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Association of Christian Counsellors and Pastoral Care UK

Children, Mindfulness and Lockdown

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I am writing this in the middle of Week 2 of Lockdown 2020. When this will end, we as yet, do not know. How our world, our country, our home, town, or even our street, will look after this ends, is also unknown. As a counsellor my work in schools has currently come to an end, but it will begin again once school eventually restarts. What will I find in school? How will our children and staff have been affected?

I have just heard from a friend whose daughter is a police officer, and she told me this: "My daughter is still going into work and dealing with how crime is changing. Domestic abuse and paedophilia top of the list sadly." News reports tell us that Domestic Abuse during Lockdown is increasing. So many children are caught up in this. The world for our children is changing, and the way in which we help them may also need to be very different.

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Pre-Lockdown

Before COVID-19 came into awareness, children living in our twenty first century Western world were, and indeed, still are, living in a culture that has the advantages of incredible technology. They are able to navigate the internet with ease and skill, finding out information from all around the world¹. This, in many ways, is an exciting and adventurous time to live. However, children are also faced with a constant bombardment from loud noise, flashing lights and moving images. There is a never-ending distraction from mobile phones, text messages, emails and internet. Electronic games and computers vie for attention. Passive entertainment, such as TV and games devices, have taken the place of active

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engagement with the world around them. It can be easier to talk by using technology to someone in another part of the country, or even the world, than to talk face to face with a neighbour living in the same street².

Our children live in a troubled world. In the time before our schools were closed down, many of them were failing to inspire or connect with students. Even in classrooms there was a fast pace, with very little time for children to stop and connect with themselves, others, or even the natural world around them. There seemed to be less and less time for children to be able to pause for a while, to stop and enjoy the experience of just being themselves, or to know how it feels to be calm, peaceful and tranquil³.

Over previous years, our world and its events have become increasingly complicated. Many children are anxious and stressed due to their parents and caregivers themselves being stressed and overloaded. Some children are under pressure to be busy doing sports, activities, or homework, with no time to be by themselves and learn who they are. Other children face issues of violence, hunger and poverty². Still others suffer from the effects of trauma and living in a state of constant arousal, meaning there is a constant feeling of being unsafe. Distress is present from family break down, domestic abuse, grief and loss, and many more incidences that affect their lives.

Moving Forward

The world as we knew it came to an end in March 2020 with Lockdown. School closures, social distancing, enforced separation from loved ones, the death of some we knew and loved. How will children have survived through these months? How will their parents have handled the situation? How will those children whose mothers and fathers were in front line positions have faced the fear they must have felt? How will children have coped with a sudden halt to most of the things they knew, except for their online world. How many hours will they have spent online, and what will they have seen? What will be needed in our therapy rooms? So many questions and so much unknown.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness offers a simple and effective way of working that may be helpful for the approaching time ahead. It could be a very useful resource for our toolbox, if it hasn't already been added. Research has shown benefits for adults with many physical and psychological problems such as stress and anxiety, eating disorders and depression. Mindfulness is a practice that heightens the capacity to become attuned to our own state of being, and to become filled by the senses of the moment. It is a simple and effective way of working that plants seeds of awareness, thus reaping benefits for the future². It is a practice, rather than a religion, and is appreciated by a number of the world's faiths and spiritualities including Christian, Judaism and Buddhism. These all value the challenges of silence, solitude and spending time alone. It seems that the wellbeing of both those who are religious, or who follow no religion at all, can be enhanced by this practice.

Mindfulness is increasing in popularity amongst mental health professionals, because of its many benefits. For example, it improves mental health by bringing about a calmer response that has holistic benefits⁴. Mindfulness makes it easier to appreciate the small pleasures in life as they happen, such as enjoying a cup of tea, or a refreshing walk⁵. It reduces stress and anxiety, prevents depression, and increases feelings of calm and wellbeing. It improves physical health and helps to relieve stress, treat heart disease, reduce blood pressure, and improve sleep patterns⁶. It teaches compassion for self, and the ability to observe others without being critical⁷.

Mindfulness and Children

Although there is currently little research into the use of Mindfulness with children, it is known to help those who have concentration problems, ADHD or who are aggressive. It is helpful in promoting self-control and self-management, and also awareness of feelings and emotions³. Children who are lacking in self-confidence and have low self esteem, can also be helped through using mindfulness techniques.

Mindfulness is a practice that can help children to regulate their behaviour, maintain focused attention and think more clearly when under pressure⁸. Teaching children mindfulness skills develops social and emotional awareness, concentration and attention, body awareness and coordination, as well as interpersonal skills⁹. By empowering children with the knowledge, skill and wisdom of mindfulness, they can be helped to avoid much of the pain and suffering they may create for themselves².

Mindfulness is beneficial for those children who have suffered trauma or who face challenging and stressful situations. A child coming for therapy who has been exposed to extreme threat or trauma may already be sensitised to stress and responding to ordinary events as though they are threatening. This will have an effect on many areas of their life such as schooling and relationships, because information will be processed very differently by them, compared to other children¹⁰.

Mindfulness in the Therapy Room

Mindfulness offers children the opportunity to develop a healthy response to the many stresses of life they face. It is an invitation to notice what is happening in any given moment. Our minds often invent stories of how events will be, while the reality may be far less stressful². Breathing techniques are important aspects of mindfulness training as these enable children to manage their stress.

Children seen in the therapy room are from all walks of life and suffer from a wide range of disorders or problems. Many could certainly enjoy the benefits of mindfulness interventions. Many of the therapeutic techniques that are already used in play therapy, or creative art therapy, such as sandtray, art, music and clay are able to bring about a response of mindfulness from the child, helping them to focus and experience the present moment. However, there are additional specific interventions that could also be used intentionally to enable the therapist to direct this response from the child and to work with it.

The Therapist and Self-care

Mindfulness is not just something for the client in

therapy but is also vitally important for the therapist. We do not know at this time how Lockdown will affect each one of us. We do not know how the client who talks about their experiences of Lockdown, will affect each of us who have had our own experiences.

Mindfulness will help the therapist to be aware and mindful of their own feelings and issues, and to be able to deal with them as they arise in the therapy room¹¹. Mindfulness will enable the therapist to monitor their own awareness and attitudes and have the capacity to observe themselves and their own internal reactivity and reaction to the child's process. A mindful way of being will help the therapist to monitor their own internal world and modify it accordingly¹².

Developing a mind that is compassionate towards ourselves means developing sensitivity, openness and self awareness towards our own physical feelings, as well as our thoughts and emotions. Mindfulness is a skill that helps focus our attention on feelings and emotions, as well as fears and needs, that are observed, wondered at and then faced up to and dealt with¹³.

Developing a mind that is increasingly mindful will encourage the therapist to examine the thoughts and feelings which increase their own capacity and resilience. Although mindfulness can be taught to a client, they will benefit from it much more if the therapist themselves have the ability to practice it⁵. The therapist who has learned to develop compassion for their own thoughts and feelings will create an experience of warmth and encouraging support in their work. This will help to create the empathy and attunement that are crucial elements in therapy, helping to bring about a resonance with the client, thus enabling a fuller dimension of healing and change¹³.

Conclusion

We do not yet know the effects that will be experienced from Lockdown. However, mindfulness practice is something that will enrich the lives of children and adults alike. It will, indeed, help us all to process the effects of Lockdown.

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