

Mindfulness – at the heart of professional excellence in manual therapies

Remedial Massage Therapist and Research Fellow Kathrin Schmieder and her colleagues Eleanor Oyston, Barbara Beacham, Marcelo Demarzo and Jon Adams continue their exploration of mindfulness in manual therapies, examining its role in patient education, therapist wellbeing and professional development.

After the first part of this article on mindfulness in manual therapies, which was published in the previous issue of the *Massage & Myotherapy Journal*, co-author Eleanor Oyston, teacher at Oncology Massage Global, commented: 'So proud to be part of this article. It is the essence of my work.'

This article, published in two parts across consecutive *Journal* issues, examines how mindfulness can be intentionally cultivated and integrated across all dimensions and modalities of manual therapies to enhance professionalism, patient care and therapist wellbeing. In the first part (Vol. 23, Issue 4, 2025), we described what we mean by mindfulness and how it can be incorporated into the consultation and treatment process. In the second part, we will explore mindfulness in the context of patient education and as a practice for improving therapists' wellbeing. Finally, we will discuss steps that therapists and educators can take to learn about and teach the importance of mindfulness and to apply it during appointments. Adopting this approach can strengthen professionalism

in our sector and help therapists build greater resilience.

Mindfulness Education

Depending on our specific training and modality, appointments do not typically finish with hands-on treatment. Reassessment, education and potential referrals often conclude the treatment process. (For independent therapists, this may also involve payments and re-bookings.) This phase includes reviewing issues addressed during treatment and discussing how to proceed with the therapeutic process. Even when post-treatment time is brief, a mindful approach is valuable for concluding an appointment professionally.

As therapists, we have the opportunity to encourage patients to take responsibility for their wellbeing and to educate them (within the boundaries of our professional scope), which can enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of our tactile work¹. This process may include recommendations for actions (e.g. exercises or referrals to medical professionals) and activities to avoid (e.g. those that aggravate pain or contraindicate the treatment process). We may help those doing sedentary work become aware of when to take breaks and get up and move. We may also encourage people to be patient when progress is slow or suggest small daily changes that are essential to achieving positive, lasting results². Using a mindful approach to communicate with patients means listening deeply and responding thoughtfully, as already discussed in the first part of this article. It

helps us to understand better their specific challenges and needs, to take these into account when giving recommendations, and to build stronger patient-therapist relationships.

In addition, mindfulness is a valuable self-help method that therapists can recommend to patients, provided they have sufficient expertise and understanding to guide them appropriately. Increasing awareness of the factors contributing to health issues in their daily lives may help individuals recognise opportunities for positive change and healthier choices.

Research demonstrates that mindfulness can positively affect health behaviours, reducing factors that contribute to specific issues³. It also indicates that both mindfulness and manual therapies can complement each other as adjunct therapies. For example, a study showed that a combination of mindfulness therapy and aromatherapy massage reduced pain and helped to improve sleep and quality of life in older women with chronic pain⁴. Another study on musculoskeletal chronic pain evaluated the effectiveness of massage and mindfulness-based stress reduction⁵, showing that the first may be more effective and longer-lasting for mood improvement, while the latter may be more effective for reducing pain. This points to the potential value of combining approaches in chronic pain management.

Practising mindfulness can also help individuals learn to perceive pain non-judgmentally, which may reduce both the intensity of pain as it increases and the emotional distress associated with that perception⁶. Considering these factors,



incorporating mindfulness practices into treatment plans may help enhance patients' long-term outcomes.

Therapists' Wellbeing

Integrating mindfulness can build and strengthen our emotional and psychological 'muscle', helping us protect ourselves from burnout and physical strain while deepening our joy in working with patients.

Many of us, particularly therapists working with trauma, serious illness, mental health challenges or end-of-life, witness firsthand patients' stories of grief and distress. These experiences can significantly affect our overall wellbeing and might even lead some to cease practising earlier than expected. For example, according to Eleanor Oyston, therapists specialising in oncology massage remain working in the field for an average of just 3.5 years.

Confronting illness, emotional and physical pain and the reality of death is never easy, and treating someone who is frail and nearing the end of life can be especially challenging. It may remind us of personal experiences that evoke strong emotions, such as losing a family member or close friend, or it may involve advanced cancer or heart disease, conditions that can invoke fear for cultural or individual reasons.

Mindfulness helps us observe our feelings, thoughts and bodily reactions without immediate judgment. It also allows us to see more clearly what triggers us, which may lead to better management of demanding situations. Being mindful also enhances our ability to listen to our own bodies. This helps us stay aware of how we are feeling during treatment and to change our techniques or posture when needed. For example, awareness of overusing specific muscles or applying too much pressure can help us quickly adjust body mechanics, lower the treatment chair or table, or sit down

to prevent injury. While more pressure can sometimes help a person release tension, a mindful approach that allows the therapist to modify techniques is just as important.

US-based tactile therapist Pamela Overeynder has gradually transformed her treatments by incorporating mindfulness. She writes: 'I began to notice how often I hold my breath while I work, how often my tummy is contracted and tense, how often I allow my mind to roam away from the body.

I saw how much unnecessary force I used to 'help' my patient.

I could see that working unmindfully caused my

own body to suffer. I wasn't treating my body with compassion. Lack of awareness of my body, lack of kindness for my body, was affecting my health and the quality of the massage I offered.'

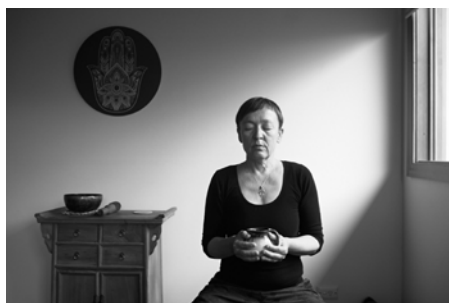
Remedial Massage Therapist Kathrin Schmieder uses mindfulness practices before each appointment as a way to place aside the challenges of everyday life. It helps her focus on the person in front of her and fully attend to their individual needs as they enter the treatment room. Mindfulness also allows her to set healthy boundaries and be fully present so she can connect deeply with her patients while taking care of her own health and wellbeing.

While working with cancer patients living with life-changing or life-ending illnesses, Eleanor Oyston has overcome episodes of extreme stress, emerging with an understanding that her self-care was ignored for an extended period. Through mindful meditation, Oyston regained a sense of control over her response to the suffering of her patients.

Our bodies continually secrete a sea of chemicals in accordance with our thoughts and feelings through complex neurobiological pathways. Each thought and emotion is associated with shifts in neurotransmitters and stress-related physiology, influencing how we feel, behave and recover. If we train our minds to notice our thoughts and feelings more clearly, we may change how we respond - and, over time, influence patterns in our physiology. This is, of course, a simplified description of an extraordinarily complex chain of events in the human body.

When we practise mindfulness in caring for others, we build a more sustainable approach genuinely rooted in empathy,





both for those we assist and for ourselves. Additionally, studies indicate that practising mindfulness can help people feel more satisfied with their work lives^{6,9}. It is a helpful way to ease feelings of depression, anxiety and stress¹⁰. It also helps people to improve engagement and gives them a greater sense of meaning^{11,12}. Findings have also emerged about the capacity for mindfulness to prevent burnout among health professionals^{13,14}. Although we have not yet seen any scientific evidence that mindfulness can prevent therapists from leaving the manual therapy sector early, the existing research strongly suggests that practising mindfulness can positively impact therapists' wellbeing.

Conclusion and Next Steps

As Ludwig & Kabat-Zinn (2008) point out, 'Mindfulness may hold promise as a potential way to help prevent and treat disease, increase the ability to cope with pain and chronic illness, reduce stress in patients and practitioners, foster compassion, improve quality of care and reduce medical errors^{15,16}.'

Across this and the first part of the article, we have demonstrated how integrating mindfulness into manual therapies can benefit therapists and patients in key aspects of clinical practice, including consultation, tactile treatment and patient education. Mindfulness enables us to connect more profoundly with our work and with the individuals who seek our support, helping to create a more sustainable career.

We encourage therapists to integrate mindfulness into their professional practice by including it in their professional development plan and practising it regularly. This can begin simply by taking one minute before an appointment to focus on one's breath and physical sensations with full intention and without judgment. Over time, if practised consistently, mindfulness becomes a natural state that



positively affects every aspect of your life. It will improve professional practice and the professionalism of our entire sector. We invite therapists to consult with the authors if they have any questions.

In addition to individual professional development, we strongly recommend that educational institutions and course providers offer integrated mindfulness training and practical study materials as part of every manual therapy course from day one. This way, students learn the relevance of mindfulness and practise working mindfully from the very start of their careers. Adopting this approach will enhance professionalism in our sector and help therapists build greater resilience.

Finally, we invite practitioners to read the mindfulness literature and share their own insights to help advance the field. For example, therapists can engage in research as participants and reflect on their professional experiences in a case study¹⁷. Sharing real-life stories about how therapists and patients interact – and the treatment results they note – can help demonstrate why integrating mindfulness into practice matters. Massage & Myotherapy Australia supports practitioners in writing case studies and provides a scholarship, enabling one therapist each year to present their work at the National Conference. Therapists have a wealth of experience, insight and wisdom to share, and the people who seek our support teach us many lessons. Writing a case study and participating in research projects enriches us all.

The first session of the Leadership Program at Australian Research Centre in Complementary and Integrative Medicine (ARCCIM), University of Technology Sydney (UTS), in 2022 sparked valuable conversations and collaborations among participants, including academics, educators and practitioners. This article constitutes one such collaboration, capturing an important aspect of our therapeutic work that we don't often discuss. May our discussions during the

ARCCIM Leadership Program mark the beginning of a dialogue on the importance of integrating mindfulness into all manual therapies. And may our thoughts inspire actions that enable us to incorporate mindfulness into our lives. Doing so will not only enhance the professionalism of our practice and its value for the health sector; it may also impact the wellbeing of our patients and us therapists in profound ways.

Kathrin Schmieder, Eleanor Oyston, Barbara Beacham, Marcelo Demarzo, John Adams.

Photos by Celeste de Clario (colour) and Tristan Pierce (black and white).

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