSR, in the future, is to provide a path of love, healing, and transformation that enhances the health of mind, body, society, and the planet. An aspiration is that the heart awakening essence of MBSR continues to be protected and preserved as mindfulness programs flourish throughout different parts of the globe. MBSR already serves as a platform for a growing number of other mindfulness-based programs. The unifying element of mindfulness evokes awareness of the shared human condition with its vulnerability and deep strength. Mindfulness promotes equanimity and wisdom, and both are needed to face urgent global issues affecting current and future generations. Turning toward and inquiring into pressing issues of social justice, global health, climate urgency, and generational responsibility, requires deep listening, compassion, and presence. This kind of work calls for patience, cooperation and collaboration with a shared intention, integrity and understanding of the essential interconnectivity of all life. This is the weaving, constantly unfolding. The tapestry is woven with each emergent life experience on the loom of mystery and wonder into a wholeness that stretches beyond personal suffering and individual knowledge. Life patterns are changing rapidly with the recognition that individual and social health is not separate, nor contained by national boundaries. A global health crisis reveals systemic inequalities and racial discrimination. An undeniable teaching from this time is that all life is deeply interwoven. Global recognition of this can ignite collective action dedicated to

reducing harm and upholding human flourishing. This kind of caring for one another, grows awareness, generosity, wisdom, and love which are the colors, hues, and patterns of a tapestry for all.

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