

Building a mindful society

When we become mindful we learn to recognise the impact of our words and actions on everything around us, and can create powerful change in our communities and the world.

by Margie Ulbrick and Dr Richard Chambers

As more and more people become aware of the benefits of mindfulness, it has spread beyond medicine and healthcare into business, sport, and education. Some people are beginning to wonder what it would look like to create a mindful society, and we don't need to look very far to see that our world certainly needs it! A collective unconsciousness has led to the degradation of the environment, and fight/flight reactivity on a large scale regularly leads to conflict and war. Mindfulness offers a powerful way to start addressing some of these issues.

Each of us is responsible for creating this change. Only when we learn to bring mindfulness and loving presence to ourselves are we able to extend that out towards others. These ripples then travel further and further, meeting other ripples on the way, and mindfulness eventually crosses the whole pond. We create a mindful society by creating a mindful self.

BEING THE CHANGE

Mindfulness starts with being. Only when we learn to quieten down and become intimate with ourselves and the world around us can we start responding appropriately. Prior to that, we are merely reacting. But once we learn how to *be*, we can discover how to bring that being into the world – into our work and play, into our relationships, families, and communities. Doing this effectively requires that we look deeply and see clearly. When we do this, we get to know our core values and deepest desires, and to notice the 'still inner voice' of intuition. And we become able to truly listen and recognise the impact

of our words and actions on everything around us.

It is easy to get disheartened by feeling like we alone have to carry the burden of responsibility for changing the world. We can become overwhelmed by global poverty, high rates of suicide in the young, and all the other inequality and injustice in the world. But mindfulness is not necessarily about going out and single-handedly trying to change everything. We may end up doing just this when we hear a calling from deep inside to make a contribution, but it is vital that we don't lose touch with our own heart and become separated from those around us. So much activism today creates further divisions rather than healing by increasing the sense of 'us' and 'them'. To be truly effective agents of change, we need to learn to rest in a space of loving presence and find ways of bringing that into being in the world, which is easier said than done. In fact, nobody can tell you how to do this. We need to discover it for ourselves.

Gandhi motivated all of India to engage in a nonviolent struggle that ultimately achieved Indian independence by embodying the idea of being the change that he wanted to see. On a smaller scale, we can embody mindfulness by the way we are in the workplace and in our relationships and homes. When we get in touch with our true nature through mindfulness, we discover that, far from its being some apathetic state where we sit around contemplating our navels, it is very much alive.

When we rest as awareness, we find that it is inherently joyful,

compassionate, and fearless. Think of times you have felt completely contented, even just for a moment, and you will recognise these qualities. The first step is to look deeply and to see who we really are. The way we are in the world then becomes an expression of this 'beingness'. Mindfulness is transforming our being in a way that is enduring so that the traits we express in our everyday life become the ripple effect of the state of mindfulness: loving kindness and non-judgemental friendliness to our inner experience, which builds a moment-by-moment awareness of presence and what is real.

The very words 'creating a mindful society' imply effort and doing which is

anathema to what mindfulness is about. Mindfulness is non-dualistic. It does not separate thoughts and actions but rather comes from a profound sense of wholeness, which is enhanced by a deeper connection to our true nature. It is not about exerting effort and achieving. Rather, it is about listening to what is most meaningful for us. This expresses itself through each person individually and then through society collectively.

Each individual has a contribution to make in the world. Joining like-minded groups and communities supports our mindfulness practice and contributes toward building a mindful society. However, it is important to do this

without getting caught up in a sense of self-importance or being motivated by wanting to prove we are right so we can strengthen our ego. This is not what mindfulness is about.

If we seek to dominate with the importance of our beliefs we make mindfulness just another dogma. Mindfulness continues to come back to the expression of our inner truth as it arises moment-by-moment, day-by-day. Whether you are a dentist or a social worker, a factory worker, an insurance broker, or a stay-at-home parent, the ripples that you create by relating mindfully to the people and things around you will reverberate and keep on reverberating. If the world is going

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using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them". We must be able to sense into the depths of our being, know ourselves fully, and hold all of this in a loving, healing space. Only then will we be able to relate to each other as unique, whole beings, and overcome the conflict that results from rejecting parts of ourselves and those around us. When the internal conflict subsides, conflict in the world will subside accordingly. Deep inside each of us is a yearning for this wholeness and loving relationship. All we need to do is listen deeply enough to hear its call, and then follow that.

EXERCISE: WHAT DOES YOUR DEEPEST BEING WANT TO EXPRESS IN THE WORLD?

1. Take a moment to pause and sense inside. Notice and let go of any tension. Use the breath as an anchor so you can become calm and centred.
2. Once you start to quieten down, ask yourself, "What do I want to contribute to this world?" or, "What is the next step for me?"
3. Resist the temptation to try to 'work out' an answer. Instead, allow the question to rest in the stillness as an inquiry. Allow the answer to arise

in its own time. Breathe deeply into your belly and let the breath flow throughout your whole body. Cultivate a place of inner stillness and wait. See what arises.

4. Perhaps for a time nothing will come. Don't judge it if this is the case. Just notice what sensations you are experiencing. Let this question form the basis of an ongoing inquiry.
5. When answers do arise, simply notice them and check whether they feel true to you. Keep returning to the inquiry.

You may also wish to revisit this enquiry in any daily meditation you may have. When you seek earnestly to know what your place is in this process of building a more mindful society, your heartfelt question will connect you with what is most real in you. You will start to be led by intuition and impulses, big and small. Allow these to guide you, always checking back in with yourself as to whether what is arising – and the ways you are bringing it into action – are an expression of mindfulness and loving presence.

STARTING WHERE WE ARE

Mindfulness is inseparable from heartfulness. We need to start where we are and be curious about

what our commitment to relating respectfully and lovingly to all parts of ourself and our world brings. It may calm and focus us. Or it may shake us out of our lethargy and inaction. Little by little, mindfulness takes us on a journey of discovery that expands possibilities beyond what we might previously have considered. Mindfulness is not a quick fix but it necessitates whole-hearted engagement. To quote Eisenstein again, "Addiction, self-sabotage, procrastination, laziness, rage, chronic fatigue, and depression are all ways that we withhold our full participation in the program of life we are offered. When the conscious mind cannot find a reason to say no, the unconscious says no in its own way."¹

Mindfulness offers us the capacity to wake up. We begin to see the patterns that may have held us back and the ways in which we have been stuck or saying no to life. Mindfulness allows us to have fresh eyes and to be engaged with life in a fuller way. This requires connecting deeply with an experience of being, and then finding ways to bring that into our doing.

Mindfulness eventually involves changing behaviours, structures, and systems where injustice flourishes.

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What can you do and how can you lend voice to your community, whether it is in prisons, schools, hospitals, the young, or the elderly? We may very well need to sit with that question as an inquiry, allowing the answer to emerge in its own time from deep inside.

The scientific term for humans is 'homo sapiens', meaning 'the ones that have the capacity to know, and to know that they know'. This knowing gives each person immense power, if we are willing and able to use it. A more mindful unfolding in our society will

flower and blossom as the ripple effect fans out across the world. As Hugh Mackay in *The Good Life* says, "You don't have to be rich to leave a positive legacy; you don't have to be intelligent, famous, powerful or even particularly well organised, let alone happy. You need only to treat people with kindness, compassion and respect, knowing they will have been enriched by their encounters with you."²

Picture a society where an understanding and practice of mindfulness is as commonplace as the gym and exercise are to our understanding of health and fitness. Health is not merely the absence of illness. This is why some health insurers have started funding mindfulness classes just as they do for Pilates, yoga, and other stress reduction modalities. Perhaps there will be a juncture between religions and contemplation and mindfulness. We may find the fidelity to our own hearts' desire to live from a place of mindful presence, so that we can each bring about a more mindful society.

And if it feels like what you can offer is merely a drop in the ocean of need, remember that oceans are just a lot of drops of water. ●

This article is an excerpt from the book *Mindful Relationships: Creating genuine connection with ourselves and others*, by Dr Richard Chambers & Margie Ulbrick and is reprinted with permission from the authors.

- 1 Charles Eisenstein, *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know Is Possible*
- 2 Hugh Mackay, *The Good Life*

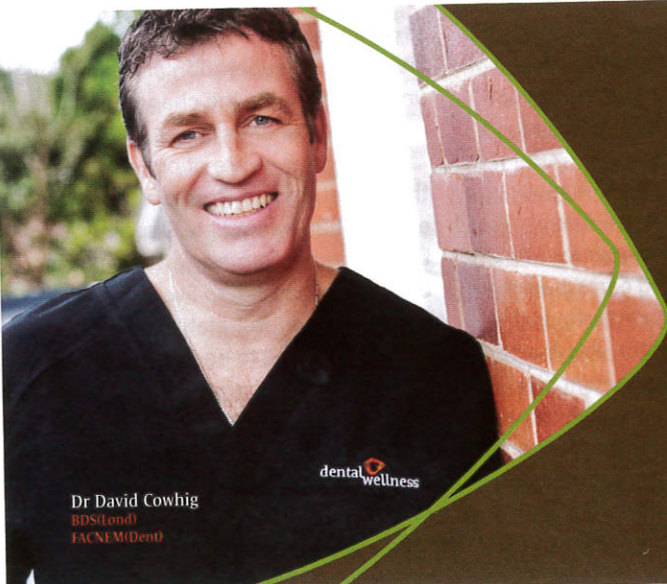
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