**An Interpretative Phenomenological Study Exploring the Lived Experiences of Participation in a Mindfulness and Compassion Course**

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**Declaration of interest statement**

The authors declare no conflict of interest

**Ethical considerations**

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**Abstract**

The aim of this study was to examine the lived experience of an 8 week or equivalent 3-4-day mindfulness and compassion course using participant diary entries to explore participants’ thoughts, feelings and emotions during the course.

Sixteen participants (n = 14 females, n = 2 males; age group = 45-54 years old) participated in research during a mindfulness and compassion course. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to explore the experiences of the participants.

Three superordinate themes emerged in the analysis: Expectations a person brings to mindfulness training; Epiphanies/Turning Points/Game Changers: When it just makes sense; Simple class vs. cluttered life: Practising in class is different to practising in everyday life.

Within the three themes there were twelve subordinate themes including expectations a person brings to mindfulness training; the social awkwardness of practising in a group; meditation for beginners is hard work; the importance of the teacher in making it okay to experience uncertainty; the importance of metaphors/stories in making sense of mindfulness concepts; compassion: important but challenging; shifting awareness of body, place and mind; epiphanies/turning points/game changers: when it just makes sense; noticing suffering in everyday life; responding differently to suffering in everyday life; knowing the self-better: in a non-judgmental way; simple class vs. cluttered life: practicing in class is different to practicing in everyday life. The current study provides an understanding of the lived experience of participating on a mindfulness and compassion course.

**Keywords**: mindfulness; compassion; interventions; qualitative; IPA; non-clinical

# Introduction

 The integration of mindfulness and compassion has been identified within many areas however, the Buddhist pathway also highlights the importance within mindfulness training. The Buddhist pathway includes mindfulness training as a starting point in which the student then progresses and advances to compassion practices to the self and to all beings (Thurman, 1997). Mindfulness and compassion have been identified as being so strongly intertwined that it is said that“Wisdom can never be brought to completion without the perfection of compassion” (Candrakīrti. 2002, P.15). In the West, the connection between mindfulness and compassion has also been likened to ‘two wings of a bird’ (Germer & Siegel, 2012), with mindfulness offering a context for compassion focused approaches to flourish (Tirch, 2010). The evolution of compassion training began by encompass both compassion and loving kindness meditations (Tirch, 2010).

The lived experience of attending a mindfulness course tends to receive less attention than the quantitative evaluations measured from the course. This is evident with the high volume of quantitative research that focuses on numerical outcome measures. However, exploring the lived experience could inform us of how these changes take place, giving a deeper understanding of the processes of change. To give a more holistic overview of the research, qualitative approaches were used to give a picture of the lived experience of a mindfulness and compassion course. In keeping with mindfulness, exploration of reflection and introspection are important components within the journey of practice. William James first coined the term “introspection” which is described as “looking into our minds and reporting what we there discover” (1890, p.185). Similarly, in mindfulness, being aware and observing the mind and body is encouraged through introspection practices such as the body scan and using the senses.

A further dimension of introspection is self-transcendence, a concept engrained in holistic approaches such as Transpersonal Psychology. Self-transcendence is defined as ‘…a fundamental shift in one’s life attitude, from an egotistic focus to caring for others or something greater than oneself’ (Wong et al, 2020), alongside being identified as a core mechanism of mindfulness (Hanley et al., 2020). Recent research has shown an increase in decentreing and self-transcendence following only five mindfulness sessions (Hanley et al, 2020).

Qualitative research gives the participant a voice and an opportunity to express what is important to them, while allowing the participant to emotionally process the experience, enabling a type of catharsis (Dickson-Swift et al, 2006). As mindfulness meditation is an intervention used to increase skills such as awareness, introspection and reflection, this may be evident in the richness of data collected within the study. First person accounts allow for a deeper understanding representing the stream of consciousness, which is a direct introspection of experience. Empowering the participants allows for deeper self-analysis and consequently a real and intimate response. First person accounts such as reflective diaries also require the participants to use their own words rather than be guided by options predetermined by the researcher, allowing reflection on thoughts, feelings and behaviours during the course. Diaries outline a first-person account over multiple time points that not only provide the processes of change for practitioners of mindfulness, but support the generation of hypotheses for quantitative research and theories (Kerr et al, 2011). Diaries as a method of data collection reduce retrospection, recall and reframing errors, whilst eliminating demand characteristics typically found with the presence of the researcher (Sheble & Wildemuth, 2009).

## ***Previous research***

Previous studies using quantitative measures have identified changes through pre and post outcome measures in a range of different areas (Bergen-Cico et al, 2013; Carmody & Baer 2008; Gouda et al, 2016; Shapiro et al, 2011). However, few studies have explored changes during a mindfulness intervention using qualitative methods, in particular diary methods (Kerr et al, 2011; Stelter, 2009). Stelter (2009) used diary entries to examine three clinical client perspectives of a mindfulness meditation course which included 2-3 hours a week ran over 6 to 8 weeks. The intervention included the components of informal meditation: breathing exercises, body scanning; mountain meditations, sitting meditations, guided practices for homework. The diaries were completed on a weekly basis to offer an insight into experience and changes made during the course.

Interviews were also completed at the beginning, middle and end of the course. The first interview consisted of questions about illness history, reasons for joining and expectations of the course. The details of the second set of interview questions were not provided by the author. The third interview included questions on the evaluation of the course instructor and teaching environment. A Thematic Analysis (TA) (Holton, 1973) was used to analyse the interview transcripts. The results from the TA included the following themes: experience of mindfulness; words or metaphors describing mindfulness; thoughts, feelings or reflections; illness stories; effects or learning in relation to the training; life dreams or ambitions; possible difficulties. The diary entries were analysed using narrative analysis, an approach that allows individuals to narrate one’s experiences as they live them. For the narrative analysis the author summarised the results into sections. Firstly, all participants found the experience of a mindfulness meditation course a good alternative path towards supporting one’s health and wellbeing. Secondly, a common feature identified for all three participants were difficulties around rumination and worry. Thirdly, mindfulness supported a transition from the ruminative to perceptual self-focus. Lastly, embodied cognition supports the change in the relationship with one’s thoughts and becoming more present moment focused.

Another study by Kerr et al. (2011) used diary methods pre and post an 8-week MBSR intervention exploring home practice. The MBSR included 2-2.5hour weekly sessions beginning with the body scan (weeks 1-2), mixture of the body scan and yoga (weeks 3-4), longer sitting meditation (weeks 5-6) and without the guidance of tapes a combination of the body scan and sitting meditation (weeks 7-8). Five participants completed daily diary entries which included practice logs and time spent dedicated to the practice. The design was split into two parts, the first included Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to analyse the diary entries. The results from this section highlighted that participants identified with moments of distress that related to the practice including improved affect and increased abilities of the observing self.

The second part to the analysis used Observational Coding Scheme to identify a potential cognitive mechanism within mindfulness defined as reperceiving (Shapiro et al, 2006). Reperceiving has been identified as the ability to disengage from one’s own experiences and observe them without judgement (Shapiro et al, 2006).). The results from the Observational Coding Scheme highlighted three main results. For all participants there was an increase in reperceiving during the course along with an increase in reperceiving attributed to a reduction in negativity or increases in meta-awareness. In addition, spikes in reactivity were identified midway. Both of the results were shown to be in support of the perspective shift ‘reperceiving’ proposed by Shapiro et al, (2006).

For both studies there were limitations, firstly, both studies included a small sample size which limits the range of experiences collected from participants on a mindfulness course. Kerr et al, (2011) noted that a bigger sample size could have added to the mechanism of ‘reperceiving’. Secondly, Kerr et al, (2011) only collected experiences related to home practice rather than the whole course experience with week 8 being incomplete. Lastly, in the study by Stelter (2009), three participants from a clinical population were chosen based on those to be experiencing the most serious life challenges.

Stelter (2009) also states that the referrer for the course was also the client/participants’ active Psychologist and participants were expected to completed final interviews on the evaluation of the teacher. This could have contributed to bias in the responses due to the relationship with the Psychologist. Stelter (2009) also did not include the results of the interviews, although there was mention that all participants had high expectations of the course but this was not discussed any further in the write up of the study.

However, both studies (Kerr et al, 2011; Stelter, 2009) recognised that participants were able to identify with the observing self and work towards improvement by the end of the course. Both of the mindfulness interventions were different in both structure and content, nevertheless both highlight the change in the observing self-relating to non-attachment and de-centering from the self.

The current research sought to add and extend on the previous findings by including a larger sample of participants from the general population, collecting diary entries related to the whole course experience rather than a selected part and exploring the lived experience of a mindfulness and compassion course. The overall aim of this study was to explore the lived experience of attending a mindfulness and compassion course offering an insight into the participants’ experience using diary entries.

# Methodology

## ***Participants***

A total of sixteen participants consented to participate in the research during an 8-week or 3-4 day equivalent mindfulness and compassion course through Mindfulness CIC. The participant characteristics included females (n = 14) and males (n = 2). Participants were all above 18 years old with the most common age group between 45 and 54 years old. The ethnicity of the group was majority white British (n=12), white European (n=2), and British Asian (n= 2).

## ***Materials***

Diaries were given to participants to allow reflection on one’s practice and journey of mindfulness. The diaries were given to the participant at the start of the course to complete throughout the course. The participants were given the diary which included entries for thoughts, feelings and behaviours during the course. The diaries were structured allowing at least a page for each day which was left blank for the participants to complete.

## ***Course***

The Mindfulness and Compassion course was developed by Mindfulness CIC to offer the necessary skills for participants to develop self-awareness, self-care, compassion, and to bring meaning to people’s lives. The teacher would deliver a 1.5hr section of the course on a weekly basis following the traditional format. The mindfulness and compassion course combined breathing practices, compassion, body scans, and psychoeducation. In addition, participants were expected to commit to homework set out by the teacher, which included formal and informal practices of mindfulness.

The topics covered in the sessions were as follows:

Theme 1: Jewel in the ICE

Theme 2: The Feeling Body

Theme 3: Living in the Present

Theme 4: Calming the Chattering Mind

Theme 5: Dancing with Dragons

Theme 6: Compassion – Loving Kindness Meditations

Theme 7: ABC of Mindfulness

Theme 8: Bringing Mindfulness to Life/ Next Steps

# *Analysis*

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative inductive approach that supports an ontological interpretative position which attempts to explore the meanings and the essence of experiences. IPA was the chosen methodology for this piece of research as the main focus is on the meaning essence of the lived experience, which is an imperative standpoint for the research question. The term ‘Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis’ consists of two parts to the approach. Firstly, phenomenology is not only the understanding but also the exploration of the participant event. Secondly, the interpretative nature includes the ‘making sense’ of these experiences (Smith et al, 2009).

IPA is defined as an approach that examines ‘how people make sense of their major life experiences’ (Smith et al, 2009, p. 32). When individuals are engrossed in a new experience, usually of importance, they bring awareness and reflection to that event. This allows the individual to process their experience of the event. IPA aims to capture and explore the meanings that participants assign to their experiences (Reid, 2005). Larkin et al, (2006) advise the IPA researcher to firstly understand the participant’s world and to describe what this is like for the participant, bringing together the participant and researcher. The second part is the interpretative analysis which includes commentary on how and what this experience means for the participant. Therefore, the researcher plays an important role in constructing the expression of participant’s experiences.

The aim of this research was not simply to describe the experiences of participants attending a mindfulness and compassion course, but also to explore and capture what this experience meant to them. Dilthey (1976) described IPA as targeting the ‘constructive unit of experience’ which in turn means the experiences in life that are of significance in one’s life (Dilthey, 1976 cited in Smith et al, 2009, p.2). Attending a mindfulness and compassion course for some individuals could be a significant life experience. Some examples could include integrating new skills, learning about introspection and stress reduction.

In summary, the research question and epistemological position indicate that IPA would enable an understanding of the lived experiences and meanings associated with attending a mindfulness and compassion course. Qualitative approaches are aligned with the post-positivist paradigm and are helpful when ‘*exploring, describing and interpreting the personal and social experiences of participants*’ (Smith 2008). IPA has also been deemed appropriate for research that aims to relate findings to bio-psycho-social approaches (Smith, 2004). Therefore, IPA analysis was deemed the most appropriate method to use for this research.

# Findings

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| **Superordinate Themes** | **Subordinate Themes**  |
| Expectations a person brings to mindfulness training | Expectations a person brings to mindfulness trainingMeditation for beginners is hard work |
| Epiphanies/Turning Points/Game Changers: When it just makes sense | The social awkwardness of practising in a groupThe importance of the teacher in making it okay to experience uncertainty The importance of metaphors/stories in making sense of mindfulness conceptsCompassion: important but challengingShifting awareness of body, place and mindEpiphanies/turning points/game changers: when it just makes senseKnowing the self-better: in a non-judgemental way |
| Simple class vs. cluttered life: Practising in class is different to practising in everyday life | Noticing suffering in everyday lifeResponding differently to suffering in everyday lifeSimple class vs. cluttered life: practising in class is different to practising in everyday life |

**Expectations a person brings to mindfulness training**

***Expectations a person brings to mindfulness training***

There are numerous reasons people attend mindfulness; therefore, different expectations are placed onto the courses, these include learning new skills for emotional regulation, a retreat experience or a break from normal life, step towards teacher training or to have a go at something new. Hannah for example, describes the expectations placed on the course through external pressures of the employer. These expectations include the management of mental health difficulties that have been a struggle.

‘I am putting a lot of pressure on this course helping me to better handle stress, anxiety and depression I have been struggling with over the past twelve months. Whilst my employer has been patient that patience is wearing thin’.

This external pressure has come after a long struggle with mental health while Hannah feels that the patience of their employer is now coming to an end. This places additional pressure for the course to be successful. Expectations around mental wellbeing are also a consideration for Stacey who describes how unknowingly the course helped to find pauses in life, while the expectations of the course was to get a hold of the anxious mind from running around all day creating a negative feedback loop:

‘So I started the course unknowingly to find pauses again. Knowingly, to stop my anxious brain from running around and around and around and around all day, everyday’.

As a beginner in mindfulness there can be many questions regarding the process of change in the relationship one has with one’s thoughts, in particularly thoughts of negativity. One of these questions include the expectation of mindfulness quieting or shutting up the darker thoughts. Mary questions how mindfulness will help in the hope that it will make some changes to the difficulties they are facing and whether they will become worse before they get better:

‘I am wandering if whatever may have happened/may be happening/ or will be happening will give my dark side something to moan about! Is mindfulness going to train it to shut up? Or does it just melt away? Will it get nastier before it goes?’.

***Meditation for beginners is hard work***

Home practice is encouraged to help with both the formal and informal aspects of meditation. One of the common requests is to complete a mindful activity during a simple everyday activity such as brushing teeth or showering. Tim attempts to have a go at this practice but recognises the uncertainty around what is means to have a mindful shower:

‘We were told to be mindful in our actions e.g. a ‘mindful shower’ whilst I attempted to do this I realised that I did not actually know what this means’.

Katie goes on to reflect and acknowledge not to beat oneself up over lack of concentration but to continue with the practice of being in the present moment and acceptance:

‘I am concerned about how I can improve my concentration/awareness and reduce the following of my thoughts/distractions. But I now know not to beat myself up about it and to try to just accept what is and be present and aware of what is going on’.

A key concern of the beginner is around the correct implementation of mindfulness techniques. This uncertainty of thoughts, sensations and the external world can be frustrating for a beginner. Stacey outlines these doubts around getting it right, but begins to realise there are no right or wrong thoughts, only thoughts:

‘And then I’d think God I am doing this all wrong because I am thinking all the wrong thoughts and I don’t feel at one with nature etc and yet the rules say there are no right or wrong thoughts, just thoughts’.

Stacey continues with the process of meditation and likens it to a bespoke suit. Recognising that the skills do not come instantly but once things come into place it works out better in the long run:

‘Reaping the benefits of meditation feels like waiting for a bespoke suit, custom made entirely to your lumps and bumps. It takes a lot longer than the instant purchase, with many irritating backward-and-forward trips to the tailor, but fits way better in the end’.

Lisa also outlines the frustrations with the resistance to practice. Through this new found awareness Lisa has identified that when a light shines on the difficulties there is a resistance against what might come up. During meditation practice difficult thoughts, feelings and sensations can feel overwhelming as they are brought to the surface:

‘Thoughts included frustration at my resistance to practice. Feelings include a lot of resistance coming up to shine the light on stuff maybe I don’t want to see.’

Another common difficulty for beginners is the ability to focus on the breath with the acceptance that the mind will naturally drift. Mary expresses the frustration of what seems like a failure when the mind drifts and wanders. Mary questions the fears of feeling like a failure when trying to follow the breath and if this feeling will continue:

‘Try to follow the breath – fail – try again etc etc!! Must ask about this- I am always going to fail it seems expected – would I just feel like a failure?? (common bad thought for me)’.

**Epiphanies/Turning Points/Game Changers: When it just makes sense**

***The social awkwardness of practising in a group***

Zac expresses that even in a group setting a sense of discomfort can still be felt which can make one feel separate from the group. Mindfulness training is traditionally taught in a group setting which for some can pose a challenge for those seeking time alone. For some individuals timeout and time with oneself is what they are seeking:

‘After feeling uncomfortable for about ten minutes & disconnected from everyone, I then enjoyed the freedom of not having to speak to people and make conversation for the sake of it!’.

The uncomfortableness of group discussions can put individuals on the spot when discussing a subject that they might not feel comfortable talking openly about. Katie expresses on reflection that having some patience was a better option. To see how the course continues to unfold before adding one’s opinions and thoughts to the group. The uncertainty over having value to add to the discussion could be attributed to an uncomfortableness of disclosing in the group, or not having the answers to discuss at depth at this stage in the journey:

‘I noticed during the group discussion time and Q & A sessions I have been very quiet….I am normally quite vocal but upon reflection, I think I am waiting out to see how the course unfolds, how the ‘land lies’ maybe, perhaps I am uncertain that what I have to say has value at present or perhaps I do not have the faculty to question yet, until I know where I am’.

New skills that a beginner experiences include periods of pauses and silences. For the beginner this practice tends to induce a sense of unease or discomfort as pauses and silences are usually a contrast to the busy lives that most are seeking a break from during the course. Stacey discloses how the uncomfortable feeling of pauses and silences is exacerbated when in the presence of other individuals, which can be a challenging adjustment when learning new skills:

‘Silence is a very powerful thing. As a meditation newbie, it’s tricky enough sitting in silence alone, but sharing that silence with thirteen strangers is a very disconcerting experience’.

Stacey goes on to express the enhanced awareness of the environment but at a deeper physiological level. The normal bodily functions and mishaps become ever clearer when pauses and silences are introduced into the practice. Noticing and becoming aware, but also the connection as human beings sharing the same space. Stacey also suggests that the British control these natural urges, such as the need to break wind, out of politeness to others:

‘Rumbling tummies to heavy breathing, coughing, sniffing, nose blowing, scratching, fidgeting, the list goes on. The fear of the fart is also very real but so far we’ve controlled ourselves because we’re all ever so polite and British…’

During mindfulness practices, a range of emotions can be present. Mary describes a mixture of strong emotions happiness and sadness at hearing nature in the present moment. The urge to cry was strong but was blocked with the discomfort of displaying this emotion in front of the group. Mindfulness can evoke a range of emotions during the practice and building of skills. For some individuals it may not be the right environment to feel comfortable expressing these emotions:

‘During one of the meditations I was managing to think about nothing quite peacefully when I suddenly heard a little bird chirrup briefly. I instantly felt a deep kind of sadness but at the same time I felt deep happiness. It made me want to cry but I stopped myself because I didn’t want to in front of the group’.

 ***The importance of the teacher in making it okay to experience uncertainty***

During meditation, new experiences and sensations come into play. Clare details how a particular meditation had an impact on her body, which filled her with a sense of unease. Afterwards the teacher posed a question, igniting a sense of laughter, which was somewhat of a relief to Clare during a moment of uncertainty:

‘During the meditation the first thing I felt was the pull at the heart and then the tightness, quivering lips and flaring nostrils I sat with it, it eased a little and I just felt what was there. When the teacher asked us to look at the other side I then felt this urge to laugh and smile. It felt somewhat a relief’.

As the courses progress a continuation of practice and consequently new behaviours are implemented. Stacey reiterates the teacher’s response of the skills and techniques becoming easier with practice. With this practice, one will begin to notice the changes in everyday life:

‘And that is what daily practice will eventually teach us; to sit more comfortably with our thoughts. Teacher tells us that it will get easier and when we start to notice the small changes it gradually makes in our everyday lives, we’ll get through the initial pain of doing it. So we persist’.

The continuation of the practice through support by the teacher is also highlighted by Rochelle who reports a time when they became so deep in the meditation that it became frightening and came out of it. The teacher offered support with the feelings of the unknown and offered reassurance that it will become easier with practice:

‘A couple of times I got so deep I got so deep into the meditation that I got a fright and snapped myself out of it. When I asked the teacher what this was, he said it was the fear of the unknown and that I should become more comfortable with going deeper the more I do it. At the end of the day I felt more relaxed and less anxious’.

***The importance of metaphors/stories in making sense of mindfulness concepts***

Mindfulness is not only taught through the experiential practice, but through Buddhist stories, metaphors and philosophy that help to cement important concepts within mindfulness. Typically, in other therapeutic orientations, such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), stories and metaphors are also used to consolidate new skills and support behaviour change (Otto 2000).

Katie describes the experience of learning about the two-dagger teaching as an important concept that needs further analysis. Through this concept, Katie has become aware of the relationship with oneself, which has allowed a reflection on how the two daggers are applicable to the sense of self:

‘The two dagger teaching was a hugely important idea that I need to think about more. It makes sense and as someone who is pretty tough on herself it really struck a chord’.

Katie continues with another metaphor of the cracked vase. They feel this is something to work towards but at present they are unable to achieve. The story of the cracked vase also touched on the existential human condition around the acceptance of endings and death:

‘The cracked vase story was also massive. I can see it is something to strive for but at present I cannot see myself achieving that level of un-attachment and acceptance that everything breaks/dies…more food for thought’

Marie recognises how events can affect our thoughts, emotions and actions. Marie explores the fear for the need to be in control and how these fears can create stories. On further reflection, Marie believes that stepping back highlights that it is not often the event but the thoughts and beliefs that cause the suffering:

‘I often fear the need to be in control drawn by unconscious fears that create stories in my head – the need to step back and see things more clearly. I think it is often not an ‘event’ I react to rather than my beliefs about it and the thoughts I have’.

As one learns the skills of mindfulness and becomes more aware of how to apply these new skills, a framework is built on how to manage future situations that allow further opportunity for practice. Nita describes the use of the second dagger, followed by becoming aware and being able to realise what was happening in the moment. On reflection of this situation, Nita was able to understand the power of thoughts and present moment reality:

‘A situation occurred when I was describing an object and felt suddenly that I may have upset someone, but then realised that it was a thought and a second dagger. When I prompted to think, I am now clear and realised how easily you can believe your thoughts without questioning and realising you are not in the present moment of reality’.

The teacher uses old records as a comparison for how mindfulness allows us to take things a bit slower and integrating pauses into our lives. Stacey goes on to suggest that streaming music is an analogy for the fast-paced lives that we live. On reflection, Stacey recognises that slowing down and finding pauses are what they currently need in their life:

‘He reminds us of the good old days when records - proper records-had pauses between the songs and all you’d hear at that point between the tracks was maybe a spot of fluff on the needle. Nowadays streaming music has no room for pause, and neither do our lives. So I started the course, unknowingly, to find pauses again’.

Katie outlines the words of wisdom from the teacher about how to treat our thoughts – not so much as enemies but just to observe. This helped Katie to feel less pressured by the current concerns they were feeling:

‘Teacher highlighted that thoughts are not the enemy and should not be treated as such, just noted and observed. I felt this took the pressure off my concerns….’.

***Compassion: Important but challenging***

On the final session, Tim describes the compassion meditation as warming and rewarding. The most difficult aspect of the compassion meditation was giving compassion to someone they found challenging. However, on completion, they felt enlightened and this feeling was the strongest compared to the others:

‘During the final session today, we were introduced to compassionate meditation. I found this very warming and rewarding. I found the hardest letting someone in who I found challenging, but once I managed this, I found it the most enlightening and the feeling was the strongest’.

Even with practice, Clare also expresses how self-compassion can still be a challenging skill. Clare is aware of feeling angry towards the lack of self-compassion practice, while feeling at ease focusing on another. Further self-analysis shows a propensity towards giving compassion rather than self-compassion:

‘I always find this practice a little harder because I find it harder to be compassionate towards myself and I notice this when I meditate as when I focus on myself I feel angry as I don’t do this enough. When I focus on another I feel lighter and comforted perhaps. I find it easier to be compassionate towards others and not myself’.

Marie describes how sitting with difficult emotions and feelings in a calm and non-judgemental way can support self-compassion. With this awareness, self-compassion becomes an important concept:

‘Sitting with and feeling my emotions-with curiosity and no judgement very calming and helpful. Can see the compassion for self is powerful’.

Marie goes on to express their commitment to find out who they are and to find happiness. With the commitment of mindfulness, they feel in a better position to cope with life and to make the best of themselves integrating the skills learnt. While acknowledging that compassion and acceptance will support this process:

‘I want to know who I am and find happiness. I am committed to the practice of mindfulness. I feel better equipped to cope with my life and make the best of me with compassion and acceptance’.

Stacey explores and reflects the changes that have been made whilst being on the course. This has resulted in a greater understanding of oneself and has led to a kinder more compassionate relationship with the self:

‘I’m a bit different now. I’m getting to know myself, I’m kinder and more understanding of myself, and most important of all, I like myself. Me and myself are mates! Not to say I didn’t like myself before, but I barely gave myself a chance to know me. I thought the good bits were alright, they’d do. I despised the bad and would do anything in my power to cover them up, from others and from me’.

***Shifting awareness of body, place and mind***

During meditation practice we become aware of how the mind works and this tends to be negatively orientated. Stacey describes how they become aware of their own mind and how it regularly works against the self, resulting in created scenarios. However, they begin to see the differences between helpful and unhelpful thoughts.

‘I am becoming aware of how my mind plays tricks on me and regularly works against me…..Watching my mind at work though – playing out scenarios of bad things which I invent will happen……means I am starting to see which thoughts are destructive, meaningless and harmful, and which thoughts are constructive, meaningful and helpful’.

Isabelle describes feeling a physical shift in their body, along with the heart feeling like it was going to explode during a meditation practice. This experience for Isabelle was a greater awareness of body while also resulted in heightened emotion:

‘My mind was spinning like crazy and this time I felt that the right part of my body was higher than the left one (I could control balance). I also had the feeling that my heart exploded (started breathing louder and louder) – got very emotional’.

***Epiphanies/Turning Points/Game Changers: When it just makes sense***

During the course, introspection and self-analysis is paramount to understanding patterns of behaviours for oneself, both the positive and negative. Hannah describes a moment of introspection when they realise that the biggest critic is themselves and how during meditation the critical thoughts were towards oneself:

‘I’ve realised today that my biggest critic is myself. During meditation, I became aware that as my thoughts drifted off I was criticising myself. This has been an epiphany for me’.

During mindfulness practice introspection techniques can highlight one’s current situation including the inclination towards a fast-paced environment. Katie realises during the meditation practice that she had not sat still for a short time since her last pregnancy over three years ago:

‘The first meditation practice was also a profound experience in that I realised I had not sat still (physical) for 10 minutes like that in over 3 years, probably during a meditation session when in my last pregnancy’.

Turning points in practice help to consolidate and make changes to current patterns of behaviour. Marie describes lightbulb moments as helping to become aware of judging thoughts while recognising that it is okay to experience emotions:

‘Found today really helpful – quite a few lightbulb moments, especially related to the need to ‘cleanse our soul’ as well as ourselves – not to judge thoughts and know that emotions are okay, but to distinguish what is real rather than just thoughts’.

Some of the teachings in mindfulness go against what natural inclinations such as recalling difficult thoughts when we would like to push them away. Stacey describes the often-perplexing nature of the experiencing as a ‘mind-screw’:

‘The game-changing/ mind-screwing bit for me was the teacher encouraging us to sit with a reoccurring thought we may have that is causing us unnecessary stress, or created emotions, and to say in our heads, having a thought’.

***Knowing the self-better: in a non-judgemental way***

With the exploration of one’s life and the self, the frustration felt can be a mixture of challenges that need to be faced. Isabelle recognises during the course that the frustration they feel towards one’s partner is more to do with the lack of space and breaks they have in their own life:

‘I just realised that my frustration with my partner is not because whatever he was doing – it’s because I’m not having any ‘breathing’ space in my life/I don’t allow myself to have breaks’.

Mary describes the experience of the course as a release of tension. The protected time within the meditation allows one to not have to think of all the things one must get done. The only things one needs to try is to remain in the present allowing for an opportunity to refresh:

‘Really though I have been walking on air. I have experienced a release of tension knowing that during a meditation I don’t have to think, I don’t have time to plan, I don’t have time to solve problems all that is to do is to be present and this makes room for the rejuvenating brain – rest, peacefulness and happiness’.

When we do slow down and begin to take pauses, we also recognise that our lives can be fast paced and for some chaotic. Florbella explores the reasons as to why there is so much need for distraction in their life. This is continued with more depth on reflecting why they are not choosing to experience life much of the time:

‘…it made me wonder if I am limiting myself with negative worries and concern. I was wondering during today’s session why am I distracting myself so much? Why am I choosing not to experience my life so much of my time?’.

**Simple class vs. cluttered life: Practising in class is different to practising in everyday life**

***Noticing suffering in everyday life***

As we become more mindful of the behaviours one can also become mindful of the impact we have and the suffering we could impose on others. Stacey describes the treatment another would receive should they feel the need to win the argument. On refection they arrive at the conclusion that their argumentative attitude is socially detrimental:

‘But if in the process of an argument I win by making the unlucky recipient of my wrath feel terrible, it’s not winning at all. If I dish out the silent treatment to the offender until they realise the error of their way, guess what? I also don’t win as silence is almost as hard as admitting defeat for me’.

Awareness of the suffering we impose on ourselves can be more intense when we do not have the support of others. Mary describes the ‘interrupting thoughts’ as more positive on course but once at home the thoughts began to turn to negative past events. Support from course members helped Mary to explore this further:

‘On the course the ‘interrupting thoughts’ were more interesting, motivating and happy. At home, they were putting me down and dwelling on past experiences. I suppose, as I discussed with a course member these are part of my ICE which needs melting. My mind keeps making me remember them and time is not healing’.

***Responding differently to suffering in everyday life***

This informal practice of mindfulness skills allows the participant to apply skills to situations outside of the formal practices of mindfulness. One of the most challenging informal practices can be trialling our new skills in a stressful situation that we encounter. Tim describes how coming across traffic lights they were able to slow down and enjoy the moment:

‘When possible I focused on the moment and thinking about other things. I found myself rushing less when the traffic lights changed red. I didn’t speed up I slowed down and waited. I enjoyed that moment’.

Tim also states how they have responded differently to suffering through what they learnt that day. Changing the behaviour stopped the second dagger from occurring while minimising the suffering for others around:

‘There was a particular event that became of my learning that day I acted differently which undoubtedly stopped the second dagger for me as well as causing further issues for my daughter and wife’.

Changing the behaviour of oneself does allow one to make a choice and this leads to a direct impact on those around us. Katie describes how this recognition of thoughts has led to acceptance around their children’s sleeping issues:

‘I do feel that the recognition and marking of thoughts as just that does make a difference has done already, stopping the tangle and frustration i.e. my 2 year old will not go to sleep, that is not how I should be thinking. This has made me more accepting of the situation’.

For some individuals they are aware of the triggers that normally set off the negative thought process but have come across that situation while on course. Susan describes the application of mindfulness skills and techniques to a situation that regularly induces anxiety. However, using the technique of focusing on their immediate environment helped the panic to settle:

‘That evening I went to the theatre. I do experience claustrophobia – as always, my panicky racing thoughts’ started. I spent some time focusing on everything around me – I suddenly realised the panic had settled. I feel optimistic this skill might help me’.

***Simple class vs. cluttered life: Practising in class is different to practising in everyday life***

Part of the home practice is to put in place the skills learnt and to notice one’s reactions to our internal and external environment. Hannah describes a situation where the ‘two daggers’ was triggered when considering the continuation of the course and the practices, setting off negative feelings. Hannah also discloses the uneasy around return to everyday life:

‘We were set the challenge to notice any situation where the ‘two daggers’ came into about the course I was doing I felt negative about continuing the practice. I am feeling apprehensive about returning to everyday life’.

Katie describes how learning these perceived ‘simple’ skills and concepts can be overwhelming, especially when leaving the course and having to apply all they have learnt to everyday life:

‘In some ways these ‘simple’ concepts can also be rather overwhelming. Applying them to everyday life will be interesting’.

Further reflection by Katie on the application to everyday life includes the questions of how they will they guarantee the time to complete the formal mindfulness practice with the responsibilities of two small children. However, Katie remains optimistic and opts for a problem-solving strategy before the worry begins:

‘I am still concerned about how I am going to ensure I have 15 mins guaranteed uninterrupted practice everyday with 2 small children..….but where there is a will etc…Maybe I am learning to be less worried about these things and I will first work it out’.

However, on leaving the course things and practicing alone begins to feel harder and more challenging than originally thought. Highlighting the transition participants have to make to adopt mindfulness into everyday life.

# Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the lived experience of attending a mindfulness and compassion course while offering an insight into the participants’ experience using qualitative methodology. This study explored the lived experiences of participants during an 8-week or 3-4-day equivalent mindfulness and compassion course. Some of the findings found in this study are novel and have not been identified elsewhere from qualitative research. Mindfulness has predominately been researched using quantitative outcome measures to identify changes. Diary research in this area is also limited and therefore this study offers an understanding of participant experiences during a course. These experiences are important for future participants as they give an insight into what one may encounter as a participant while also giving teachers an awareness of participant experiences.

From the diary entries twelve themes were identified offering a broad and rich collection of data. The number of themes also highlights the vast array of experiences that participants encounter on a mindfulness and compassion course. The results emphasised themes that integrate with key timescales within a mindfulness course which include: before one attends the course; beginning the course; learning new skills and experiences; introspection; application to life outside the course.

The majority of the themes identified in the current research are what one would expect to see from a mindfulness intervention. These themes include meditation for beginners is hard work, the importance of the teacher in making it okay to experience uncertainty, epiphanies /turning points/game changers: when it just makes sense, the importance of metaphors/stories in making sense of mindfulness concepts and knowing the self-better: in a non-judgemental way, compassion: important but challenging. These are all themes that we would expect to encounter on a mindfulness intervention, however this research is the first to identify these experiences from a qualitative stance using diary entries.

The themes of expectation a person brings to mindfulness training, the social awkwardness of practising in a group, noticing suffering in everyday life and responding differently to suffering in everyday life are themes that are novel to this research area. The expectation a person brings to mindfulness training highlights the pressure an individual may feel to make the training effective in their life. In an ironic contrast Buddhism would define expectations as part of the ‘wanting mind’ driven by wants, desires and anxieties that lead to suffering. The Buddha described and outlined the four noble truths as a pathway to support a reduction in suffering. These include (1) Life is full of suffering (*Duhkha*), (2) There is a cause of this suffering (*Duhkha-samudaya*), (3) There is a way to stop suffering (*Duhkha-nirodha*), (4) There is a pathway that leads to the cessation of suffering (*Duhkha-nirodha-marga*) (Davids, 2003). However, a mindfulness intervention would encourage a flexible state of mind when encountering difficulties.

An additional novel theme of the social awkwardness of practicing in a group highlights the difficulties individuals can face in group settings. Even though participants were attending an intervention promoting self-care, some individuals can feel vulnerable in settings with new people. Group settings tend to be open to personal disclosures which for some individuals may feel uncomfortable. For example, this could include very basic introductions made at the start of the course around the reasons for attendance on the course and what changes they would like to make from the course.

The results also indicated the hardship and potential adverse effects while being on a mindfulness and compassion course. Participants recognised that not all the experiences are pleasant and frustrations were highlighted when new skills were being developed. Adverse effects and potential harm have been highlighted as an area in much need of further research (Baer et al, 2019). However, in the current research teacher support and the importance of metaphors and stories helped participants to work through some of the frustrations while building confidence.

## ***Previous research***

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Previous research highlighted moments of distress relating to practice during a mindfulness course (Kerr et al, 2011) and possible difficulties (Stelter 2009). In support of this finding the current research identified the theme ‘meditation for beginners is hard work’ and ‘the social awkwardness of practising in a group’ as relating to some of the difficulties experienced during a mindfulness course. For the majority of participants there were times of difficulties while engaging in mindfulness practice. However, what was also identified in the current research was the importance of the teacher in making it okay to experience uncertainty. The teacher’s reassurance and support to explore these difficulties helped to attenuate some of the distress experienced by participants. Previous research has shown that during a mindfulness course motivational support and skilful guidance supports the needs of the participants (Lundgren et al, 2018).

Words or metaphors describing mindfulness was identified as a theme in previous research (Stelter, 2009). This theme has similarities with the theme ‘The importance of metaphors/stories in making sense of mindfulness concepts’ highlighted in the current research. In the current research participants included the names of metaphors such as ‘two daggers’ and ‘cracked vase’, which helped to consolidate mindfulness concepts. The use of metaphors could provide an alternative perspective that offers clarity when uncertain of the concepts.

During the course, participants began to become aware of the observing self through changes such as noticing and responding differently to suffering in everyday life. As participants began to notice these changes, the relationship with one’s thoughts became more positive and compassionate. Previous research also identified one of the key transformations during a mindfulness course was the changing relationship with one’s thoughts (Stelter, 2009).

The current study adds to previous research in the following areas: possible difficulties and distress during a mindfulness intervention; the use of metaphors to support mindfulness and the concepts; the change in the observing self. The novel areas identified in this study include ‘expectations brought to mindfulness course’, ‘social awkwardness of practising in a group’ and the identification of the metaphors that helped during the course. From the participant sample few participants declined to take part and reported that it supported the experience of being on the course. Diaries also offered the participants the opportunity to fully express how they felt during the course at their own pace and in their own time.

Limitations of IPA include the debate around the participant’s ability to capture experience and whether this is more aligned with stating opinion rather than experience. This also raises the question around whether participants and the analyst can accurately identify experiences including the right skills (Tuffour, 2017). The lack of standardization of the IPA processes has been identified as an issue including the ability to distinguish between good and poor IPA research (Giorgi, 2010). However, Smith et al, (2009) suggest that “IPA is a creative process and it is not a matter of following a rulebook” (Smith et al, 2009, p.184). Therefore, some measure of flexibility needs to be incorporated. To support good IPA process and ensure rigor during the research, Yardley (2000) has offered guidance on what this should include: sensitivity to context including existing literature; commitment and rigor; transparency and coherence; impact and importance.

### *Conclusion*

The current study provides an understanding of the lived experience of participating on a mindfulness and compassion course. The findings may contribute and offer future participants an insight into the experiences of previous participants, both positive and negative. It will also give participants an idea of the experiences one may have during a mindfulness course. The research will also provide practitioners an ‘insight’ into of the experiences that participants may encounter. This additional knowledge could support practitioners to be prepared to address any issues that arise. Some of the findings would also offer additional support and awareness to those practitioners offering one-to-one mindfulness sessions either as a full or part intervention. Further investigation into the lived experience of mindfulness interventions is required not only to build a platform of knowledge around participant experiences but also to add to the findings from quantitative outcomes. Using qualitative methods such as IPA will help support identifications of the processes of change that occur during a mindfulness intervention. It would also be of interest to further understand the relationship between mindfulness and compassion with self-transcendence not only as a mechanism of change but also as a process.

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