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Mindfulness 101: Mindfulness amid the War in Ukraine

By Scott L. Rogers


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The study and practice of mindfulness draw on a variety of wisdom traditions spanning across the ages. One of the most well-respected and researched mindfulness training programs, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), is taught across the globe as its teachers and students hail from hundreds of countries—from Canada to Australia, Brazil to Japan, and South Africa to Ukraine.

A few weeks ago I had the privilege of being introduced to Valta, a mindfulness teacher from Ukraine, who has been collaborating with MBSR and other mindfulness teachers around the world and within Ukraine to find ways to share mindfulness with Ukrainian first responders, volunteers, refugees, children, soldiers, and everyday Ukrainians trying to live their lives, one day at a time, amid a brutal and terrifying war.

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I asked Valta if he would share his thoughts on mindfulness and the ways he is introducing it to his community. Often in these columns, we consider mindfulness practices and insights as a vehicle for helping bring clarity and calm out of conflict and chaos. We explore what it means to be more present for what arises and, in doing so, experience and contribute less suffering to the lives of others. Below are some questions Valta has generously taken the time to answer, which may further enrich our understanding of mindfulness with a big-picture look at the promise it holds for finding a sense of stability and inner well-being amid the throes of a chaotic and unstable world.

What does mindfulness mean to you?

Mindfulness to me is getting to know my own mind, by which I discover the reality of my nature and my presence in this reality, as it is. This offers me freedom from inner narratives and lets me be less dependent on illusions and perceptual biases. I find mindfulness practices to be very helpful in dealing with the challenges of facing a harsh reality, making it a much less anguished journey.

In what ways do you believe practicing mindfulness can be of benefit to your fellow Ukrainians?

I believe mindfulness to be an indispensable component in finding solutions to many problems of humanity in general. And I see Ukraine as a natural compound of this global project.

As for now, I'm focused on forming a Ukrainian mindfulness teacher's community and connecting it with the global mindfulness community for exchanging experiences and finding support amid war and the impending mental health crisis in our country. There are already small teams and initiatives bringing mindfulness to veterans and their families, children affected by hostilities, refugees, asylum-seekers, and internally displaced people, all of them reporting mindfulness tools to be helpful to both those getting help and those providing it.

One of the initiatives I dedicate my time to is focused on bringing mindfulness-based tools to those accepting the most complicated challenges and whose work is connected to high risk: the first responders, soldiers, and volunteers. The aspiration is to help equip them with skills that will help strengthen their attention and emotional resilience so that they may respond to the constant stress in a more effective way.

I understand you have begun teaching mindfulness to a group of volunteers who are working a great deal to maintain a sense of normalcy and are exhausted. What has it been like sharing mindfulness with them?

I'm working with the team of a nonprofit organization providing thousands of people with food on a daily basis, among them those in the military, hospitals, orphanages, and elderly people. We have sessions twice a week, and every session, in some sense, is like the first as participants change, and some of them are so tired that they fall asleep during the guided practice.

Despite a high interest in practice and curiosity of the participants, it is difficult for them to maintain discipline to practice when they are overloaded with daily tasks, not to mention the uncertainty of their everyday reality. So I'm keeping my mind open, attuned to the current state of the group so as to be flexible and open to their needs. Acceptance and beginner's mind are the qualities I rely on here. I punctuate practice with explanations, discussion, and various creative and physical exercises. I also prepare short audio guidance for those who can find time to practice between sessions. It's still an experiment, and I'm very grateful to the team for the trust they show in the process.

An impromptu opportunity to practice emerged with a group of volunteers I periodically join to help clean up the rubble and repair the destroyed houses in the villages of the Chernihiv region. At the end of the first day of the two-day trip, sitting around the fire at the improvised camp, the organizers of this initiative became curious about my path of exploring mindfulness. We decided to try out a short meditation for a small group of organizers the next morning. At 7:30 am nine sleepy young people with roll mats followed me to a neighboring clearing to sit silently for 20 minutes in non-judgmental awareness of their own breath, surrounding sounds, bodily sensations, and the hordes of bloodthirsty mosquitoes covering their bodies. Despite the distractions and the fact that for most of the group, it was their first experience of meditation, participants described it to be "interesting and amusing" and shared the common impression of feeling "calmer and less distracted" by the end of the session.

Have online technologies been helpful for applying mindfulness in this unfolding emergency?

Yes, since March 16 I have been holding online “Supporting Mindfulness” group sessions for my fellow citizens three times a week. I didn’t have a particular plan; I just knew that amid reigning chaos, many will be distressed, overwhelmed by negative emotions, and feel extremely alone or abandoned, as many had to leave their homes for the safer regions inside the country or refuge abroad. So I invited everyone interested to meet in a virtual friendly space, share, discuss, support each other, and learn a little bit about meditation and mindfulness. Some people attended several sessions, some for just one, and some kept joining and became kind of friends. We discuss personal news, challenges, and how mindfulness can be applied to daily experiences. I share my knowledge on psychology and other topics, and we do short practices. Mindful talking/listening is essential in this format. The practice called “safe space” seems to be very helpful and became one of our regulars. Also, mindful movement is helpful for those having a hard time sitting calmly with their eyes shut, as the exploration of challenging or uncomfortable experiences can be especially challenging at this time.

What is a mindfulness practice you find helpful, and has it been different practicing at this time?

For the first weeks of Russia’s full-scale invasion in my country, it seemed like there was no place for formal practice at all. Yet, as terrible as things were and still are, I noticed an underlying sense of calm and resilience in the face of what previously I would have found overwhelming. I realize now I was drawing upon the skills and insights I gained through years of practice. It dawned on me that this *was* actual mindfulness applied in real life. It involved continually bringing attention back to what is—whatever the distractions—noticing fear and anger without getting preoccupied by them. The developed awareness of changing body states allowed me to notice when I was getting extra-agitated or overly tired and the way it affected my thinking or behavior. What I find to be one of the most essential qualities to have emerged from practicing mindfulness is the ability to experience joy even amid the presence of other challenging or even painful experiences.

In terms of how it has been different, I noticed that practices got shorter (from an hour and longer to 15 to 30 minutes) and became more flexible. For example, during the “body scan,” rather than continuing to move through the body at a steady pace, sometimes I would feel like spending more time observing my breath or any other particular sensation and stay there for as long as I felt like. Sometimes that would mark the end of the practice. In this way, the practices felt less rigid, and I felt greater freedom in the ways I attended to my moment-to-moment experience.

Any closing thoughts you’d like to share?

The moment I’m writing these final lines for the interview, after weeks of seeming safety, Kyiv is being shelled again. It’s an uncompromising reminder of how illusory “before” and “after,” “was” and “will” are that makes it crystal clear to me that there only is that which happens right now where “I” am.

It is a process over which I barely have any control. In this only existing moment, I’m either present or lost in thought, and if there’s any choice at all, it is to reclaim my attention and direct it where I choose, which in turn will influence how I feel, the thoughts I have, and the decisions I make. Therefore, to me, mindfulness is practicing real choice. Despite all the torments stressing the world right now, I’m finding space for optimism as I’m very curious to find out what choices we as a species are capable of, if, on a large scale, we get to discover this potential we’ve been so generously granted by nature.

Taking this opportunity, I want to kindly express my gratitude to everyone following the path of honest self-exploration with a reminder that whatever distractions and challenges come our way, we can always take a small pause to become a little more aware, and in doing so find a little relief. Zoom out a bit. And start again.

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I am grateful to Valta for the generosity of his time, for our growing friendship, and for his commitment to sharing mindfulness with others. Valta recently founded “Awarehouse” as an organization for connecting with others and sharing mindfulness. I asked Valta if he would share with us one of his guided practices. As he normally guides practice in Ukrainian, Valta offered to record for us a short practice in English, which you can access by [clicking here](#). This wonderful practice was my morning practice today, and I believe you will enjoy it. As you listen, consider how people all over the world are taking a little time each day to come to know the present moment a little more fully.

While Valta embodies a calm, clear, and kind manner that models what he imparts to others, in our conversations he speaks frankly of the great uncertainty this moment in time means for his safety and that of his family, friends, and fellow citizens. I asked Valta if there was a passage or poem he turns to at times for strength, and he shared “Sweet Darkness,” written by the poet David Whyte. It begins with: “When your eyes are tired/the world is tired also.” You can read it [here](#). May we all find strength in its message.

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