

Mindfulness as a Coping Mechanism for Employment Uncertainty

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Mindfulness-based stress interventions are well suited to reduce the anxiety of clients living with employment uncertainty. With the advent of globalization, increased job flux, and at-will employment policies, feelings of insecurity are becoming more prevalent, contributing to work-related stress (D. L. Blustein, 2006), which in turn is associated with lowered job satisfaction, elevated turnover intentions, and increased cardiovascular risk (C. D. Spielberger, P. R. Vagg, & C. F. Wasala, 2003). Mindfulness, an intentional consciousness learned through meditation, can reduce psychological suffering by reducing the anticipation anxiety experienced by employed workers who face a high degree of employment uncertainty.

A growing concern for clients seeking career counseling is that the world of work is changing dramatically and rapidly, resulting in elevated levels of anxiety and employment uncertainty. Indeed, one of the major themes in the September 2003 special issue of *The Career Development Quarterly* (Savickas, 2003b), in which several notable scholars and practitioners stated their goals for the counseling profession, included significant concerns about the changing nature of work, the need for thoughtful integration of mental health concerns with career counseling, and the growing demand for preventive interventions (Herr, 2003; Savickas, 2003a). To that end, this article integrates these aspirations with an increasingly visible topic of research and practice in the mental health field, mindfulness-based stress reduction (Kabat-Zinn, 1996).

We propose that mindfulness can provide an effective means for workers dealing with uncertain employment conditions to cope with the anticipation stress associated with employment in an increasingly ambiguous work environment. By supporting clients through mindfulness-based coping skills, career counselors can help clients remove a key contributor to their overall stress; therefore, clients are able to make calmer and perhaps more informed decisions for themselves, create a sense of agency about their situations, and operate in a more centered mode of functioning. Although other stress-reduction techniques have been used in various

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aspects of career counseling and work-based prevention programs (e.g., Murphy, 1996; Quillian-Wolever & Wolever, 2003), regular meditation practice and the accompanying mindfulness philosophy seems particularly well suited to help clients manage uncertainty beyond the boundaries of the actual intervention (Quillian-Wolever & Wolever, 2003).

Employment Uncertainty

Because of increasing globalization, industrial restructuring, rapid technological development, and the resulting flexible staffing arrangements, workers no longer have the security of guaranteed long-term employment (Blustein, 2006; Howard, 1995). Today's work environment contributes to feelings of insecurity, resulting in work-related stress (Blustein, 2006), which in turn is associated with lowered job satisfaction, elevated turnover intentions, and increased cardiovascular risk to the worker (Spielberger, Vagg, & Wasala, 2003). Although work stress has many antecedents (cf. Spielberger et al., 2003), the revolution in the labor market has the potential to enhance stress levels for individuals, who already face considerable psychological challenges in their work lives.

Work stress is an overarching term that encompasses many different themes, ranging from issues of interpersonal and role demands, to workplace policies, job conditions, and role and job ambiguity (Spielberger et al., 2003). In this article, we concentrate on employment uncertainty, a consequence of job insecurity, which can be especially stressful to workers across the full range of skills and occupations (Sverke & Hellgren, 2002). *Job insecurity*, defined as "employees' negative reactions to the changes concerning their jobs" (Sverke & Hellgren, 2002, p. 26), has been linked to problems affecting both the individual and the organization, such as physical and mental health problems, family problems, and reduced levels of job satisfaction. Job insecurity proves especially problematic to companies whose highest achieving workers feel insecure in their employment and decide to leave (Ashford, Lee, & Bobko, 1989). *Employment insecurity* can be defined as an individual's negative reactions, concerns, and "expectations about continuity in a job situation" (Davy, Kinicki, & Scheck, 1997, p. 323) and is the result of a discrepancy between the level of job security that employee would like versus the perceived amount of job security that worker actually has (Hartley & Klandermans, 1986).

In a comparison study examining distress in insecurely employed and unemployed plant workers, both groups reported similar amounts of stress (De Witte, 1999). In other words, working in an ambiguous employment situation may feel just as stressful as coping with being unemployed and significantly more stressful than being securely employed (Mantler, Matejcek, Matheson, & Anisman, 2005). In fact, the anticipation of job loss may have an adverse effect on individual workers that is similar to job loss itself (Dekker & Schaufeli, 1995; Latack & Dozier, 1986). However, those workers who took a problem-solving approach to their situations, rather than being overwhelmed by their emotions, experienced less perceived stress (Mantler et al., 2005).

The decision to take a problem-solving approach to cope with a stressful job situation may help to attenuate a bad situation. Having an *internal*

locus of control, or confidence concerning the relationship between an individual's behavior and outcomes (Antonovsky, 1991), seems to help workers gain resilience within a culture of job insecurity (Parkes, 1994). One potentially useful direction for further advances in counseling and preventive tools for clients faced with growing employment uncertainty may be obtained through mind-body interventions such as mindfulness-based stress reduction techniques.

Career counselors have traditionally used external techniques to help employees leverage as many external organizational venues as possible, such as working with managers to modify employee situations and coaching workers to prepare themselves to find alternate work situations. An intervention such as mindfulness-based stress reduction, through the reduction of anticipation anxiety, can help workers change situations internally so that they are better able to use external resources. Career counselors can add mindfulness techniques to their skills arsenal to help clients cope with uncertainty and perhaps even open doors for clients by providing a means to achieve more clarity with which to make meaningful career decisions. This clarity can allow clients to more effectively mobilize their resources, enhance their skills, and maximize new opportunities.

Mindfulness as a Means of Coping With Stress

Mindfulness is a type of intentional consciousness, awareness, or a way of being attentive in the present moment that can be learned through meditation. The origins of this concept arose in Buddhism approximately 2,500 years ago (Germer, 2005a) as a way of understanding the nature of the mind and reducing psychological suffering. Because mindfulness is a universal quality of attention, it does not need to be tied with any philosophical or religious tradition to be effective (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Mindfulness-based methods of stress reduction are very helpful in that they provide a structured process as a means to achieve clarity. Findings from empirical research support using mindfulness-based interventions (Murphy, 1996; Quillian-Wolever & Wolever, 2003); furthermore, individuals coping with generalized anxiety and panic disorders demonstrated significant treatment gains using mindfulness-based stress reduction (Kabat-Zinn et al., 1992).

Mindfulness practitioners become aware of the thoughts that appear, but accept them as finite, fleeting, and ephemeral, placing little attachment and no judgment to them. Baer (2003), in her synopsis of mindfulness and psychotherapy research literature, presented her psychological perspective in her definition of mindfulness as "the non-judgmental observation of the ongoing stream of internal and external stimuli as they arise" (p. 125). In contrast, *mindlessness* is rushing through an experience and not noting sensory information that arises, such as eating a meal without tasting it or worrying to the point of being unaware of what is going on in the present moment (Brown & Ryan, 2003). This may be the case for many workers experiencing employment uncertainty; employees may be so worried about the future that they may not notice what is occurring now, which could possibly be a more adaptive way of functioning and coping. Practicing mindfulness can help clients focus on the present and separate themselves from future-focused anticipation anxiety.

Germer's (2005b) three key elements of mindfulness incorporate the major aspects of many prominent mindfulness interventions. Mindfulness cannot be used as a prescription because it is an enduring lifelong process (Germer, 2005a). These elements can indicate appropriate means for career counselors to integrate aspects of this approach into their practice. The three key elements of mindfulness are *awareness*, *being in the present moment*, and *acceptance*.

Awareness is further broken down into three components: *stopping*, *observing*, and *returning*. Stopping refers to halting those automatic behaviors that arise from automatic thoughts. Clients can learn to interrupt automatic thoughts by noticing, or becoming aware of, these behaviors and consciously stopping them, perhaps through a deep breath or even a physical reminder. Stopping can also refer to slowing down, which refers to savoring and focusing on an experience rather than rushing through it. The observing component of awareness refers to concentrating on an aspect of awareness, such as the breath or sensory experiences. Practitioners, when concentrating on this chosen focus, take nonjudgmental notice and observe what other thoughts, sensations, or feelings occur while concentrating on this aspect of awareness. These thoughts, sensations, and feelings are just experienced, and no values are attached to them. The mind cannot focus on the future while focusing on the present. By turning attention toward what is happening now, the mind turns away from anticipating what may happen in the future. The observer may label the thoughts as they come and go, with titles such as "worry," "fear," or "thinking." In time, these experiences no longer need to be named, just observed and released. After stopping and observing, the final step of awareness is to return complete intentional consciousness to the activity in which the practitioner was originally engaged, whether walking, working, or relaxing. Returning to awareness is often likened to "waking up" (Germer, 2005b, p. 117) to the present moment, which leads to the second element of mindfulness.

The present moment within the mindfulness school of thought refers to "pour[ing] attention completely, without reservation, into the most important task at hand" (Germer, 2005b, p. 118). Mindfulness exercises universally focus attention on the present moment, drawing focus to the current experience (Germer, 2005a). The purpose of this present-centered focus is to be in the here and now because experiencing the present as fully as possible diminishes worrying about the past and feeling anxious about the future. The final universal element of mindfulness techniques, acceptance, involves acknowledging experiences without judgment or partiality and with gentle interest and a sense of kindness toward these occurrences (Germer, 2005b).

We are not advocating that mindfulness should function for workers as a means of blindly accepting an unstable working world in which they are losing power, often to forces and individuals who are not considering the plight of working people. In fact, we advocate that workers do in fact focus on their own career planning as well as on the macrolevel factors that shape the employment market. A balanced, clear person practicing mindfulness can better explore the external options as well, such as initiating the steps to navigate toward a new position, investigating independent business opportunities so that more control

can be leveraged by the individual, or even getting involved in social justice initiatives to change policies (cf. Blustein, 2006). Mindfulness, paradoxically, coexists with action and may be one of the greatest tools for surviving in an unstable, complex, and challenging world.

Applying Mindfulness in Practice

How do career counselors know when the use of mindfulness within their practice is appropriate? How should counselors teach clients to begin practicing mindfulness techniques? The decision to leverage mindfulness in a career counseling practice becomes most apparent when a client seems to be “stuck” or “hooked” in anxious thoughts related to employment uncertainty. For example, a client might say, “All I can think about all day long is ‘I might be out of a job tomorrow’ and I can’t do anything else.” Mindfulness techniques can help clients take a step back and focus attention away from anxiety-laden thoughts.

Career counselors have an opportunity to give clients a powerful tool by both teaching them explicit meditation practices and providing them with a mindful view of the world. This view advocates realizing that problems come and go, giving clients the freedom from becoming overly attached to their current difficult experiences. The most basic explicit technique practitioners of mindfulness use is sitting consciously and following the breath as it enters and leaves the body, greeting thoughts as they arise in the present moment with awareness and acceptance. Career counselors can teach their clients to deal with work-related anticipation anxiety resulting from their uncertain situations by using this basic technique, gradually increasing their practice from a few minutes a day to ideally 30 minutes or so a day. Resources that career counselors may find useful in their application of mindfulness are listed in the Appendix. The following exercise, adapted from *Full Catastrophe Living: How to Cope With Stress, Pain and Illness Using Mindfulness Meditation* (Kabat-Zinn, 1996), uses the breath as a tool to become more mindful through concentrating on the moment-to-moment sensations of breathing.

1. Sit quietly in a comfortable position, either on a chair or on the floor with legs crossed.
2. Pay attention to the breath as it goes in and out. Observe the feeling of the incoming and outgoing breath. Breathe calmly from the diaphragm, letting the stomach rise and fall the way a child’s does when it is sleeping.
3. Whenever attention has wandered away from the rise and fall of the breath, perhaps toward other thoughts and feelings, internally note that change of attention, and gently bring the attention back to the breath.
4. No matter how many times attention strays, bring it back to the belly and breath. This act of continuity prepares the mind to cope with reactivity in a calming way, resulting in a more stable awareness.

Mindfulness is an internal psychological practice that can be used in interactions with the world. In the career counseling realm, using mindfulness meditation can reduce the symptoms of the anticipated threat of

job loss. By reducing anxiety levels, workers can better concentrate on upgrading their skills and advocating for themselves and other workers to improve their job prospects and decision-making skills.

Conclusion

Integrating mindfulness into career counseling benefits a wide array of clients by providing a valuable coping skill that can provide a more grounded foundation for exploratory activities and decision making by reducing anticipation anxiety through a focus on the present moment. Although mindfulness is much more than a set of techniques, the goal of this article is to provide a starting place for exploring the benefits that mindfulness can bring in coping with employment uncertainty.

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APPENDIX

Mindfulness Resources

Psychoeducational workshops

- Mindful Living Programs: <http://www.mindfullivingprograms.com/>
- Omega Institute for Holistic Studies: <http://www.eomega.org/>
- Stress Reduction Program and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School: <http://www.umassmed.edu/Content.aspx?id=41254>

Resources and suggestions for reading and listening

- Epstein (1995) *Thoughts Without a Thinker: Psychotherapy From a Buddhist Perspective*
- The Institute for Meditation and Psychotherapy: <http://www.meditationandpsychotherapy.org/>
- Kabat-Zinn, mindfulness meditation practice CDs and tapes: <http://www.mindfulnessstapes.com/>
- Kabat-Zinn (1996) "Work Stress" chapter (pp. 386–395) in *Full Catastrophe Living: How to Cope With Stress, Pain and Illness Using Mindfulness Meditation*

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