

A Capacity-Based Approach to Teaching Mindfulness

Every person in the process of cultivating mindful awareness and compassion does so through building on their existing experiential, emotional and cognitive learning. The uniqueness of every person's experience and the learning arising from that experience means that everyone will also cultivate mindfulness and self-compassion in their own way and at their own pace. These differences include different learning styles, different histories of what feels safe in the face of illness, distress or trauma and different ways of representing and engaging with physical sensations, emotions, thoughts and images. These differences are particularly important in the context of past or ongoing trauma.

A safe and effective learning environment is one that in which the learning is differentiated so that individual learning needs are more likely to be met and also one that encourages the development of self-efficacy (aka 'mastery') in learning so that the individual has the confidence and understanding to adapt learning experiences to meet their own needs. Crucially, the cultivation of self-efficacy depends on safe learning experiences and, in clinical contexts in particular, many participants may not have had the necessary life opportunities for self-efficacy to be well developed.

The implication of this for the mindfulness teacher is that, for effective learning, differentiated learning experiences need to be offered in order to meet individual learning needs and that psychoeducational scaffolding is included so that the learner can understand how to adapt what is being offered to their own needs. In addition, the learning environment needs to be safe and foster self-efficacy through an approach of mutual discovery where the learner's 'self-experiments' enable them to become confident in adapting what they are learning to their own life situation. We find the phrase '*Mindfulness – you just can't get it wrong.*' helps foster this spirit of experimentation.

In seeking to differentiate learning experiences for the individual we have developed a **capacity-based approach**. This approach grew out of asking questions such as: '*What is the aim of this practice?*' and '*How can this practice better meet these aims?*'. Our experience was that the mindfulness literature tended to either offer general aims for a whole course or session or it focused on teaching points arising from a particular practice. What seemed lacking was an approach that clearly identified the aim of a given practice, how that practice was designed to meet that aim and how an individual's learning needs (or current capacities) might interact with the aim and design of a practice.

We have been developing this capacity based approach as a reflective tool that prompts consideration of aims, design and individual need. This approach views a mindfulness course as a series of learning experiences that enable the learner to cultivate specific capacities necessary to choosing to approach moment-by-moment experience with mindful awareness and compassion. Certain capacities form the foundations for other capacities which, in turn, are necessary for further capacities to be cultivated. The chart of key capacities we have developed is not intended to be all-inclusive or definitive in the ordering of capacities it presents. Instead, as noted above, it just aims to bring into focus aspects that we have found most relevant to consider in our own teaching, so facilitating of a process of reflection.

Using the Capacity Chart

Vertical Order: The **6 Key Capacities** are ordered so that the lower capacities are more likely to require the higher capacities to be established first. Most importantly, we consider that no effective learning occurs without a safe learning environment (**Key Capacity 1**). Without a perception of safety, people are more likely to reinforce previously learned safety behaviours in order to stay safe (such as apparent compliance, disengagement or avoidance). **Key Capacities 2 & 3** are likely to be accessible to most people and tend to be the initial focus of a mindfulness curriculum. **Key Capacities 4 & 5** depend on capacities associated with Key Capacities 1 & 2 (such as having a degree of mental and emotional steadiness and some capacity to have a perspective taking relationship to experience). Thus Key Capacities 4 & 5 tend to receive more explicit focus in the middle parts of a mindfulness curriculum. While some people may already have developed capacities to be self-soothing or self-compassionate (**Key Capacity 6**), many people find engagement in these areas highly activating of experiences of unmet need and so need to have first cultivated their capacity for emotional resilience. Thus Key Capacity 6 tends to be explicitly cultivated later on in a mindfulness curriculum.

Horizontal Order: The 'sub-capacities' shown under each of the Key Capacity headings start on the left with what is typically more accessible and then each further sub-capacity to the right represents the development of this sub-capacity towards greater resilience and/or ability. Each sub-capacity needs to be considered independently in the context of a particular person, practice or the curriculum as a whole:- they are not aligned vertically at the left to mean they are all equally present at the start of a course nor does the right side equate to the end of a course.

Overall, as a participant progresses through a mindfulness course, the practices they encounter are likely to be most aligned to the top left at the start of the course and to be more aligned with the right side and lower down by the end.

Focus on the Person: The chart can be used to ask what capacities someone has at present and so what form of mindfulness practice will be both safely accessible to that person and so offer an opportunity for learning and growth. Safe & effective learning will occur if the mindfulness practice is within or just near the limit of their current capacities.

Focus on the Practice: The chart can be used to analyse an existing practice or adapt or design a practice so that it is more likely to meet a particular aim or to be appropriate for a particular point in a course or for a person's needs.

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Cultivation of Key Capacities Across a Mindfulness Course

1 Capacity for Effective Learning (depends fundamentally on a safe learning environment)

- 1.1 Enabling & Trusting Participants to Engage in Practices at Their **Own Pace** Within a Curriculum Building Incrementally on Their Initial Capacities
Making it Safe for Participants to Disengage From Practices Beyond Their Present Capacity Without Shame or Failure
- 1.2 Practice in **Low Intensity, Safe, Familiar** Contexts Practice in **Low Intensity, Safe, Unfamiliar** Contexts Practice in **Higher Intensity, Challenging, Familiar** Contexts Practice in **Higher Intensity, Challenging, Unfamiliar** Contexts
- 1.3 Practices **Maximising Association** with External Senses: *Open Eyes, Moving, External Focus, Engaging Environment, Short, Guided* Practices **Risking Dissociation** or **Triggering Trauma Memories**: *Closed Eyes, Static, Body or Breath Based, Still Environment, Long, Unguided*
- 1.4 Most **Accessible Practice** is When **Guided by Teacher in Session** Self-Efficacy & Situation Supports **Audio Guided Practice at Home** Self-Efficacy & Situation Supports **Self-guided Practice in Session** Self-Efficacy & Situation Supports **Self-guided Practice at Home**

2 Capacity for Mindful Attentiveness to Present Moment Experience

- 2.1 **Noticing Sensations** at Focus of Attention **Tracking Attention** When it Wanders **Directing Attention** to Chosen Focus **Returning Attention** to Chosen Focus **Holding Whole Cycle of Attention** in Awareness
- 2.2 **Narrowing Attention** to a Focus **Widening Attention** to Broader Awareness **Perspective Taking** Relationship to Experience **Open Awareness** Allowing Experience to Arise, Linger & Fade
- 2.3 **Distinguishing Mental Experience** From Physical Experience **Recognition** When Attention is **Caught Up** in Mental Experience **Identifying Specifics** of Mental Experience **Observing Mental Experience** as Mental Events
- 2.4 **Short Periods** of Intentional Attentiveness **Longer Periods** of Intentional Attentiveness

3 Capacity for Mindful Attentiveness to Physical Stimuli / Sensations

- 3.1 Attention on **Relieving or Comforting** Sensations Attention on **Pleasant** Sensations Attention on **Neutral** Sensations Attention on **Mildly Unpleasant** Sensations Attention on **Strongly Unpleasant** Sensations
- 3.2 **External Sensory** Stimuli as Focus for Attention **Neutral Body** Sensations as Focus for Attention **Intense Body** Sensations as Focus for Attention
- 3.3 **Vivid Sensations** as Focus for Attention **Vague Sensations** as Focus for Attention
- 3.4 **Vigorous Movement** as Focus for Attention **Gentle Movement** as Focus for Attention **No / Minimal Movement** at Focus of Attention

4

Capacities for Curiosity & for Mindful Choosing

- 4.1 Curiosity Offered to **Neutral or Pleasant External or Bodily** Experience Curiosity Offered to **Low Intensity Mental** Experience Curiosity Offered to **Unpleasant / High Intensity** Experience
- 4.2 Making the Choice to **Notice** Automatic Habitual Reactions Making the Choice to **Pause** Rather Than React Making the Choice to **Step Back & Observe** with a **Wide Perspective** Making the Choice to **Respond Rather Than React**

5

Capacity for Emotional Resilience

- 5.1 **Pausing** When Unpleasant Experience is Present **Opening Awareness** to Aspects of Unpleasant Experience **Offering Curiosity** Towards Unpleasant Experience **Moving Closer** to Unpleasant Experience With **Kindness**
- 5.2 Resilient in Context of **Relieving or Comforting** Experience Resilient in Context of **Pleasant or Neutral** Experience Resilient in Context of **Mildly Unpleasant** Experience Resilient in Context of **Strongly Unpleasant** Experience

6

Capacities for Self-Soothing & Compassion

- 6.1 **Softening & Easing** Around Unpleasant Experience **Actively Self-Soothing** **Actively Being Self-Compassionate** **Acting With Compassion** to Self & Others Even in **Difficult Moments**
- 6.2 **Awareness** of the Reactions Triggered by Difficult Experience **Curiosity Offered Towards** the Reactions to Difficult Experience **Befriending the Reactions** Triggered by Difficult Experience Reactions to Difficult Experience **Welcomed** as Part of this Moment
- 6.3 Self-Compassion **Conditionally** Offered Towards Aspects of Self (*E.g. only when can justify it or feel deserve it*) Self-Compassion **Unconditionally** Offered Towards Self (*E.g. compassion offered simply because it can be offered*)