

Chapter 15

Mindfulness and Mindful Learning

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"Because every performance is unique this has profound implications for how we practice and perform. Recreating best past performance may be helpful but being present and open to what we encounter, right here, right now is vital if we are to create the best performance today".

Derek Tate (2018)

Learning objectives – at the end of this chapter you will be able to do the following:

- Understand what mindfulness is and is not!
- Understand what meditation is and how it relates to mindfulness.
- Understand how mindfulness can help improve sport performance.
- Understand how a mindful learning approach can enhance the learning process and experience.
- Be aware of how you can go about developing your mindfulness skills.

List of topics:

- Defining mindfulness.
- Mindfulness vs. meditation.
- Being vs. doing.
- Mindfulness in sport.
- Mindful learning – automaticity vs. awareness.

Defining mindfulness

While the overall goal of this chapter is to understand how mindfulness can help improve sport performance, and in the context of this manual snowsport performance, it is important to start with understanding what mindfulness is and what it is not. The terms mindfulness and mindful are very common in today's society and it would be fair to say that these terms are very much buzzwords. However, like many heavily used expressions there is not always a clear understanding of their meaning. So let's start with a definition from Jon Kabat-Zinn (2004), "mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally" (p.4). So mindfulness is not about emptying the mind, as I have heard some people say, but rather it is about intentionally paying attention to particular cues. These could be bodily sensations, emotions, feelings, sounds or thoughts but the real challenge is to learn to do this in a non-judgmental way so that one simply observes whatever comes into consciousness without chasing after it.

Jon Kabat-Zinn is largely credited with bringing mindfulness to the west in the 1970's and his mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR) program has been widely used as a complementary treatment for chronic pain and other illnesses with the aim of reducing and relieving physical and psychological ailments. This program has led to many more mindfulness-based interventions being developed and researched including those that enhance performance across a wide range of domains (Baltzell, 2016). The world of sport has also seen an increase in such interventions, which are now used to compliment the more traditional cognitive based sport psychology approaches (more on this later).

Another important perspective on mindfulness comes from the Harvard psychologist and researcher Ellen Langer. Her approach almost builds on the previous definition in that once the mind has been 'controlled' and one has learnt to focus attention intentionally she suggests that mindfulness "is a process of actively making novel distinctions about objects in one's awareness" (Langer, Cohen, & Djikic, 2012, p. 1114). This has important implications on 'learning' and will be covered later in this chapter under the heading: automaticity vs. awareness.

Finally, for this opening section on defining mindfulness is a definition offered from more of a sporting (yet academic) viewpoint from Blatzell and Summers (2017), “mindfulness is a quality of awareness that objectifies the contents of experience, internally and externally, promoting greater tolerance, interest, and clarity towards one’s experience” (p. 39). This definition highlights the Kabat-Zinn idea of being present while also embracing Ellen Langer’s idea of noticing novelty.

REFLECTION

How do the definitions offered relate to sport and snowsport?

Can you think of instances, during snowsport performance, where remaining present moment focused is essential?

For example when skiing/riding difficult variable terrain to what extent is your attention directed inwards towards feelings and sensations or outwardly towards sounds or visual cues?

Mindfulness vs. meditation

This is another area of confusion when it comes to understanding mindfulness. Meditation was created five thousands years ago, originates from the East and is rooted in religion and spirituality. Whereas, mindfulness has been around for about 50 years and is a Western creation for living and managing life in our modern fast paced world.

There are many forms of meditation practice, of which one is mindfulness. Meditation practices commonly use *one* thing to anchor ones attention such as the breath, an object or a mantra (word/phrase). Mindfulness, in its more formal practice, is a type of meditation and this is often referred to as 'open monitoring' meditation. This involves simply observing moment to moment anything that arises in consciousness be it thoughts, feelings, emotions, sensations or sounds. As highlighted earlier, in defining mindfulness, this practice involves observing these stimuli without being taken away on a whole train of thought about what you have observed. Formal practice of *open monitoring* meditation will help with preparation for real life and snowsports specific situations. For example, when waiting for your turn to ski a run of short turns in a technical exam, you may observe the feeling of nervousness. However, if this then leads to a whole series of thoughts about whether you will perform well and perhaps reflecting on negative past experiences, or worrying about future outcomes, then your present moment focus has been lost and your ability to perform in the here and now adversely affected.

Thus, mindfulness is simply the non-judgmental, moment-to-moment awareness that can be brought into everyday life while meditation is a more formal practice that can include mindfulness.

Being vs. doing

We are human beings not human doings! However, that said being and doing are both of equal importance. **Doing** is about getting things done, achieving goals, and problem solving. Thinking about past, present and future. While **being** is about focusing on moment-to-moment experience, being fully present, aware and engaged in the task in hand (whatever that might be).

So, how can one strike the right balance? In our modern world there is a great deal of pressure to get things done, so quite often the balance is tipped toward doing more than being. Practicing meditation can help redress that balance and allow the mind to regain some order with thoughts becoming more intentional. Uninvited thoughts, rumination and worrying can end up creating a very busy 'monkey mind' and this can easily lead to unwanted stress. Through meditation there is often a realisation of just how busy the mind can be!

In the sporting arena there is a need for both mental states. Goal setting, planning for the future and learning from past experience are all very important for athletes and for snowsport instructors working their way through the certification system. However, when engaged in the activity itself what is important is the quality of attention that is brought to that activity with full engagement and concentration on the task in hand helping to facilitate optimal experiences (flow). So, in order to perform to a very high level *being* in the moment is crucial.

REFLECTION

What is your balance like of being and doing?

When engaged in snowsports activities either in practice or performance do you tend to have full engagement on the task in hand?

Mindfulness in sport

In the last 10 to 15 years there has been a lot more research carried out on how mindfulness can improve sport performance. Many of the mindfulness-based interventions that have been developed have a common aim, which is to develop the skill of focused attention in both practice and competition. Other benefits may include reduced stress, a reduction in negative thoughts, greater acceptance and ability to tolerate feelings and emotions and an increased frequency of flow.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to go through all these different interventions but one of the more recent interventions is the Mindfulness Meditation Training in Sport (MMTS) and its successor MMTS 2.0 (Baltzell & Summers, 2017). This particular program is based on previous interventions like the Mindfulness-Acceptance-Commitment (MAC; Gardner & Moore, 2004) approach. MMTS 2.0 has 6 modules, using a series of mindfulness exercises that help to establish new habits of attention and emotion regulation.

There is both a need and an opportunity to develop specific interventions for snowsports and the author is currently engaged in such a process through his studies on the MSc Applied Positive Psychology course at Bucks New University. Publication and results of this study should be available towards the end of 2019.

One final point, that was eluded to earlier in this chapter, is that using mindfulness in sport to enhance performance is a useful addition to the more traditional cognitive based approaches such as thought stopping, visualisation, imagery, pre-performance routines, positive self talk etc. With the recognition that having a range of techniques available helps to accommodate for individual needs.

Mindful learning – automaticity vs. awareness

Because every performance is unique this has profound implications for how we practice and perform. Recreating best past performance may be helpful but being present and open to what we encounter, right here, right now is vital if we are to create the best performance today.

The statement above was the opening quote at the beginning of this chapter and links to both the Ellen Langer approach to mindfulness and mindful learning and how they integrate into the Diamond Model of Skill Acquisition, which was explained in the previous chapter. The final part of this chapter will unpack what that statement means and how both automaticity and awareness are vital parts of a successful and on-going learning experience.

Automaticity is akin to being able to perform skills without having to think through the process because they are pre-programmed movement patterns. In other words, motor learning has taken place and the skill is *mostly* autonomous as detailed in the Fitts and Posner (1979) model. This is, indeed, an important part of learning and it is entirely desirable to learn movement patterns so that they are automatic and attention becomes more effortless (Tate, 2017).

However, being on *automatic pilot* has its limitations. Lets take an example from skiing and in particular imagine skiing bumps. Due to the open environment where snowsports take place the performer is required to be continuously aware of what is happening around them: changes in terrain, snow texture/depth, weather/visibility not to mention other people. If the performer were to simply rely on pre-programming, from previous learned skills, then they are relying on what has occurred in the past (Baltzell & Summers, 2017) and not open to noticing new and novel stimuli in the present (Langer, 2000).



In snowsports, as in many sports, it is important to be constantly aware of slight changes and variations to what is happening both inside and outside of the body. That way the performer can be more adaptable and capable of making on-going adjustments. Perhaps this helps to answer one of the questions posed earlier, in this chapter, as to whether attention should be directed inwardly or outwardly? The performer needs a heightened sense of awareness to *everything* that is happening. Langer (1998) sums this up perfectly by stating that, “In a truly great performance all technical skills are transformed into a unique, context-sensitive, one of a kind experience” (p. 25).

Summary – key points from this chapter

- Mindfulness involves being present, focusing attention *intentionally*, observing what is going on while remaining non-judgemental and having a heightened sense of awareness to new and novel stimuli.
- Mindfulness is simply the non-judgemental, moment-to-moment awareness that can be brought into everyday life while meditation is more formal practice that can include mindfulness.
- In order to perform to a very high level *being* in the moment is crucial.
- Many mindfulness-based interventions that have been developed have a common aim, which is to develop the skill of focused attention in both practice and competition.
- Using mindfulness in sport to enhance performance is a useful addition to the more traditional cognitive based approaches.
- When motor learning has taken place the skill is *mostly* autonomous.
- Being on *automatic* pilot has its limitations. If the performer were to simply rely on pre-programming, from previous learned skills, then they are relying on what has occurred in the past and not open to noticing new and novel stimuli in the present.

Suggested reading and resources

There are many books available on mindfulness but the one recommended for further reading is 'The Power of Mindfulness' by Amy Baltzell and Joshua Summers. This text is about their program “Mindfulness Meditation Training in Sport (MMTS)” which is very transferable to the world of snowsports hence it is an excellent resource.

For those of you who are interested in practicing meditation, more formally, there are a number of very useful apps available. **Insight Timer** and **Smiling Mind** are both free apps while **Headspace** is subscription based. Using these kinds of apps can help with developing a regular habit of daily meditation practice.



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