

# Co-Creating a Space for Mindfulness

In his recent 2013 book *'The Ethical Space of Mindfulness in Clinical Practice'* Don McCown offers a compelling account both of the uniqueness and of the qualities of the space into which a mindful approach to our present experience is encouraged to emerge in the context of Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs).

Importantly he explores the limitations of the frameworks that are often used both to understand the processes arising in MBIs and inform the teaching methods (e.g. Buddhism, psychology, neurophysiology). He goes on to develop a much more congruent model for what are the qualities of MBIs that foster the emergence of mindful awareness.

He notes that in MBIs the way the learning space unfolds, whether in group or 1-2-1 contexts, is a process of co-creation. The role of the mindfulness teacher is not one of 'teaching mindfulness' as an instructor but rather one of embodying mindful awareness so that, as the 'teacher' turns towards and is willing to be with what is present this moment, the other group members are encouraged by example to choose to do the same. The structure of the curriculum can then be understood to be a series of learning experiences where the group co-creates an unfolding and increasingly richly textured experience of what it is to be mindfully aware.

He offers a very helpful model that can help inform an understanding of the qualities that foster the emergence of a rich learning space for cultivating mindful awareness.

His chosen terminology for this model is often rather technical and inaccessible (or so we have found) so we are experimenting with somewhat more immediate terminology.

His model is one of interweaving qualities that all interact with each other so that together they create a context in which mindful awareness is more accessible to all.

Diagrammatically he represents this as 3 interpenetrating aspects as shown in the diagram below (but with our adapted terminology):



These qualities are summarised overleaf (with McCown's original terms also noted).

### **Doing Qualities**

**Engaging with Physical Experience:** (McCown: 'Corporeality') = Turning towards what is physically present, right now, especially what is experienced in the body.

**Openness to Change:** (McCown: 'Contingency') = Willingness to notice how things are right now and, in so doing, approaching the realisation that our experience of everything changes moment-to-moment.

**Openness to Difference:** (McCown: 'Cosmopolitanism') = Willingness to allow different experiences than our own to be valid and alongside our own.

### **Non-Doing Qualities**

**Non-Pathologising:** (McCown: 'Non-Pathologising') = Recognising that, in this moment, we can be OK in the midst of much that is not-OK in our life, we can step out of the tendency to define ourselves or others by a category, a diagnosis or a label that suggests something is 'wrong' with us or we are a 'problem'. If we don't tend to say '*I am a broken leg*' why do we say '*I am depressed*.'?

**Non-Fixing:** (McCown: 'Non-Instrumental') = Choosing to allow what is present to be as it is rather than rushing to make it different. There is the intention to meet people as they are without acting on the agendas that arise to 'fix' or 'improve' them. If we are not seeing people as a 'problem' by pathologising them we then have nothing to 'fix'.

**Non-Hierarchical:** (McCown: 'Non-Hierarchical') = Identifying ourselves with the common humanity we all share that allows another person the room to be as they are rather than identifying with the roles we may have that place us in a more or less powerful position than others.

### **Warmth & Ease**

**Warmth & Ease** (McCown: 'Friendship') = The quality of kindly warmth to ourselves and others surrounds and infuses all that is done together. The teacher is willing to be open to the warmth and ease that emerges – they are not 'making'/'forcing' them to happen.

By identifying these qualities that support the emergence of mindful awareness we can see that everyone in the group contributes to what unfolds for each group member. As each member becomes more attuned to these qualities, to whatever extent, the group as a whole supports a deeper and richer engagement with mindful awareness. This creates a very particular learning space that is unique to each group as each group co-creates it afresh.

It is important to acknowledge that everyone, including the teacher, will step into and out of alignment with this learning space. This occurs when we re-engage with other roles. For the teacher this can be their professional role, as may happen if they need to act for the safety of a group member or the group as a whole, but it can also happen when something arises that seems beyond the teacher's capacity to approach with mindful awareness. It also happens for the participants as they slip into roles/modes of being that may well be the reason they are coming to the group in the first place and when something arises that they feel is beyond their capacity to approach with mindful awareness. The model helps us be more specific as to what has occurred that interrupts our capacity to approach what is being experienced mindfully. Note that stepping out of and coming back into alignment offers a rich learning experience for the group, especially if these transitions are held in kindly mindful awareness.

The model also helps understand why personal practice is so important for the teacher: the more they are steeped in these qualities the more they can embody them in the different and sometimes more challenging situations that arise in the mindfulness learning space.

A version of McCown's book (that seems to be a Doctoral thesis) is freely available here:  
[https://pure.uvt.nl/portal/files/1513935/McCown\\_ethical\\_14-05-2013.pdf](https://pure.uvt.nl/portal/files/1513935/McCown_ethical_14-05-2013.pdf)