

Mindful Practice Narrative Meets Therapy

David Paré,

International School of Narrative Practice
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Mindfulness ideas and practices offer many rich possibilities for enriching narrative questioning. At the same time, narrative inquiry also offers rich possibilities for supporting explorations informed by mindfulness traditions. The cross-fertilization goes both ways, and the following questions draw from the two traditions. They're organized around four themes and provide a few examples of these possibilities. It's important to note that helpful questions always arise from conversations with the persons who consult us, and are negotiated throughout the exchange. These are not intended as a "recipe" or fixed protocol, but to give some ideas of possible avenues of inquiry.

Theme One: Embodied experience

Whereas narrative practice pays a good deal of attention to how we story our experience in the context of discourses, a mindfulness orientation leans towards attending to the senses. And so problems can be explored as stories, but they can also be explored as phenomena that have taken up residence in the body, as it were. This view suggest some useful possibilities for narrative inquiry. The following questions focus on a problem as embodied. Narrative inquiry facilitates a rich exploration of a problem as it presents in the body.

Identify some problem/issue that you think sometimes has repercussions on your health/your body. Where does it take up residence in your body? Is it there now? If not, can you imagine what it's like when it is?

Paying attention to it (or its imagined presence) What does it feel like? Does it have a texture, a color, a shape, a sound, a smell?

Would you be interested in relating to it as a presence rather than a story or an idea? What happens to it as you let yourself breathe in its presence and follow the rhythm of the breath?

What happens to it as you look upon it with compassion, loving kindness?

When did (worry, sadness, etc.) enter your body? What did you first notice that told you it had done that? Does it ever leave? What do you notice when it does?

Would you like to create a space for (worry, sadness, etc.) in your body, or are you more interested in removing it?

What helps your body to keep (worry, sadness, etc.) out? OR What happens when you create a more inviting place for (worry, sadness, etc.)?

Does your body give you forewarnings that (worry, sadness, etc.) is coming to visit, or is about to expand or get more active??

Are there times when (worry, sadness, etc.) occupies less space in your body, or does so much more quietly?

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www.glebeinstitute.com dpare@uottawa.ca

What did you notice in your body after you (went to the cafe/wrote the exam/laughed with your friends, etc.) even though (worry, sadness, etc.) was trying to convince you to do otherwise? Have there been other times you've had that feeling in your body? Tell me more about THAT sensation. What did it feel like when it was present? Did it have a texture, a color, a shape, a sound, a smell? What would you call IT?

Theme Two: Relationship with the problem.

Narrative practice encourages an exploration of a person's preferred relationship with a problem. But because some problems are particularly pernicious or dangerous, narrative questioning sometimes encourages a relationship to problems that involves resisting them, revising them, standing up to them, turning one's back on them, etc. A central tenet of mindfulness traditions is an orientation of non-attachment or non-grasping, which implies neither clinging to preferred experience, or pushing away/combating aversive experience. Instead, there is a focus on being present to experience (including problematic experience) with compassion and nonjudgment. For clients interested in orientating this way, mindfulness practice suggests a range of alternate questions. As in each of the four themes here, when a particular way of orienting is helpful to clients and congruent with their values, there is the opportunity for "rich story development" through narrative questioning.

Would you be interested in learning to be present to the (worry, sadness, etc.) without it overwhelming you?

Would you be interested in greeting the (worry, sadness, etc.) with compassion and gentleness?

What do you notice when you allow yourself to be present to the (worry, sadness, etc.) without trying to fix it?

What allows you to stay with the (worry, sadness, etc.) without getting more distressed? Are there things you do in your body/mind to stay in the presence of the (worry, sadness, etc.) without it taking over?

Are there ways you can make space for the (worry, sadness, etc.) in your life without it getting in the way of you moving forward?

If the (worry, sadness, etc.) is speaking to you with a voice of care, what might it be saying to you?

What would you like to say back to the (worry, sadness, etc.)?

What did you do to prepare to greet the (worry, sadness, etc.) and have it accompany you without it taking over?

What does it say about how you prefer to relate to difficulties in your life that you chose to make space for the (worry, sadness, etc.)? Can you tell me about other times you have done this?

Who might predict you'd choose this way of dealing with the (worry, sadness, etc.)? What could they tell me about you that would explain how they were able to predict this?

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Theme Three: Identity as non-essential.

Like narrative practice, mindfulness traditions understand identity as constructed and non-essential. Narrative leans towards identifying and constructing preferred identities. Mindfulness practice leads to the discovery of the ultimately illusory nature of self. For many people, joining with them in ‘re-storying’ their identities is both acknowledging and helpful; in other cases, the clinging to a firm view of identity (even a preferred view) can be all-absorbing and exhausting, precluding the joyful expansiveness that can come with a relinquishing of self. Mindfulness practice suggests some interesting possibilities for exploring the fluid and ever-changing nature of identity, and also of orienting to oneself in a way that embodies compassion and living-kindness. Narrative questions contribute richly to this inquiry.

What do you notice when you find yourself clinging really hard to that particular (problematic) view of yourself? Is that a view you’d like to let go of a little? What does it take to loosen your grip on that view of yourself?

What other views of yourself do you see arising in the course of a day? Have you noticed a connection between certain views of yourself and certain contexts? What sorts of social messages seem to contribute the most to those fluctuations in that view of yourself?

When do you find you’re more (outgoing/optimistic/kind, etc.) and when are you less (outgoing/optimistic/kind, etc.)?

What do you notice when you pay attention to how that (outgoing/optimistic/kind, etc.) quality fluctuates in you?

Which version of yourself was in the foreground at that moment—the (outgoing/optimistic/kind, etc.) version or the (withdrawn/pessimistic/selfish, etc.) version?

Are there times when you grow tired of defending or stoking particular views of yourself? Do you tire of being “full of yourself”?

Have you ever had the experience of letting go of your self? If so, what’s that like for you? Is that something you’d like to experience more of?

What do you notice when you find yourself clinging really hard to that particular (preferred) view of yourself? Does that view stay firm, or does it also come and go? Are there ways in which the holding to that (favorable) view of yourself is not always helpful for you?

If you relate to yourself with that compassion and nonjudgment you speak of, what does the person in the mirror look like?

What happens when you bring compassion in those moments when Shame is painting that painful view of yourself? Does the picture change?

It sounds like you let go of your image of yourself yesterday—what would others have witnessed?? If not “an invisible person”, what would they have seen? How do you feel about that version of yourself?

What version of yourself would you like to take into (the meeting with your boss/the conversation with your father, etc.)?. What view of (your boss/your father) would you like to take into the meeting/conversation?

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Theme Four: Personal discipline and re-authoring.

Narrative traditions place a lot of emphasis on associating with a supportive community that can pay witness to preferred developments and sustain preferred identities. Mindfulness traditions also emphasize the importance of a community of like-minded persons on a similar path, but they also emphasize the individual dimensions of the journey.

To align our intentions and actions with a preferred set of values is an act of great personal discipline. Mindfulness takes practice, literally speaking. It's not necessarily 'natural' and certainly not easy. There is the expectation of a lifelong process of cultivating personal disciplines that enables a particular relationship with aversive experience, which is regarded as inescapable. In narrative terms, one might say that discipline supports the attainment and sustenance of preferred experience.

What kinds of practices help you to stay true to the values you're describing now?

What helps you to hold onto and be guided by that image of your preferred way of being (with your partner, with your children, in relation to your work, etc.)?

What makes it possible to relate to your partner (in this favorable way you're describing) on an ongoing basis, instead of in isolated moments?

Are there things you do on a regular basis that help to remind you of these higher purposes you're describing?

If you exercised a sort of muscle in choosing to stay calm when he was getting on your nerves, what muscle is that and how do you keep it in shape on an ongoing basis?

It's easy to get distracted by all the choices available to us for filling our time these days.

How do you manage to stay focused on your priorities?

Is there any mental or spiritual discipline you draw on to stay with this commitment to yourself/commitment to living in peace/these commitments of yours?

Among all the potential choices for how to (raise your children, relate to anxiety, be with the back pain, etc.) you've been speaking of being committed to one that fits for you....what do you do to ensure that you keep making those choices when you could get sidetracked and lose your way?

Are there practices in your life that make that preferred view of yourself more available to you?

It sounds as though sometimes you feel that things just happen to you and other times you're in the driver's seat and you make active choices and take hold of your life. Are there practices that help you spend more time in the latter place?