

Academic Paper

Taking control of the wandering mind: how can an experiential mindfulness programme support coaches and their practice?

Eike Brazier [✉](#)

Abstract

This paper shares the key findings from a participatory action research study that explored how attending an evidence-based mindfulness programme impacted coaches and their practice. Whilst an output from the study is a customised mindfulness programme for coaches, this paper will only focus on the impact of the programme. The findings suggest that the programme affected coaches by raising their awareness, enhancing their knowledge and skills, and supporting their self-care. The study also demonstrated the importance of experiential learning for cultivating coaching attitudes, such as non-judgement and openness, as well as practising embodiment and self-compassion in coaching. A neglect of these experiential aspects in current coach education is noted and an integration of mindfulness practice into formal coach training is proposed.

Keywords

awareness, coaching, coach education, experiential learning, mindfulness

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, the concept of mindfulness has emerged in many different contexts, and a growing number of studies have added research evidence about its beneficial impact on practitioners' physical and psychological well-being (Shapiro, Oman, Thoresen, Plante & Flinders, 2008). Mindfulness is still a relatively new phenomenon in coaching, and initial research suggests that practicing mindfulness can positively affect the coach, and consequently, the coaching relationship and outcomes (Chaskalson & McMordie, 2018). Most scholars agree that mindfulness has the potential to enhance coaches' awareness and presence in coaching (Cavanagh & Spence, 2013; Passmore & Marianetti, 2007). These effects are important as greater presence is linked to better attunement and empathy with the coachee, while raised awareness can support the coaches' active listening skills and self-regulation (Hall, 2013). These aspects suggest that coaches may benefit from mindfulness practice. While numerous publications encourage coaches to adopt

mindfulness, the reviewed literature lacks direction on how coaches may best learn it. Although mindfulness training is offered in different formats, only a few have a strong evidence-base (Crane et al., 2017). Furthermore, there is a paucity of mindfulness programmes specifically designed for coaches. As a qualified mindfulness teacher, I was able to address this gap by developing an experiential mindfulness programme for coaches through this action research study. However, the findings presented in this paper relate only to how the programme supported coaches and their coaching practice.

Literature Review

The literature search explored firstly the background, definition and theoretical framework of mindfulness. It then investigated the relevance of mindfulness in coaching and highlighted ethical considerations regarding its integration in practice.

Mindfulness Background, Definition and Theory

The core principle of mindfulness is the training of attention to increase meta-awareness of thoughts, feelings and sensations in the present moment (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). By becoming the observer of their experience, practitioners learn to recognise unhelpful habitual patterns that lead to emotional distress and maladaptive behaviour, allowing them to choose more skilful responses (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2013). Mindfulness meditation-techniques originate from Buddhist traditions (Hanh, 1976) and were initially applied to Western clinical settings by Kabat-Zinn (1990) who developed the mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) programme for the management of chronic pain. Meanwhile, mindfulness interventions have been applied within clinical and therapeutic settings for several decades, and numerous research papers have highlighted their health benefits for the treatment of psychological and physical symptoms (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Shapiro, Spence, Cavanagh, & Grant, 2008). Recently, mindfulness has also been introduced to non-clinical populations, such as teachers, students and coaching professionals (Hall, 2013; Passmore & Marianetti, 2007).

There is a plethora of mindfulness definitions that focus on different aspects of the construct, ranging from lifestyle choice to philosophy. Kabat-Zinn (2003, p.145) presents what is probably the most widely used definition, referring to mindfulness as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment”.

In their seminal paper, leading mindfulness researchers (Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006) concur that Kabat-Zinn’s (2003) definition embodies the core elements of mindfulness: *intention, attention and attitude (IAA)* and propose a theoretical model of how mindfulness might cultivate transformation and change. They emphasise that IAA leads to a process of *reperceiving* that results in a shift of perspective on experience which facilitates self-regulation, value clarification, cognitive-behavioural flexibility and exposure (allowing). This perspective-shift involves observing thoughts in a non-elaborative way as mental events rather than true facts. The study used Kabat-Zinn’s (2003) mindfulness definition and Shapiro et al.’s (2006) IAA model as its theoretical framework.

Mindfulness in Coaching

Exploring the role of mindfulness and the IAA model in coaching, it is apparent that intentional attention with the attitudes of openness and non-judgement is also a core coaching competency and referred to as *presence* or *being present* (Cox, 2013; Felgen & Lewis-Hunstiger, 2011). Notably, scholars’ individual definitions vary, for example Felgen and Lewis-Hunstiger (2011) call *presence* an intentional and purposeful commitment to serving the moment and others, while Cox

(2013, p.133) considers this process as *being present*. Despite these definitional nuances, the coaching literature and the International Coaching Federation (ICF, 2019) agree that *intentional presence* is a core skill for coaches, offering the client an open, compassionate and non-judgemental relational experience (Geller & Greenberg, 2002). As mindfulness is a relatively new phenomenon in coaching, there is a lack of theoretical frameworks or models demonstrating its mechanisms in the coaching practice. To address this gap, Cavanagh and Spence (2013) present a well-researched conceptual effect-pathway which illustrates that the coach's mindful awareness can influence all coaching aspects. It is supported by empirical research and qualitative studies, which generally agree that mindfulness can positively affect three coaching dimensions: *the coach*, *the coaching relationship* and *the outcomes* (Chaskalson & McMordie, 2018; Hall, 2013; Passmore & Marianetti, 2007).

Impact on the Coach

Scholars have highlighted that mindfulness has a potential beneficial effect on the *competencies of the coach*, as it cultivates skills such as conscious awareness with intentional attitudes, which can lead to greater presence and attunement with the client (Chaskalson & McMordie, 2018; Hall, 2013; Siegel, 2010). These effects may contribute to a deeper coach-client connection and increase the coach's moment-by-moment receptivity and resonance (Geller & Greenberg, 2002). Based on empirical evidence, Passmore and Marianetti (2007) suggest that mindfulness can support the coach in preparing for coaching and during coaching. This concurs with the results of Hall's (2013) survey concluding that coaches may employ mindfulness *before*, *during* and in their reflections *after* coaching sessions. This is strengthened by Chaskalson's and McMordie's (2018) qualitative survey and interviews which highlight that mindfulness has not only the potential to enhance *coaching-competencies* but can *permeate* every aspect of coaching. They conclude that mindfulness is an *embodied way of being* with the client. Since both mentioned studies have investigated the experiences of mindfulness coaches, they may have an inherent outcome-bias. Nevertheless, their results are further supported by Cavanagh and Spence (2013) who propose that mindfulness can support core coaching skills such as attention control, emotional reactivity, intrapersonal attunement and openness to new information.

Impact on the coaching relationship and outcomes

The literature suggests that mindfulness can enhance the coach's competencies and thereby positively affect the coaching-alliance. In Chaskalson's and McMordie's (2018) survey, most respondents indicated that mindfulness improved their capacity to build awareness, client trust and active listening skills. Whilst these results are encouraging, they are to be considered with caution as they represent a small sample and self-reported observations. Scholars also highlight that mindfulness can increase the coach's capacity for empathy and compassion (Hall, 2013; Neff, 2011), thereby contributing to greater rapport (Gilbert, 2009; Haan, 2008). Furthermore, Passmore and Marinetti (2007) suggest that mindfulness helps coaches to maintain focus and emotional boundaries, which supports them in staying objective and grounded. Some researchers suggest that by enhancing the coaching relationship, mindfulness may also positively affect the *coachee outcomes*. For example, Cavanagh and Spence (2013) propose that the benefits for the coachee can include improved *goal-attainment*, *behavioural* and *emotional regulation*, *self-attunement* and *enhanced self-perspective*. More research evidence is needed to substantiate these claims.

Ethics of mindfulness in coaching

Various scholars (Kemp, 2017; Passmore & Marianetti, 2007) propose that coaches train their clients in mindfulness. This is concerning as it has ethical implications. While the sharing of specific mindfulness concepts may be useful in coaching, an active teaching approach can be incompatible for coaches who consider their practice as an andragogical learning engagement (Knowles, 1980). Another concern is the lack of ethical guidelines for the integration of mindfulness in coaching. This bears the risk that mindfulness practices are offered to clients by coaches who may have had no

formal mindfulness training and are unaware of potential risks. Although mindfulness may positively affect practitioners' wellbeing, it can also be harmful if certain underlying health conditions exist. For example, extended meditations may exacerbate acute depression, psychosis or anxiety (Britton, Lindahl, Cooper, Canby, & Palitsky, 2021). Consequently, the teaching of mindfulness to clients requires great caution and may only be considered by coaches who have had professional mindfulness training.

Thus, the literature review indicates that coaches may benefit from mindfulness training. The original study's literature search explored potential training options and concluded that there was a gap of evidence-based mindfulness programmes for coaches. Consequently, such a programme was developed through this action research study and its impact on coaches explored. This paper will focus on the findings relating to the programme's impact on coaches and their practice.

Methodology

Due to the practical nature of my research, I chose *pragmatism* as its paradigm. Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2019) suggest that the *ontology*, *epistemology* and *axiology* of pragmatism focus on *improving practice*, which aligned with my intention to create a programme that supported coaches and their practice. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) argue that pragmatism determines the meaning of experiences through action and interaction, and Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) recommend it for people-related research with practical outcomes. These pragmatic assumptions concurred with the intentions for this research, as knowledge was to be created through cooperation with the research participants, enabling the practical programme development.

For the methodology, I opted for Action Research (AR), which allows the researcher to evaluate a theory or programme in the real world within an experiential research design (Cox, Shoukry, & Cook, 2020). The AR process closely resembles Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycles, encompassing the stages of planning, action, reflection and conceptualising. The cyclical AR approach enabled me to create and adapt the programme in response to the collected data, before adapting it again. As the research required interaction with participants to explore their programme experiences, participatory AR (PAR) appeared to be most suitable. Since the participants were representatives of the target audience rather than active co-researchers, my research resembled an evolutionary (Cox et al., 2020) type of PAR.

Participants

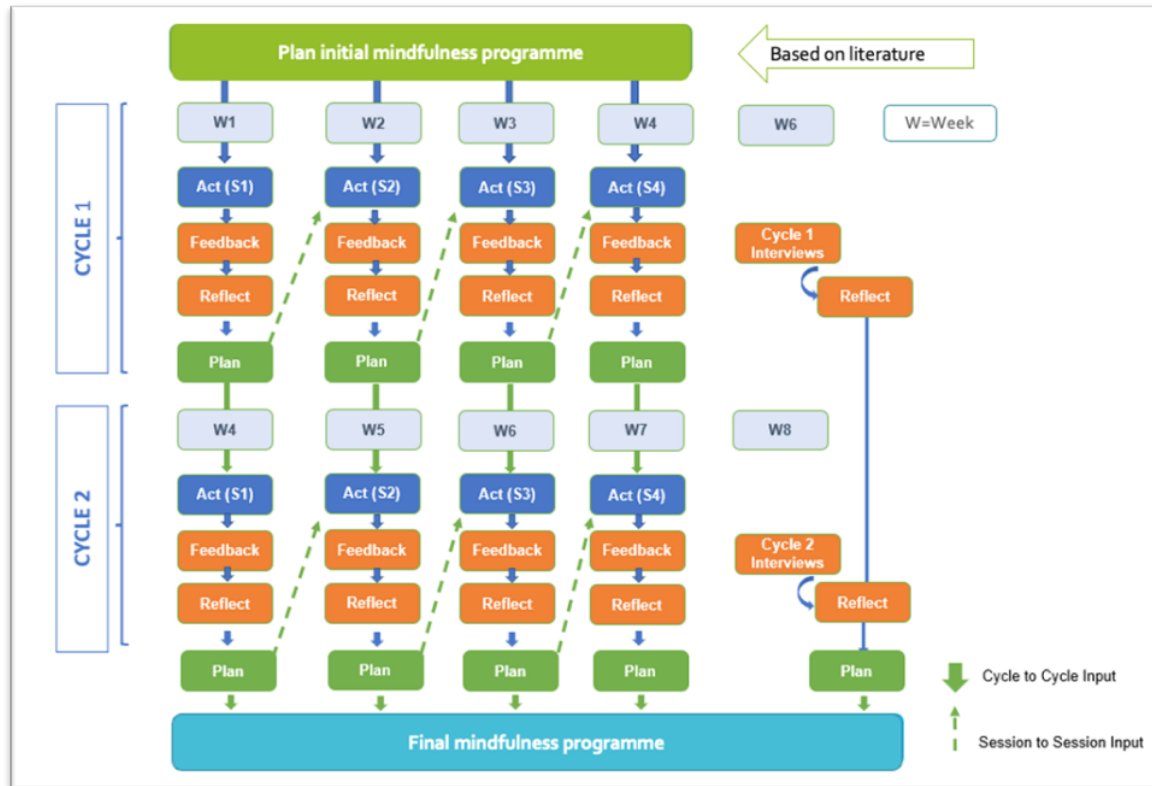
The study's participants had to represent the target audience of coaches (Cox et al., 2020). A non-probability, purposeful sampling strategy (Creswell & Poth, 2018) was applied to invite volunteer coaches who had no previous mindfulness training and were actively coaching. As the programme was facilitated in a group setting, six participants were recruited for each research cycle. Each cycle covered four two-hours training sessions on different mindfulness topics that took place online and were delivered over a four-week period. There were two cycles and 12 participants in total. The participants resembled a mix of different nationalities, gender, ages and coaching genres. I will refer to the participants as coaches.

Data collection

To explore the impact of the programme, I collected post-session questionnaires after each training session to understand its immediate effect. I also conducted semi-structured interviews two weeks after each research cycle ended to explore the post-programme effect (Figure 1 below). In total, 48 questionnaires, 12 interviews and my own research diary reflections contributed to the research data. I followed the procedures outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018) for preparing and conducting the interviews. This process involved the design and use of an interview protocol (Kvale &

Brinkmann, 2015) comprising of open-ended questions. All interviews were recorded online, transcribed and anonymised with the permission of my participants.

Figure 1: Illustration of PAR cycles and data collection



Data analysis

As I was working with non-numerical data and aiming to develop meaning from text, I choose a reflexive thematic analysis for my research method (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This method allowed me to systematically code the data to develop themes for analysis and interpretation, while also covering my critical reflections about my research role, practice and process. I followed Braun and Clarke's (2022, p. 35) six thematic analysis phases, facilitating an NVivo database to organise, code and analyse the emerging themes.

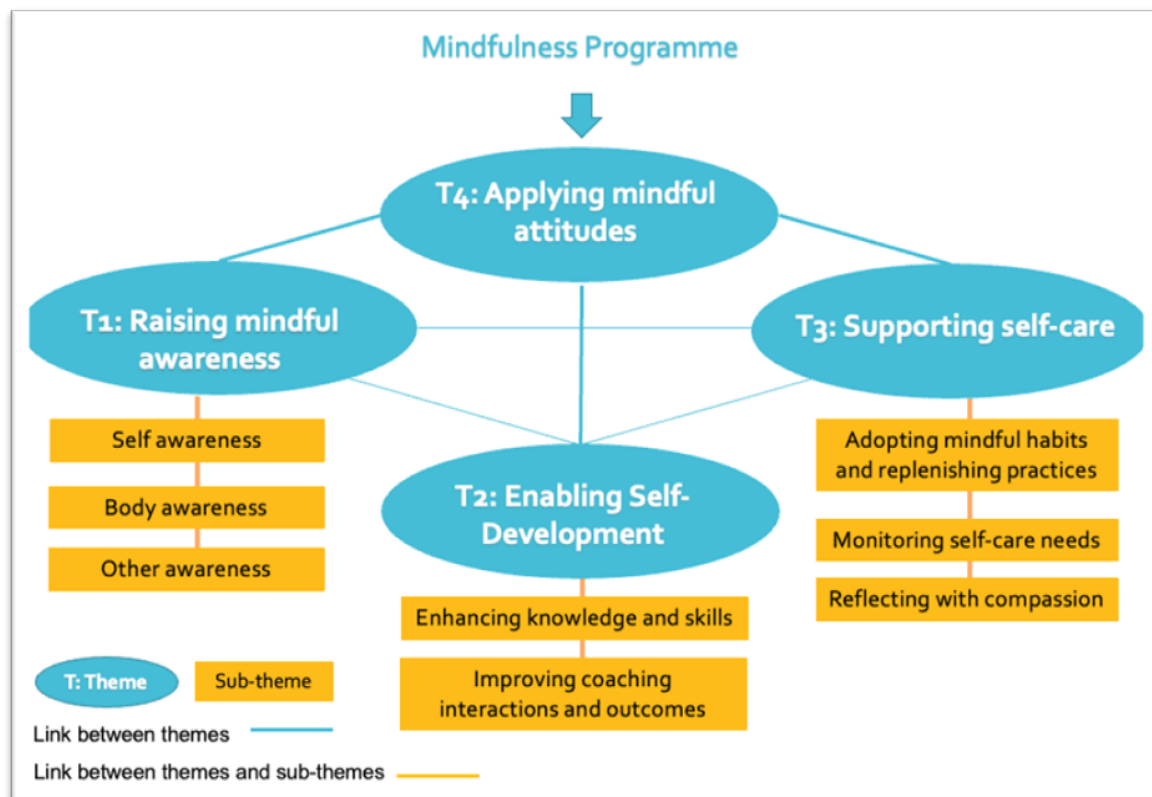
Reflections and limitations

Considering the limitations of this study, I had to reflect on my positionality (Jackson & Cox, 2020) and dual role of being a researcher and practitioner (coach and mindfulness teacher). While my practice knowledge and expertise were assets for the programme development and its impact exploration, my dual position could be seen as inherently biased. My reflective diary and the iterative analysis process enabled a reflexive interrogation of the data and interpretations, and the regular interactions with my supervisor and research buddy provided additional opportunities to discuss and mitigate potential research bias. My reflections also covered my participants' positionality and their willingness to share constructive feedback about the programme adaptations. I therefore clearly outlined their role in the research process and emphasised the importance of their open and honest contributions. Collecting their feedback in writing and following up with individual interviews allowed me to explore and validate their responses, thereby mitigating an outcome bias.

Ethics

The research complied with Oxford Brookes University's code of practice for ethical research. All volunteers filled in a mindfulness health screening questionnaire and attended a pre-course session which outlined the expectations for their participation. Before joining the research, the volunteers provided informed consent, and I took all necessary measures to protect their personal data and anonymity, while securely storing their data. The delivery of the mindfulness programme adhered to the ethical guidelines for mindfulness teachers.

Figure 2: Emerging themes and sub-themes



Findings

Four conceptual themes emerged through the analysis of the post-session questionnaires, interviews and reflective diary. They revealed that attending the mindfulness programme supported coaches and their practice by *raising mindful awareness*, *enabling self-development*, *supporting self-care* and in *applying mindful attitudes* (Figure 2).

Theme 1: Raising mindful awareness

The programme introduced the coaches to mindfulness practices that helped them to intentionally place their attention in the present moment. As a result, they noticed a heightened awareness of their *self*, *body* and *others* in their practice.

Self-awareness

Most participants emphasised how the awareness raising practices helped them to prepare their mindset before coaching sessions, enabling them to switch from a *doing* to *being* mode. Jo referred

to “preparing myself for that opening up and to be, rather than to do the coaching”. The intention to use mindfulness practices to *become available* for the coachee is also reflected by Chris’ comment: “I just sit and just be. That allows me to drop some of the other stuff ... before ... coaching”. Similarly, some coaches mentioned that short pre-session meditations helped them to *focus their attention*: “this is my way of saying to my body... you are about to focus on one person and leave everything else behind” (Maya). The coaches also reported greater awareness of their own thoughts and mental distractions during and after coaching sessions.

Body awareness

The data indicated that many coaches lacked own *body awareness* and struggled with experiential practices aiming to connect them to their physical sensations and feelings. Most coaches felt disconnected from their body’s signals and were unfamiliar with using them as a tool in coaching. This is reflected by Jamie’s comment: “I was not very good before with the body sensation awareness... the key learning point for me was that I also need to listen to my body [in coaching]”. During and after attending the programme, most coaches experienced greater sensory awareness which enhanced their reflective practice and helped them to stay grounded during coaching. The findings suggest that the programme enabled the coaches to acknowledge their somatic experiences in coaching: “I think it is good to become more aware of how our body experiences emotions and to learn to listen to this more” (Fae). Notably, some coaches were unsure about utilising their body awareness in coaching. This may reflect a need for more practise or a generic incongruence with their coaching approach.

Other awareness

The programme’s experiential practices also raised the coaches’ *other awareness* which provided them with deeper client insights. One exercise seemed to have a catalytic impact as it demonstrated how differently people can interpret the same event. For Maya, it was a “breakthrough” as it helped her to “understand how people respond differently to the same thing”. Most coaches mentioned that the programme encouraged them to look at issues from their *coachees’ perspectives*: “I now try to look at things from other people’s perspective and to actually step back and think a bit more” (Ian). Higher other awareness enabled the coaches to be more *curious* about their coachees and *less assumptive*. Ella reflected “[it] reminded me not to have any assumptions ... it increased my awareness, and it increased my curiosity”.

Theme 2: Enabling self-development

The data indicated that the programme contributed to the coaches’ self-development by enhancing their *knowledge* and *skills*, which affected the *coaching interactions and outcomes*.

Enhancing knowledge and skills

Several coaches mentioned that the programme not only reinforced existing *knowledge*, but also provided *new insights* for their coaching practice. For Maya it was useful to “learn about certain concepts like metacognition”, which helped her to observe her own thoughts in coaching. By enhancing the coaches’ knowledge, the programme also affected their *confidence and resilience* in coaching. Describing her experience of coaching after the programme, Lisa felt “reassured that the science is behind me, [and] more confident”, and Anna noticed that “the experiential exercises have helped with my cognitive resilience”. Most coaches also noticed an improved ability to emotionally and behaviourally *self-regulate*. Greater awareness enabled them to notice and regulate their *urges to fix* coachees’ issues or *strive for outcomes*. Instead, they responded with an attitude of *allowing*. Tara recognised that “it’s ok to not fix things or find a solution and to simply be with a situation or issue and to explore it”. The great potential of self-regulation was further emphasised by Jo’s observation that it “gives a chance of agency”, and this agency seemed to trigger changes in the behaviour of both the coach and the coachee.

Improving coaching interactions and outcomes

Many coaches mentioned their *improved focus* in coaching and that their *presence* had a *new quality* due to the application of mindful attitudes. For Jane, the programme reinforced “to be non-judgemental, open and to listen properly with the whole self”. Several coaches noticed better *listening skills* and *empathy* during coaching. Lisa explained “the quality of my listening increased, I notice if I am distracted by thinking of the next question, so I sustain more presence”. These programme effects also contributed to *better coach-coachee attunement*. Several coaches *connected* to their clients on a different level, which Jo referred to as a state of flow “you can feel them, your empathy is up, you are hearing them, seeing them, feeling them and ...this bubble is created of oneness”. Rita described this attunement as “becoming more of a channel rather than willing everything from my ego”. While many coaches mentioned the positive impact of the programme on their rapport, they also noticed that it helped them to *retain emotional boundaries* from their coachees’ issues. Jane applied mindful breathing “*instead of getting all uptight along with her [coachee]... and not take part in her anxiety*”. She explained that by holding the space, she enabled her coachee to take ownership of her issue, thereby giving her autonomy over the session outcomes.

Theme 3: Enhancing self-care

The programme enabled the coaches to recognise and monitor their self-care needs and to adopt *mindful habits, replenishing practices and self-compassion* to support their wellbeing.

Mindful habits and replenishing practices

The programme shared *mindful routines and practices* that supported the coaches wellbeing. After attending the programme, many participants mentioned that they were taking things more slowly, rather than rushing around all the time. For example, instead of booking back-to-back coaching sessions, they allowed time to relax and mentally prepare for their next encounter. This positively affected their coaching, as demonstrated by Ian’s comment: “*I stopped doing back-to-back coaching meetings. And I’ll just sit there quietly, and it makes a massive difference [in coaching]*”. The mindfulness practices were not only useful tools for recharging, but also helped to improve the coaches’ sense of wellbeing. As a result, some coaches noticed that they felt happier and more content which was reflected in their coaching. Rita mentioned “how heart-warming and purpose giving” the gratitude practice is and Lisa explained that it “*shifts how I feel about something or somebody... it’s like the heart is glowing straight away*”.

Monitoring self-care needs

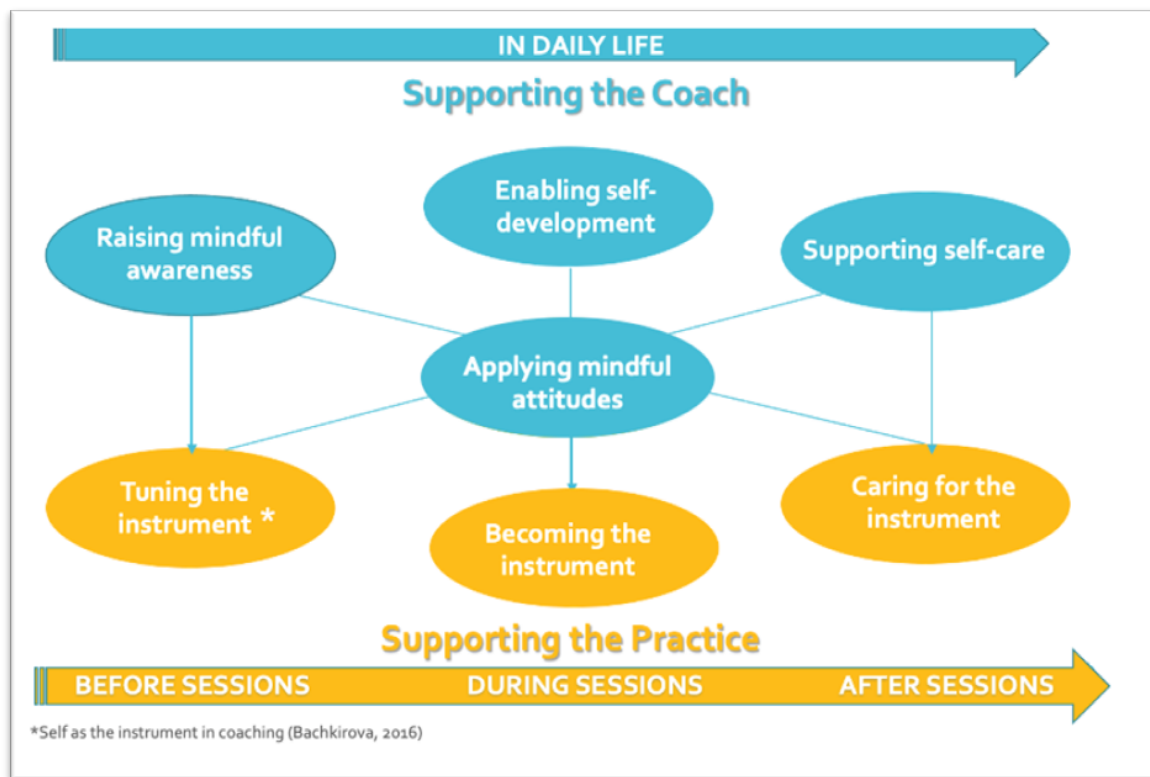
The programme helped the coaches to monitor their wellbeing, which is particularly important for preventing burnout and compassion fatigue in their helping profession. One exercise identified nourishing and depleting activities in one’s life, highlighting how an imbalance can trigger depletion and exhaustion. The coaches recognised that permitting themselves time for self-care would support them in their coaching role. Anna noticed that this was not only relevant for herself, but also her coachees: “I thought talking through the nourishing and depleting stuff is good because I have seen the exhaustion funnel for a while. I think that is really relevant to clients too”.

Reflecting with self-compassion

The programme raised the coaches’ awareness of their own critical and judgemental voice. In their session feedback, the coaches mentioned the detrimental impact of negative self-talk. Ian admitted: “*I am probably my own worst critic, and I will beat myself up a bit at times when things don’t go right [in coaching]*”. Although the coaches agreed that the negative voice is usually unhelpful, not many had a strategy for dealing with it. While being kind and empathic to others seemed natural, many coaches felt uncomfortable about the concept of self-compassion and considered it to be self-indulgent: “*to do that self-compassion thing, it felt really creepy to me...that*

turning my attention inward to myself, I hated it to be honest” (Fae). And Jo commented: “We can do that to other people, but it’s very difficult to do that to ourselves”. Recognising their initial struggles with self-compassion was a thought-provoking insight for many coaches. For some, it was more the terminology than the action itself that was repelling. The programme helped to see self-compassion in a different light: “It kind of shifted something in my way of thinking... that this is not indulgence but it is taking care of yourself” (Jane). After attending the programme, several coaches used self-compassion in their reflections after difficult sessions. Rita explained: “I stopped judging myself so harshly and then I try to find some compassion, being with it, connecting to it with my heart”.

Figure 3: Mindfulness programme impact framework in coaching



Theme 4: Applying mindful attitudes

This theme affected all the other themes as mindful attitudes determine *how* one pays attention to an experience. The programme cultivated attitudes, such as openness and non-judgement, through mindfulness practices. The data confirms that most coaches were aware of these attitudes, but not all applied them in their coaching. The data revealed that some coaches compared themselves to others or judged their own experiences: “I just don’t seem to notice as much as the others. I am not sure if mindfulness is for me” (Fae). The programme’s experiential practices reinforced the mindful attitudes and reminded the coaches to intentionally apply them. As a result, Tara was “more aware of difficult things [during sessions] in a non-judgemental way”, and Maya mentioned her “curiosity of seeing what is there, rather than with the urge to judge what it is”. Similarly, Jo felt more “willing to being open to what is or will be”. As mentioned earlier, many coaches learnt to embrace the attitudes of *allowing* and *non-fixing* which enabled them to be with unexpected experiences in their practice. Rita explained that she “can just be in a [coaching] situation that feels more difficult, more draining by allowing it”. Anna particularly valued *non-striving* and added: “Striving has been part of my DNA and I have to remind myself that the opposite of striving is thriving”.

The emerging themes demonstrate that the programme and its experiential practices supported the coaches to *tune, become* and *care for* their selves as the *instrument in coaching* (Bachkirova, 2016). The term "instrument" refers to the intentional use of the coach's self as a coaching tool. The coach's mindful awareness is a fundamental enabler in this process. Figure 3 illustrates the study findings in the "mindfulness programme impact framework in coaching"

Discussion

The discussion will consider my research findings by theme in relation to the literature and highlight new learnings.

Raising mindful awareness/tuning the instrument

The programme's practices helped to raise the coaches' awareness. A critical enabler in this process was the conscious shift from a conceptual to experiential state of mind, which allowed the coaches to *tune* their selves for coaching.

Self-awareness

Many coaches used the mindfulness practices to *shift from a doing to being* mode before coaching, which allowed them to become fully available for their clients. Chaskalson and McMordie (2018) explain that this experiential state of mind allows coaches to become genuinely open for exploration with their clients and comfortable with *not knowing*. The mindfulness literature refers to this open curiosity as *beginners mind* (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). It comes with a detachment from specific actions and outcomes which H. Kimsey-House, K. Kimsey-House, Sandahl, and Whitworth (2010) refer to as *spaciousness*. It allows for uncertainty and vulnerability in coaching, and for a more creative and authentic process (Hall, 2018). The findings suggest that greater self-awareness also improved the coaches' focus during coaching sessions, as they were able to notice and respond to mental distractions. Siegel (2010) explains that human brains continuously monitor their environment for danger which explains the tendency of *neuroceptive evaluation*. Mindfulness creates a greater awareness of these mental processes (Segal et al., 2013) which supports practitioners in intentionally redirecting their attention and focus. This is of great relevance in coaching, as it can enhance the coaches' ability to be present and actively listen, which may lead to greater attunement with their clients (Cavanagh & Spence, 2013).

Body awareness

The study highlighted that most coaches not only *lacked body awareness* but were also unaware of its significance as a source of information in coaching. Silsbee and Strozzi-Heckler (2008) explain that the body is a useful compass in coaching as it can signal subconscious processes like intuition and countertransference. Vannini (2006) describes it as a vessel of information. Surprisingly, the literature research produced very little about using the body-signals of the coach in coaching. Most publications focused on the somatic experiences of the coachee (Aquilina & Strozzi-Heckler, 2018; Sills, Lapworth, & Desmond, 2012). Jackson (2017) also notes the neglect of the body in the coaching literature and suggests that an awareness of the coach's physiological state can enrich the coaching experience and affect its outcomes. Chaskalson and McMordie (2018) explain that embodied coaching requires a shift from a conceptual to experiential mode. Many coaches recognised their affinity to be conceptual and considered their body awareness as an important development area. The programme's experiential practices helped them to enhance their sensory awareness and encouraged some coaches to bring more physicality to coaching.

Other awareness

The data shows that the coaches' increased awareness also included their observations of others. Singer et al. (2004) explain that a higher awareness of one's own emotional and body states can help in reading others. Their raised awareness of others enabled the coaches to notice and pick up additional information from their coachees. Hall (2018) refers to accessing more detailed data, such as the coachee's micro-expressions and nuanced behaviours. These effects are well documented by mindfulness research (Kabat-Zinn, 1991; Segal et. al, 2013) and the coaching literature (Cavanagh & Spence, 2013; Chaskalson & McMordie, 2018). Importantly, other awareness also improved the coaches' ability to notice and consider their clients' perspectives and made them less assumptive. This resulted in greater empathy and client connection. Neuroscientific research by Singer et al. (2004) illustrates that greater awareness can increase the capacity for empathy with others. Clearly, other awareness is an important skill in coaching, and the programme helped to cultivate this competency.

Theme 2: Enabling self-development/becoming the instrument

As a result of attending the mindfulness programme, the coaches benefitted from enhanced knowledge and skills, such as self-regulation, which positively affected their coaching interactions and enabled new session outcomes.

Enhancing knowledge and skills

The mindfulness programme reinforced the coaches existing knowledge in relation to coaching and provided new insights that supported them in their practice. This concurs with research by Chaskalson and McMordie (2018) which highlights that mindfulness affects all coaching aspects. The programme's theory and practices engaged the coaches at a cognitive and experiential level. Redmond, Heffernan, Abawi, Brown & Henderson (2018) propose that this kind of engagement involves critical thinking, the adaption of new ideas and deep discipline understanding. The acquired knowledge reassured the participants in their coaching practice and increased their confidence. The programme also enhanced coaching skills, such as *emotional* and *behavioural self-regulation*. The potential of mindfulness to enable self-regulative processes is well-documented in the literature (Masicampo & Baumeister, 2007; Shapiro et al., 2008). Several coaches reported that their increased meta-cognitive awareness allowed them to notice unhelpful thoughts and reactive emotional and behavioural patterns during coaching sessions. This aligns with the literature on *metacognitive monitoring* (Deng et al., 2019; Jankowski & Holas, 2014). The coaches learnt to regulate their habitual patterns which provided their coachees with more autonomy and self-agency. Cavanagh and Spence (2013) refer to these effects as *session relevant outcomes*.

Improving coaching interaction and outcomes

Greater awareness and the application of mindful attitudes improved the quality of the coaches' presence. This positively affected their *listening skills*, *empathy* and *awareness of non-verbal cues*, which concur with Hall's (2013) survey results. Some participants mentioned a *new quality* of listening, without any distractions and outcome expectations. Chaskalson's and McMordie's (2018) research also identified these mindfulness effects and refers to them as enhanced *active listening skills*. Greater presence and active listening enabled better client *attunement* and *connection*. The coaches described this as *being with the client* without an agenda or *being in flow*. The potential of mindfulness to enhance client rapport, attunement and connection aligns with the research of Geller and Greenberg (2002) and Hall (2013). The mindfulness practices also helped the coaches *to ground* themselves during coaching and retain emotional boundaries between them and their coachees. Rather than being carried away by their coachees' distress, they were *holding the space*. Passmore and Marianetti (2007) refer to this as *emotional detachment*, and Cavanagh and Spence (2013) describe it as *decreased emotional reactivity*. The findings support the literature about the beneficial impact of mindfulness on the coaching presence and relationship which

inherently affect the outcomes. Combined with mindful attitudes they enable the coach to *become the instrument of coaching*.

Supporting self-care/caring for the instrument

The mindfulness programme introduced the coaches to mindful habits and practices that supported their self-care rituals and helped to monitor their well-being. The coaches learnt to apply self-compassion in their reflective practice.

Adopting mindful habits and replenishing practices

Self-care can be described as nurturing well-being at a physical and emotional level (Myers et al., 2012). By attending the programme, the participants became familiar with meditation practices and new ways of thinking that influenced how they looked after their own well-being. Many participants adopted mindful habits to reduce their stress and exhaustion levels. Corrie and Kovacs (2022) highlight the importance of coaches' self-care due to the high risk of depletion and exhaustion in their profession. They note that little attention has been given to the subject of coaches' wellbeing and how to enable it. Most participants embraced the mindfulness practices that helped to replenish their energy levels and increase their positive outlook, which improved their practice attitudes. The ability of mindfulness to enhance a sense of well-being and flourishing has been well researched (Spence & Cavanagh, 2019) and is supported by the study's findings.

Monitoring self-care needs

The findings highlight that the participants were also using the programme's tools to monitor and respond to their self-care needs. Corrie and Kovacs (2022) propose that the coaches' ability to monitor and manage their wellbeing is an important element of an effective practice. The findings not only support this argument but also demonstrate how the programme can enable self-care. This contributes to the very limited literature about how mindfulness can support coaches' wellbeing and emphasises the value of the mindfulness programme.

Reflecting with self-compassion

In the context of dealing with difficulties, the programme explored how the participants were dealing with their own judgemental voice in coaching and introduced the concept of self-compassion. The literature defines self-compassion as a method of relating to the self in difficult times (Bluth & Neff, 2018) which is characterised by aspects such as increased kindness and reduced self-judgement. The data highlighted that many participants struggled with directing kindness towards themselves. Some felt that this was self-indulgent and narcissistic, others just disliked the terminology. In her research, Neff (2011) acknowledges the existence of such concerns. Hall (2013) suggests that compassion should be a core component of coaching, but also recognises that many coaches find it difficult to be self-compassionate. In their meta-analysis of seven studies on the effects of self-compassion interventions on health outcomes, Bluth and Neff (2018) highlight the causal effects of self-compassion and wellbeing. Despite their initial scepticism, most coaches engaged with self-compassion at some level. They became more aware of harsh self-criticism and used self-compassion to interrupt their negative self-talk. This was particularly helpful in their post-coaching reflections. While the literature demonstrates that self-compassion can enhance well-being, the findings indicate that it is currently under-used in the self-care rituals of coaches. The coaches' understanding and use of self-compassion can be enhanced through mindfulness.

Applying mindful attitudes

The Mindfulness practice is firmly linked to mindful attitudes (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Hall (2013, p.18) outlines the list of attitudinal qualities that mindfulness and coaching have in common, such as openness, non-judgement, curiosity and empathy. The mindfulness programme cultivated these

attitudes through experiential practices. The study findings suggest that the programme reminded and enabled the coaches to apply mindful attitudes to their coaching practice. The data indicates that the application of mindful attitudes impacted all previously discussed themes and changed the quality of the coaches' experiences. Most coaches emphasised how they began to embrace openness, non-judgement and non-striving/fixing. While most coaches were familiar with mindful attitudes, it was apparent that knowing something is different from practising it. Segal, Williams, and Teasdale (2013) explain that intellectual knowledge may be helpful but insist that mindfulness skills and attitudes can only be acquired through experiential practice. The findings highlight that current coach training lacks opportunities for practising mindfulness attitudes. The mindfulness programme provided an experiential framework to cultivate these attitudes and could therefore contribute to the professional development of coaches.

Summary

The discussion illustrates that the study findings generally concur with and strengthen the literature about mindfulness in coaching, confirming how it can support coaches and their practice. Beyond this, the research contributed new evidence to subjects that have little coverage in the coaching literature, such as the coaches' bodily awareness, self-care/self-compassion and the cultivation of mindful attitudes. These can be addressed through experiential mindfulness training.

Conclusions

The study's findings establish how attending an evidence-based mindfulness training programme affected coaches and their practice. As a result, a conceptual *mindfulness programme impact framework* (Figure 3) has been developed, contributing to the knowledge base of coaching practice. The study also highlighted the importance of experiential learning for cultivating core coach competencies.

Impact on coaches and their practice

The thematic analysis established that the programme supported the coaches before, during and after coaching by *raising awareness, enabling self-development and supporting self-care*. It also reinforced the *application of mindful attitudes* to their entire practice, such as openness and non-judgement. These aspects not only affected the coaches, but also their *coaching interactions, clients and outcomes*.

Many of the findings strengthen the existing literature about the value of mindfulness in coaching. Beyond this, the study identified coaching aspects that have been neglected by the coaching literature and training, such as the experiential practice of *bodily awareness, self-compassion and mindful attitudes*. These can be cultivated through mindfulness training and practice.

Study value and implications

By addressing the research objective and questions, the study contributes to the knowledge of coaching practice. It emphasises the value of facilitated mindfulness training for coaches and illustrates how it can affect all aspects of their practice. The findings clearly demonstrate that coaches can enhance their competencies by attending a mindfulness programme which is highly recommended. The study is relevant for practitioners in similar helping relationships, such as mentors and supervisors, who are also invited to engage with mindfulness practice.

Importantly, the study identifies a lack of experiential learning in current coach education. While the coaches had a sound theoretical understanding of coaching competencies and skills, they seemed

to miss facilitated practice. This is particularly relevant for embodied coaching and the intentional application of core coaching attitudes. Such skills can only be learnt through practice. Ideally, such experiential learning would involve a competent facilitator, like a mindfulness teacher, and the opportunity to share experiences with others in a group setting. Learning a competency, such as body awareness or self-compassion, is not a conceptual process. Consequently, the study is urging coach educators and coaching organisations to seriously consider the integration of experiential mindfulness practice in their coach training curricula, or for them to offer it as continuous professional development. This would also provide coaches with useful tools and practices for their own self-care, which is undoubtedly of great importance.

Limitations

I already mentioned the limitations with regard to my positionality. As I was highly aware of my potential outcome bias, I encouraged the participants to share all their experiences, positive and negative, in their feedback. The findings illustrate that not all experiences were universal and demonstrate that the coaches also struggled with some programme concepts. I tried to fairly represent these nuances in my findings. While the mindfulness programme has the potential to support coaches of any coaching genre, I am aware that certain aspects of mindfulness, such as bodily awareness, may not resonate with every coach. This also applies to the attitude of non-striving which may present a conundrum for goal-orientated coaches. The study therefore simply highlights the potential positive effects that mindfulness training can have on coaches and their practice. However, the choice to engage with the programme content, as with any other form of self-development, remains with the individual coach. Similarly, the decision to integrate mindfulness into professional coaching training and development is a choice that will be made by respective coaching organisations and educators, taking other factors relating to the intentions of their programmes and offerings into account. The study findings may contribute to the knowledge base that will inform such decisions.

Further Research Recommendations

Future research may explore the longitudinal effects of attending a mindfulness programme on coaches. It would be interesting to compare these to the *mindfulness programme impact framework* and identify any changes over time. While the study focused on the impact of mindfulness on coaches, it potentially also affects the coaching clients. Some scholars already propose that certain mindfulness concepts may be introduced to coachees (Kemp, 2017). Further research could therefore explore how receptive coachees are to mindfulness interventions and what effects these may have. Mindfulness training is likely to be equally relevant to mentors, coaching supervisors, and other helping professions. It would be useful to confirm these assumptions by exploring the programme with these target audiences.

Finally, the study noticed a distinct absence of certain topics from the coaching literature, such as bodily awareness and self-compassion. While their importance has been acknowledged by practitioners (Jackson, 2017; Neff, 2011) further research into understanding their relevance in coaching would be welcome and contribute to practice knowledge.

Concluding Remarks

By identifying the potential benefits of attending the mindfulness programme, the study has contributed to the knowledge of coaching practice and provided valuable input for coaches, coach educators and professional organisations. To address the current gap in experiential training, the integration of mindfulness practice in coach education is proposed. Arguably, the understanding of mindfulness may not only support coaches in their professional development but extend to their flourishing in life, thereby contributing to a more mindful humanity.

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About the author

Eike Brazier is a business consultant, coach and qualified mindfulness teacher. She supports her clients during times of uncertainty and change by enabling them to make those choices that will allow them to flourish in all aspects of their lives. Eike has a passion for wellbeing and regularly facilitates experiential coaching workshops and mindfulness training.