What led you to dedicate your research to the area of mindfulness as a means to become self-aware in the present moment?

The core goal of this work is to investigate how a human’s innate capacity for mindfulness can be better developed. The concept of mindfulness has existed for years, with many believing that humans have an inner pull or innate drive to simply be present, aware and non-judgemental. However, mindfulness practice – in its current form – usually involves a significant amount of time, motivation, energy and devotion and, to a certain extent, the act of being ‘converted’ to a new world view.

This practice component guides people into developing habits and exercises that help them deliberately and consciously activate and put into action their mindfulness. Over the past few decades, social psychological science has shown the power and efficiency of our implicit or unconscious drives. Thus, our research involves taking a serious look at the potential of human’s innate capacity for mindfulness by using social psychological tools and methods.

Can you elaborate on your hypothesis that mindfulness is accessible to everyone and that we all have an innate capacity for it?

I am yet to meet someone who wishes they were more self-critical, more focused on their past and future, more aloof or absentminded; inner peace, awareness and being non-judgemental seem to naturally and innately coincide with our motivations. This natural mindfulness is within all of us.

Current discussions of mindfulness regard it as a target state, that is to say, people view it as something desired, that we want to be mindful, or we need to get into a mindfulness headspace. However, our approach – stemming from the original teachings – is to look at mindfulness as a process. In other words, we believe you need to activate a mindfulness process to experience it. You need to think and feel in a non-judgmental manner to be non-judgemental. In this sense, the process or, more specifically, the thoughts, ideas and concepts that help you along the process, can be triggered.

How can mindfulness be activated without the person being consciously aware of the process of ‘letting go’?

We use methods developed by social psychologists to non-consciously trigger mindfulness. One technique we use is the scrambled sentence task, based on the method developed by Thomas Srull and Robert Wyer in 1979, which unobtrusively ‘primes’ or activates concepts. In our version, which uses mindfulness-related words to prime mindfulness, while the person is focused and concentrated on constructing a meaningful sentence from a jumbled one they have been given, they do not realise that they are actually reading words related to mindfulness – such as ‘awareness’. This is done with eight to 15 sentences to subtly trigger mindfulness, which activates and brings mindfulness to mind when the participant engages in subsequent tasks.

Finally, what modes of thought is your research trying to redress?

People mostly think that we ‘activate a state’ of mindfulness and therefore become very sceptical of the idea. In reality, we do not activate this state of ‘making people mindful’. Instead, we bring concepts associated with mindfulness to mind, which are then activated and become salient when the individual performs a subsequent task. Also, many people we talk to form a strong association between mindfulness and deliberate practice – thinking that mindfulness requires will, deliberate thoughts and volitional actions. They seem to forget that the mindfulness process is just as present in our inner selves as our conscious and deliberate selves.
Present moment awareness

Researchers at the Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada, have uncovered important findings regarding mindfulness, a therapeutic state of mind with numerous psychological and physiological benefits.

MINDFULNESS, A CONCEPT

That has been around for thousands of years, is often described as paying attention to the present moment in a non-judgmental manner, while accepting our experiences of the moment. The concept of mindfulness has gathered popularity over the last few decades mainly because of its positive effects on mental wellbeing. Indeed, a stress reduction programme based on its tenets has been widely adopted in settings such as hospitals, prisons and schools. Our daily lives are filled with challenges that can have the effect of bringing us down, encouraging a mindset that can be likened to ‘tunnel vision’. Mindfulness is the act of simply being aware of the present moment and of our current emotions, in a non-judgmental manner.

MINDFULNESS AS AN INNATE CAPACITY

As the numerous benefits associated with mindfulness become increasingly well-documented, researchers at the Department of Psychology at the Université du Québec à Montréal are investigating the ways in which people’s inner ‘mindfulness’ can be automatically triggered. Led by Associate Professor Stéphane Dandeneau, the team proposes that mindfulness is accessible to everyone, that we all have an innate capacity for it, and most importantly, that this innate capacity can be ‘activated’.

In performing their investigations, the researchers are discovering more about mindfulness processes. “Mindful people have already developed the habit of automatically or self-activating mindfulness when and where they want,” explains Dandeneau. “In our view, non-mindful people don’t have this habit and would therefore benefit from a little mindfulness triggering.”

MAKING SENSE

To trigger an individual’s innate capacity for mindfulness, the team uses methods developed by social psychologists. One approach known as the scrambled sentence task seeks to subtly activate the underlying concepts of mindfulness to circumvent an individual’s resistance. Thus, the team presents the participants with words in random order and asks them to rearrange them into a meaningful sentence. Through the rearranging of these words, participants are unobtrusively exposed to terms such as ‘awareness’, ‘letting go’, ‘present moment’ and ‘non-judgement’. Thus, the individual is imparted with the concept of mindfulness without realising.

Dandeneau’s research has shown that the innate capacity for mindfulness can be implicitly activated. “By priming mindfulness, we have shown that a person’s wellbeing is maintained after failing a task or remembering one of their most negative memories,” explains Dandeneau. “Using a standardised laboratory stress task, we also showed that implicitly activating mindfulness led to greater situational self-esteem, lower perceived stress and lower anxiety, especially for those with low trait mindfulness.”

THE BUTTERFLIES THAT FLUTTER BY

Importantly, the team found that those who did not have a habit of triggering mindfulness – but who were subject to implicitly activating mindfulness – showed faster decline in cortisol, an important biomarker of the body’s response to social stress. That is, their minds and bodies reacted as if they had high trait mindfulness. In a sense, they were primed into being better able to deal with stress. “Cortisol is responsible for the butterflies we feel in our stomach that tell us to pay attention and focus,” elaborates Dandeneau. “But too many butterflies or butterflies for too long, can cause significant damage to the body. We’ve shown that the mere activation of mindfulness helps calm those butterflies, allowing you better face social stress.”

Ultimately, Dandeneau and his team have demonstrated the positive influence our innate capacity for mindfulness has on our daily experiences but, perhaps more importantly, uncovered a novel pathway to benefiting from a mindfulness approach. Honing in on this potential and finding ways of transforming it into a self-activating habit will be the focus of future endeavours. The psychological and physiological benefits of being able to handle stress are numerous and far reaching. Finding a means for individuals to deal with stress is good; finding a means for individuals to deal with stress that is already within all of us is better.