

ALISON O'CONNOR: Why mindfulness should be front and centre as a national health consideration

Friday, March 20, 2015 (Irish Examiner)

IF SOMEONE had told me even 10 years ago that my relationship with my phone would actually be physically closer than the one I'd have with my children I'd have laughed at the daftness of the notion.

But today there is no denying it's truth. For most of my life my iPhone is within reaching distance of me, and when it's not I'm looking for it. It owns me.

I'm constantly checking it for messages, refreshing my email, looking at Twitter, tweeting and wondering if those tweets will get any response. I'm seeing what the weather will be like tomorrow either at home, or in New York, or possibly even in Kuala Lumpur. I'm seeing how far in overdraft is my bank balance or buying another book on Kindle that I won't get around to reading.

At night I do put the phone on "airplane mode" because I know that if it lit up with a message just as I was about to fall asleep I would feel compelled to check it.

I tried, as I usually do now when Lent comes around, to stop checking Twitter — my social media drug of choice — just before sleep, because I know this affects the quality of my sleep. I fell by the wayside within 48 hours.

I no longer seem to "do" moments of quiet reflection on a bus journey, or while waiting for someone who is a few minutes late to a meeting. Before I even realise it I have the phone out and I'm busy responding to all those stimuli it presents — often at the end of a phone checking "session" feeling as if my brain has been tied up in knots. Reflection is now something reserved solely for mirrors.

When it comes to my children, it's the "do as I say and not as I do" school of parenting. I spend my time telling them their screen time has to be limited, and they spend their time begging me for the phone, spotting the rare time it is out of my sight to grab it to play games.

Otherwise, they are furtively looking over my shoulder to see if they can crack what my latest code is, and go use the Ipad. It always has the same safety lock as the phone because mum is not good at remembering too many combinations of numbers.

This dependency on screens makes me feel rather helpless. I'd like to be able to stop, take a non-digital breath and reclaim some of that mental head space. I'm thinking that the best way for me to do this is through the practice of mindfulness, of which I am a major fan, but just need to knuckle down to doing it. I'd also like the Government to help.

As a literate adult, it would hardly be possible to not be familiar with the concept of mindfulness which has become so trendy of late. It's a wonderful thing for people who are struggling to keep up with the stresses and 24/7 demands of modern life.

The practice of mindfulness essentially means maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment and of acceptance of what we find. There is good science behind its benefits — its success in preventing serious depression and emotional distress have been proven by clinical trials.

There are investigations going on in places like the Oxford Mindfulness Centre at Oxford University, where they're looking at it's potential to help people build resilience at critical periods in their lives: from couples preparing for a new baby, to children and young people at school and college; and from adults in their work and family life, to older adults and those who care for them when they become mentally or physically infirm.

Professor Mark Williams, a mindfulness pioneer, and former director of the Oxford centre, developed Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) for prevention of relapse and recurrence in major depression.

Studies have shown that in patients with three or more previous episodes of depression, MBCT reduces the recurrence rate over 12 months by 40-50% compared with usual care. MBCT is as effective as reducing recurrence as antidepressants. Those are quite incredible results. MBCT is also used very effectively now in some Irish mental health services.

There is no denying its fashionability but mindfulness is no recent thing. It has been practised for thousands of years. It's only in the last few decades though that the beneficial effects of using mindfulness techniques in relieving physical pain and mental distress have been studied scientifically.

For many it is a religious practice, rooted in Buddhism, but those teaching it today tend to keep it secular and many of us attracted to it see it as a way of calming and focusing ourselves. Worryingly, it can also be seen as a pathway to productivity by big companies who run courses for employees, and is even employed by the US military.

But British politicians have shown some interesting enlightenment when it comes to mindfulness. An all-party parliamentary group investigated it last year.

This makes perfect economic sense when you consider the multi- million euro cost to their economy (and ours) from mental health problems. Mindfulness is already being used very effectively as a treatment, but imagine how more widespread use and the training of more medical and teaching staff in health and education would reduce that financial burden.

It is a couple of years since British Prime Minister David Cameron declared his intention to measure wellbeing. He's said that the actions a government takes can make people "feel better as well as worse" and that Gross Domestic Product was an "incomplete way" of measuring a country's progress. He has asked the UK's Office for National Statistics to come up with ways to measure not just economic data but also well-being.

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Wellbeing Economics, which published its report in September last year, had four main recommendations and one of those was mindfulness training for doctors and teachers. The report said this would “embed a culture of wellbeing in health and education, and reduce a later burden on the NHS by improving the availability of mindfulness-based therapies.”

The groups hearings were told that a more holistic approach is needed, that well-being must be seen as integral to core policy objectives in health and education, and not separate from them: mental health is inseparable from physical health, and children’s mental health and well-being is inseparable from their capacity to learn and achieve.

It was suggested that mindfulness should be included in teacher training and in medical students’ training as a matter of course — bearing in mind that mindfulness can benefit doctors and teachers as much as it can patients and pupils.

So how about a little bit of that mindfulness action over here for our schools and hospitals and even the general population? I can think of far worse things for Jerry Buttimer’s Oireachtas Committee on Health to be investigating. It would make for a very good “feelgood” factor for a general election manifestos.