
IN THE *SPOTLIGHT*

Mindful Caring

By Karen Wood

Look at any app store on a smartphone, search 'Mindfulness', and before you know it, the visible page is full. Many of us may already be familiar with mindfulness as a way of helping us manage our mental health - an excellent development of smartphone technology. But, it becomes easy to rely on an app, when mindfulness itself is simply the practice of becoming aware, or to use the common phrase, 'being in the moment'.



I was familiar with mindfulness as an intellectual concept long before I encountered its power to help me. It was my unconscious belief that what I did was more important than who I was when it came to work; a recipe for psychological meltdown. I came to a full stop. And I was employed in a Mental Health Trust. My counsellor asked if I would consider joining a new group aimed at introducing mindfulness as a way of managing psychological distress, and so began my mindfulness journey.

I can quite truthfully say that it has been one of the most effective interventions for me, but how can it help me in my new role as Activities Coordinator at Elmhurst? How can it enable me to bring care and compassion to my everyday conversations and actions?

Caring for vulnerable people is a 'full on' state. It takes physical energy, mental awareness, emotional intelligence and a good sense of humour! The volume of person-centred tasks is immense, and combined with the necessary routines of daily life, can sometimes make us feel that we are on the 'hamster treadmill', finding ourselves increasingly exhausted. A state that most carers would recognise, I'm sure.

Simply put, mindful caring is about developing our self-awareness, physiologically and emotionally, and, at the same time, being with those states. When helping someone with self-care, we can find ourselves just running on 'autopilot'. We might physically be there, but in our heads we're elsewhere, for example, what shopping we need, and did we remember to put the bins out! It's just how our brains work.

But we can learn to practice care differently and the benefits of doing so, both for those we work with and ourselves are immense. By being aware of what's really happening to us, bringing our attention to our bodies by noticing - for example, our breathing, or stiff shoulder muscles, plus how we're feeling, (upset, anxious, focussed on the next task), this is the acknowledgement (not the wish that things were different), that allows us to re-focus our attention to the 'now.' We become free to listen and observe attentively, and to work in a compassionate way. This is, after all, the point of 'person-centred care'.

Mindfulness applied to caring is not a 'magic wand', our common human frailties will always mean we never remove the 'L' plates! However, if we are willing to give ourselves to the practice of being both fully here and now, I believe our care for our customers will be authentic and our own wellbeing nurtured.

**For wellbeing inspiration, including ideas on being mindful,
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