Mindfulness, Chronic Pain and The Occupational Self: a Narrative Study.

Mr Eli Dunsford's (2016) Dissertation – Sheffield Hallam University, MSc in Occupational Therapy.

This study explored the narratives of three participants from various backgrounds that experience different chronic pain conditions. One experiences lower back pain due to a work based injury, one broke his back and ankle in a car accident which also left him with PTSD, and one had chronic fatigue syndrome with a significant pain element. Each had previously undergone an eight week mindfulness course for chronic pain. Mindfulness was a major element for each of them in the recovery, maintenance and elevation of themselves as occupational beings.

In Occupational Therapy we look at occupation as: meaningful activity which mutually impacts and is impacted by our physical and social environments. These activities and our ability to perform them are massively influential in the roles we enact in the world i.e. family member, employee or independent person. These activities may be as simple as washing oneself or as complex as parenthood or employment. The occupational self is defined as a constructed identity influenced by of the occupational areas; roles, productive activity, leisure activity, self care / habitual activity, social environment and physical environment.

This study looked at the ways in which chronic pain impacts upon the Occupational Self over the course of each individual’s life story. The findings of this study were very specific to each individual. Broadly speaking, each of the individuals experienced disruption of the Occupational Self because of the physical and/or psycho-emotional impacts of chronic pain. Each of them used some element of mindfulness in the process of; recovery, maintenance and elevation of the Occupational Self as they; recovered old roles, discovered new roles and maintained these over time through a focus on well-being. Potential take home points for occupational therapy are:

- Readiness for change may be established through mindfulness.
- Mindfulness may improve the way individuals engage with meaningful activity.
- Using mindfulness may give individuals more body awareness allowing them to intuitively adjust the way they do activities making them more safe i.e. adjusting posture or gait.
- Mindfulness may be seen as a meaningful activity in itself.
Quotes

Acceptance and embracing occupation within Chronic Fatigue Syndrome:

“I got to the point where I was accepting that if this is here forever, so what? I can still have a good life, I can still do what I want can still enjoy myself. Might not be able to do as much as other people, but **quality not quantity**, and that is when it actually started to improve,”

Readiness for change through Mindfulness:

“You need to know exactly where you are right now and accept where you are to make even the first step.”

The participant expressed this whilst discussing the use of Mindfulness to look at his life through a more objective lens. This gave him new and different options for his sense of self as he discovered new ways of being within the limitations of chronic pain.

Not just recovery but discovery:

“My desired lifestyle would have been, you know, box A, and my desired life for now, lifestyle now is box B, the activity of them and the styles of them are much different

... I am now living in box B and I’m much happier and I’m living the life I want to live. But mindfulness has been able to teach me ... give me the tools to accept that box A isn’t possible, at the same time realise that actually I don’t even really want that box A anymore anyway, it changed my idea of what happiness is.”