

# Building a Mindful Community

## SUPPORTING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT



*In September 2015, 193 member States of the United Nations (UN) unanimously adopted the new global development agenda<sup>1</sup>.*

This is the most ambitious strategy for development ever accepted by countries around the world and the strongest acknowledgment that people are the real wealth of nations. This means that no country will achieve development by only considering economic growth as a measure of success. What kind of development is possible when the richest 1% of the population owns more than 50% of the world's wealth<sup>2</sup>? Putting people at the centre of development implies that what really matters is the expansion of their individuals' capabilities to do and to be what they value<sup>3</sup>. This requires a significant transformation of people's lives by enhancing the local communities where they live, work, and build a family. However, community adversities such as poverty, domestic violence, neglect, and drug abuse are becoming increasingly common in modern life and make this transformation a difficult one. What is even worse, racial

minorities, people with disabilities, and people living with mental illnesses are overrepresented among those facing these adversities.

Problems in life are inevitable for all people. By people we mean individuals but also families, communities, and other collectives. However, when faced with similar challenges, people vary enormously in how they cope. As such, some people carry on and thrive despite difficulty. Others struggle mightily, suffering for some period of time but eventually recovering their balance. And still others are never able to regain their footing<sup>4</sup>. What makes the difference? Community resilience could be the answer. Resilience applies not only to individuals but to families and other social groups as well. Communities have personalities, and, like people, they differ in how resilient they are in the face of adversity. Mindfulness-based interventions are an emerging tool for people and communities to overcome the daily challenges and become resilient.



## What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is an adaptation of Buddhist meditation. Supported by over 40 years of research across a number of sectors and applications; Mindfulness is the practice of purposely focusing your attention on the present moment and accepting it without judgement<sup>5</sup>.

It can be cultivated by a variety of mindfulness awareness practices which all share common procedures. Yoga and sitting meditation are the most common methods taught. The meditator sits in an erect posture, either on the floor cross-legged or in a chair, and places attention on the in and out flow of the breath, focusing on either the out breath at the nostrils or on the rise and fall of the abdomen. When attention wanders, the meditator simply notes the distraction and returns to the breath. This is repeated throughout the meditation session<sup>6</sup>.

## How Mindfulness Works for Community Development

Mindfulness-based interventions have the potential to help people to learn to focus on their feelings and thoughts without judging these experiences, thereby promoting a psychological state in which they are aware of who they are, how they are feeling, and what they are doing. In turn, this state can assist them to build their capacity to recover quickly from difficulties by improving their tolerance to stress and conflict, and enhancing their social and problem solving skills<sup>7</sup>. This ability is usually called resilience and, as for individuals, mindfulness can help to build a community's resilience. Community resilience is the ability of their members to overcome the adversities that they face as a group. These adversities do not need to be a catastrophe or a dramatic event but they are usually perceived as a challenge or difficulty for them. In today's world there can be many challenges; from housing issues, transport limitations, common health issues (obesity, mental illness, etc.) to specific governmental restrictions such as financial cuts.



Mindfulness practice can help to strengthen two fundamental pillars of community resilience; recovery and endurance<sup>8</sup>:

- ***Bringing back the balance; Recovery:*** As the pressures and challenges people face within their communities increase, so does their capacity to respond to that pressure. But beyond a certain point, if the pressure continues unrelieved, their capacity to respond falls off along with their health. If that continues for too long, they become stressed and eventually begin to get ill. Recovery is then a key element for community's resilience. It refers to how quickly people bounce back and recover fully from challenging events. People who are resilient display a greater capacity to quickly regain equilibrium physiologically, psychologically, and in their social relations following stressful events. Mindfulness-based interventions can help to recover and protect people from stress and its harmful impact on physical and mental health, reduce impulsive and irritable reactions to demanding situations, and suppress aggressive response when they feel tense<sup>9</sup>.
- ***Being able to keep going; Endurance:*** How well people sustain health and psychological wellbeing in a dynamic environment characterized by ongoing challenges? Current life challenges do not only require from us the capacity of recovering but also of being able to keep going as long as the event is present. As such, endurance is the capacity to tolerate and continue forward in the face of adversity. Endurance of community life requires thinking and planning of a different kind, one that relies on raising awareness and participation. Just as individuals vary in levels of awareness and purposeful engagement, communities vary in the quality of member's awareness, contribution, and commitment to their goals. These goals and the pursuit of them are not always the result of conscious choices or deliberate thought. Instead, it is the results of habits and past experiences. Mindfulness practices enhance people's attention to the present moment increasing their levels of awareness to their feelings, thoughts and the surrounding environment.

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### Why Become a Mindful Community?

Becoming a mindful community can have a positive impact on the people who are part of it and on the community itself. The main purpose of mindfulness is to help people's mental, social and physical wellbeing. When people practice mindfulness, they report higher levels of mental health (less stress, depression, and anxiety), better physical wellbeing (less pain and better immune system functioning), improved performance (better attention, motivation, and creativity), and richer interpersonal relations (better capacity to express yourself and listen to others)<sup>10</sup>. Additionally, research shows that mindfulness seems to increase compassion and empathy, which, in turn, might improve social relations<sup>11</sup>. Similarly, a study which developed and adapted mindfulness training for communities facing adversity, the Radical Mindfulness Training (RMT), found that the program helped participants to overcome personal, interpersonal, and community issues and difficulties<sup>12</sup>.

As a result, having good health and wellbeing is beneficial to ourselves and to those around us. As such, wellbeing is likely to have an impact on how we view and approach our community. For instance, stress, depression, and physical pain make it harder to take into account community concerns such as climate change, poverty, inequality, or racism. Instead, attention is likely to be drawn to the most salient personal problems, thus neglecting other concerns. If basic individual needs are not fulfilled and we do not feel well, caring for broad issues within our communities will probably be seen more as a "luxury problem"<sup>13</sup>.

### How We Can Help

Now Unlimited provides person-centred mindfulness-based interventions for individuals, communities and organisations. We base our interventions on the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) programs and adapt these to generate specific learning outcomes relevant to each client. Our mindfulness courses include information about what it means to be a mindful community, group discussions around the application and impact of mindfulness for community development, guided instruction in formal and informal mindfulness meditation practices, gentle stretching and mindful movement, tailored instruction and home assignments supported by practice CDs/ mp3 downloads and a home practice manual. Mindfulness practices include mindful breathing exercises, Body Scan (mindfulness of physical sensations of the body), hatha yoga or Tai Chi, and mindful walking.

*For more information about our work, please contact us:*



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