

# Building resilience and preventing burnout among aid workers in Palestine: a personal account of mindfulness based staff care

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*The field report is a personal account of introducing the practice of mindfulness to humanitarian professionals working in East Jerusalem and the West Bank to help them reduce stress and address issues of burnout. Mindfulness refers to the systematic cultivation of awareness that emerges through paying attention to the present moment, with compassion and open hearted curiosity. Through cultivating mindful awareness, we discover how to live in the present moment, rather than brooding about the past or worrying about the future. Through mindfulness based interventions, the author, a psychologist with humanitarian experience, aims to foster a culture of 'learning and care' among aid workers and their agencies. The underlying vision acknowledges the interconnection between personal health and global health, between personal transformation and global transformation.*

**Keywords:** burnout, humanitarian organisations, mindfulness, Palestine, resilience

*[The case illustrations used in this article have been drawn from groups and in consultation with individuals and organisations. Identifying details have been altered to preserve the anonymity of those involved.]*

## Introduction

*"Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."* Viktor E. Frankl (2004), *Man's Search for Meaning*

This field report discusses the practice of mindfulness as an approach to burnout in humanitarian aid and human rights workers in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, Palestine. Mindfulness refers to the systematic cultivation of awareness that emerges through focusing attention on the present moment, with compassion and open hearted curiosity. I discovered the need while working in the field, coming across many jaded professionals who were disenchanted by what had once been the promise of a meaningful job. As comedian George Carlin said; *"scratch any cynic and you will find a disappointed idealist."*

As a staff consultant, I later created a project called Mindfulness for NGOs, in partnership with the Oxford Mindfulness Centre, an Oxford University based centre dedicated to the research and practice of mindfulness in order to prevent depression and enhance human potentials. The centre was, at the time, led by Prof. Mark Williams, one of the scientific minds behind Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT). Prof. Williams and his team at the Oxford Mindfulness Centre generously provided mindfulness training and mentoring during the first stages of my work, which still relies on the approach developed by the Oxford Mindfulness Centre.

Returning to Palestine, it seemed as if mindfulness could offer aid and human rights workers a way to accomplish meaningful work without becoming *'burnt out'*, a result of

working without adequate support or attention to the psychological needs of the workers. A recent longitudinal study (Lopes Cardozo et al., 2012) shows that failure to provide adequate support often results in high levels of psychological distress among aid workers. Therefore, it seems reasonable to argue that such distress has the potential to hamper their work on the ground.

Through cultivating mindful awareness, it becomes clear how to live in the present moment rather than brooding about the past or worrying about the future, allowing aid workers to remain psychologically fit and active. This paper describes how aid workers involved in human rights and humanitarian work can benefit from cultivating self-care through mindfulness, and suggests that one key to burnout prevention is a supportive work environment.

## **Humanitarian work and burnout**

In 2008, I was deployed as a psychologist with a medical, international nongovernmental organisation (INGO) to the Palestinian city of Nablus. Like most Westerners, I was familiar with the heroic image of humanitarians often conveyed by the media, showing men and women helping survivors of natural catastrophes and tragic wars. There is a sort of mythical rhetoric around frontline professionals that prevents us from seeing their humanity, and the needs that go along with that humanity.

While working as a staff care consultant, I often encountered aid professionals who had come to the field hopeful and enthusiastic, with a sense of purpose and meaning, but had sooner or later found themselves exhausted, cynical about the value of their work and doubtful of their capacity to perform. In other words, they were suffering from burnout (Shaufeli, Leiter & Maslach 2009). Perfectionism, overwork and the need to prove oneself, combined with a pervasive *'stiff upper lip'*

organisational culture, poor management and lack of staff care can all contribute to the state of physical, emotional, mental, relational and spiritual exhaustion experienced by many aid workers.

Before devising an appropriate mindfulness based intervention aimed at aid workers, and in order to inform my understanding of burnout, I asked humanitarian professionals about their experience of psychological preparation and support that they received from their agencies. Through social media, such as *LinkedIn*, I opened discussions where aid workers could engage in vivid discussions offering personal stories that mirrored my own experience in Palestine, i.e. aid workers came to the field full of enthusiasm, but psychologically unprepared, and received limited support that, in turn, strained their ability to sustain their commitment and perform effectively.

The stories that aid workers shared, from around the world, suggested that few organisations considered the safety, security and effectiveness of their staff as something that encompassed the mental, emotional and relational sphere. It became apparent that what was needed was more individual awareness around self-care, as well an appreciation at organisational level of the need to integrate staff care into their cultural milieu, in order to prevent burnout and psychological distress among aid workers.

As burnout has emerged as the *'mad cow disease'* (Jackson, 2009) of aid work, I began a journey to raise awareness around its causes and remedies, and returned to Palestine to teach the ancient meditative practice of mindfulness as a way to cultivate self-awareness and embody a healthier approach to *'doing good'* in the world. Before introducing the reader to the work of mindfulness that I did in Palestine, a preliminary understanding of burnout is necessary. This will help to understand later how to disseminate and practice mindfulness at both a personal and an organisational level.

## Understanding burnout within aid work

*“The striving to find meaning one’s life is the primary motivational force in man.”* Viktor E. Frankl, (2004), *Man’s Search for Meaning*

In order to understand what burnout is, it is important to be clear about what it is not. Burnout is not simply an accumulation of stress, related to overwork. Experts on the subject have discussed the difference between stress and burnout. Pines and Keinan (2005) for example argue that *‘the root cause of burnout lies in people’s needs to believe that their lives are meaningful, that the things they do are useful and important’*. [. . .] Further, they explain that *‘people who expect to derive a sense of existential significance from their work, enter their chosen careers with high goals and expectations, idealistic and motivated. When they feel that they have failed, that their work is insignificant, that they make no difference in the world, they start feeling helpless and hopeless and eventually burnout’* (Pines & Keinan, 2005). Frustrated idealism is therefore a defining quality of the burnout experience (Schaufeli et al., 2009).

Leiter and Maslach (2005) list six areas that can result in burnout:

1. Work overload
2. Lack of control over work
3. Insufficient rewards
4. Workplace community problems, such as lack of civility and lack of support among co-workers
5. A lack of fairness, such as inequality of pay, promotions or workload
6. Conflict between one’s personal values and the requirements of a job

When these organisational characteristics meet individual traits, such as perfectionism, total dedication to the cause and naive idealism, people burnout. Often, what they experience is:

- Emotional exhaustion, that is feeling emotionally overextended, drained and used up, without any source of replenishment.
- Cynicism and a loss of idealism, this can manifest as having a negative, callous or excessively detached response to other people’s suffering.
- Reduced personal efficacy, this emerges as a decline in feelings of competence and productivity at work.

When I returned to Palestine, two years after my first mission, my task was to help the helpers so that they could remain psychologically fit and active, while offering a healthy presence to the people they aimed to assist, within a context that continued to be emotionally draining and politically challenging.

## The Israeli/Palestinian context

*“The frenzy of our activism neutralizes our work for peace. It destroys our own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of our own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful”*  
Thomas Merton (1968)

Since 1967, international humanitarian law classifies East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as territories under Israeli military occupation. Such military occupation translates into a system of controls that includes limitations to people’s freedom of movement, checkpoints and the presence of ongoing violence. This context is emotionally charged and psychologically always has an impact. This very quality makes the Israeli/Palestinian environment simultaneously engaging, frustrating and stressful. In the spring of 2011, I returned to Palestine to offer short mindfulness *‘taster’* (introduction) sessions to aid workers and activists engaged in various grass roots and international organisations. Following these workshops, I structured an eight-week course

with the intention of providing a practical self-care approach to cultivate awareness and emotional intelligence. I was aware that when people burnout, the chance that one can truly be of help to others is limited. Additionally, I was personally familiar with the strain that organisations put on staff. It was important to address both the personal and the organisational dimensions in order to prevent burnout. I began by reaching out to individuals in order to help them find their own space to take stock. Within such a highly politicised local environment, my first challenge was to find a venue that would be both accessible and welcoming to Palestinians, as well as international participants working in East Jerusalem and in Ramallah.

## **Mindfulness as presence**

*“In order to do no harm, you have to be mindful. Without awareness, you are going to do harm right and left, because you will not be able to see what effect you are having on others.” Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990; 2005)*

Mindfulness starts when we recognise the tendency to be on automatic pilot, and make a commitment to learning how best to step out of it, to become aware of each moment. Mindfulness encompasses mind and body awareness. Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programme, talks about mindfulness not as a technique, but as a way of being, where we intentionally bring attention to the present moment. In his words, it is the *‘moment-to-moment awareness. This can be cultivated by purposefully drawing our attention to things we ordinarily never give a moment’s thought to. It is a systematic approach to developing new kinds of control and wisdom in our lives, based on our inner capacities for relaxation, giving attention, awareness, and insight’* (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Mindfulness sharpens our capacity for attention and wise assessment, as it supports people’s

capacity to make judgements in the present, and to act wisely and directly on those judgements.

Explaining mindfulness practices without experiencing them is like attempting to convey the taste of chocolate to someone who has never tasted it. Therefore, below is a brief practice designed by Prof. Williams of the Oxford Mindfulness Centre at Oxford University to invite the reader to experience a one minute meditation and bring awareness to the present moment.

### **Exercise:**

1. Sit erect in a comfortable position on a straight backed chair, with your feet flat on the floor and your eyes closed, or, if you prefer just lower your gaze.
2. Focus your attention on your breath as it flows in and out of your body. Staying in touch with the different sensations of each in-breath and each out-breath, observe the breath without expecting anything special to happen. Let your breath flow without altering it.
3. Your mind may begin to wander. When you notice this gently bring your attention back to the breath, without giving yourself a hard time. The simple act of bringing the mind back to the breath without criticising yourself is central to mindless meditation.
4. Your mind may become still like a pond, or it may not. Notice how this may be a fleeting experience. If you feel angry or upset, notice how this also can be a fleeting state. Whatever happens just allow it to be as it is. After a minute or so, open your eyes and take in the room again.  
*(This meditation is adapted from Williams & Penman, 2011)*

## Mindfulness as a way to help oneself as well as others

*‘We work on ourselves in order to help others, but also we help others in order to work on ourselves.’ Pema Chödrön (2008; 78)*

Since my own experience in the field, I have been vividly aware of how many who are involved in *‘altruistic jobs’* are *‘wounded healers’*. In his book, *Heal Thyself*, mindfulness teacher Saki Santorelli (1999) highlights this phenomenon in the medical profession, and points towards the importance of self-healing, self-care and self-awareness as a pre-requisite to help others. In my own journey through aid work, I have witnessed how humanitarians overlook their own needs to grieve and heal in ways that are damaging, not just to themselves, but to others as well.

Our own needs cannot be ignored if we want to fully engage with the suffering of the world. As I began to look more closely into the *‘helper’s syndrome’*, I noticed how helping others within far-away and difficult contexts can be a way to avoid facing our own fragility and suffering, as well as a way to work with our own vulnerabilities and shadow sides. My experience of mindfulness suggested that meditation could offer both a breathing space to *‘exhausted’* individuals, as well as a way to address the thorny issue of helping and transforming ourselves, while being engaged in meaningful work. This is why I consider mindfulness to be an important component of humanitarian action and was the motivation for my return to Palestine.

## Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy for burnout

The course taught in Palestine was based on the Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) programme devised at the Oxford Mindfulness Centre, which in turn draws on the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction programme (MBSR). Both MBSR and

MBCT draw on concepts and skills based in other disciplines, for example, MBSR includes teaching on everyday communication and life style, MBCT includes techniques and exercises from cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and includes didactic elements, which give the participants information about a particular difficulty<sup>1</sup> e.g. in the case of my course on burnout prevention and recovery.

In providing mindfulness to aid workers, my intention was to offer a course that was inherently non-pathologising, where we learned and practiced mindfulness together from the very start. The course was meant as a process, not simply as a workshop, and it required motivation and commitment from participants; the eight weekly sessions run in the evening outside of working hours, and as well as an invitation to engage in daily home practice, in between sessions.

Up to 15 participants attended 90 minute sessions, once a week for eight weeks, with individual guidance on request. Class time, apart from brief didactic presentations on burnout and self care, was divided between formal meditation practices, small and large group discussions, and inquiry into the participants’ present moment experiences. Participants received a CD of guided mindfulness meditations to support their home practice, weekly handouts and a book by Mark Williams and Denny Penman, *Mindfulness. A practical guide to find peace in a frantic world*.

In order to better explain the need for mindfulness based self-care, two examples from participants are included below.

Tareq is a Palestinian who works as a field officer in refugee camps throughout the West Bank, his workload is stressful, and in his organisation there is an ongoing turnover of field managers with widespread conflict among team members. Additionally, as a Palestinian, he shares some of the suffering of those he seeks to help. The first time we met, he looked exhausted and was unsure whether a mindfulness course was *‘suitable’*

for men'. Like many others who have experienced mindfulness, Tareq embarked on a journey of 'befriending oneself'. Another participant Anna, works as a project coordinator for a human rights NGO. She told me before the beginning of the course: *'I no longer feel anything, the people I visit in Gaza tell me horrible stories and I'm totally numb and exhausted. I know what I should do to look after myself, but I don't have time'*. The stories of both Tareq and Anna show how burnout is a syndrome that develops in individuals who are committed to their work, and who, like many aid workers, push through without respite or support. The course itself consisted of moments of formally guided meditation, enquiry, brief teachings on burnout, and the use of stories and poems to convey deeper wisdom.

### **Formal and informal mindfulness practices**

In a nutshell, mindfulness is about getting out of our 'automatic pilot mode'. In the case of burnout, it offers a way to step out of a toxic work style, and may in the end, point towards moving away from a toxic work environment altogether. One participant to the course commented: *'I didn't realise how burned out I was until I stopped, I simply could no longer continue as before'*.

Formal mindfulness practices entail: sitting, laying down, walking, and practising gentle yoga movements. We learn to listen to the body by bringing attention to symptoms of burnout, such as tension, fatigue, and pain. We also pay attention to recurring thought patterns of perfectionism and over commitment. We remain open to the whole range of emotions, without suppressing or pushing away unpleasant experiences. Mindfulness based interventions encourage us to be aware of harsh judgements and to open a space of kindness, curiosity and self care. The time spent in dialogue and enquiry following a guided meditation, represents the rich mindfulness practice of deep listening and presence.

To me what matters in our mindfulness practice is the question *'how do I apply this in my everyday life?'* While during the course participants are encouraged to practice 'informal mindfulness', I find that such integration into their daily personal and professional life does not need to be guided. People can easily see for themselves how the formal practice of mindfulness can translate into routine activities and day-by-day interactions. Participants experiment with bringing a more open, kind and creative mode into their moment-to-moment experiences: by focusing on one activity at the time, rather than multi-tasking within a perpetual cycle of distraction; by developing healthy boundaries at work, such as enjoying a proper lunch break. Creating such small acts allow us to stop before crashing. Alongside this, I invited participants to dedicate some time to more 'formal practice', by following audio guided meditations (Williams & Penman, 2011). Some of these meditations are very brief, such as the 3 minute breathing space, while others are between 10 and 15 minutes in length, such as the body scan. Tareq started using these short meditations as a form of grounding before and after visiting people who had been affected by traumatic events, such as arrests, beatings or violent army house searches.

I describe what Tareq did as 'mindfulness in action'; it is when facing the most emotionally challenging situations, that we can benefit from pausing and taking stock, so that our 'doing', is informed by a particular quality of 'being'. Jon Kabat-Zinn explains how this ability has nothing to do with suppressing or denying our experience, but rather creating a space where a wider awareness gives us the choice to step out of patterns of automatic pilot reactions, which can often be what causes us suffering. Mindfulness can help aid workers not only to step out of toxic work patterns that may lead to burnout, but also to cultivate a healthy relational space where the beneficiaries of their work feel seen and their needs met.

## Enquiry

Much of the transformative effect of the mindfulness based interventions (MBIs) occurs through conversations with participants in the group (McCown, Reibel & Micozzi, 2010), an experience that resonated with those who took part in the course in Palestine. In the process of *enquiry*, participants *work at staying open to their own insights. The teacher's role in this is to bring an open curiosity to the encounter, withstanding the urges to "fix" or give advice and instead to stand with the participant in a space where meaning may unfold* (McCown et al., 2010). Active listening is a central part of the process, and it is facilitated by the shared decision within the group to switch off mobile phones and offer presence to oneself, and to each other. In my experience, these simple focusing practices bring much benefit to distracted work environments and are key to creating flow at work and beyond. As Jon Kabat-Zinn says: *'the little things? The little moments? They aren't little.'*

## The use of stories and poems

*"Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself."* Rumi (2013; 3)

Poems and stories are part of the MBCT and MBSR curriculum. While mindfulness teachers do follow a specific curriculum, we are also encouraged to adapt it to the needs of the participants. So, while relying on a tried and tested framework, based on millenary wisdom, as well as on decades of scientific research, teachers can be creative in order to respond as best they can, to the needs of the participants. In my work in Palestine, I drew on the work of poets such as Rumi, Rilke, and Mary Oliver, as well as sharing short Eastern and Western stories, to exemplify the importance of awareness in burnout prevention. Participants related to such stories and poems as they allowed us to explore core issues, such as kindness, awareness, acceptance, or change in a more

immediate way. For example, the story of the *'boiled frog'* from Oliver Clerc (2009) offered an opportunity to reflect on the importance of paying attention, and relying on the body as a kind of barometer in the process of self-care and burnout prevention. In my work, I invite people to spend time reflecting and journaling on symbolic stories and poems. In the spirit of mindfulness, we plant a seed and remain open to the possibilities of insight. Stories help us to short circuit rationality and nurture transformation. They are a simple and meaningful way to facilitate a healing process.

## Teachings on burnout and resilience

A mindfulness based course is an experiential journey, therefore more than entertaining long discussions on burnout, participants were invited to tune in to physical sensations and pay attention to thoughts and emotions that emerged in their moment-by-moment experience. During the course we addressed burnout and its symptoms, and discussed the *'exhaustion funnel'* as described by burnout expert Marie Åsberg (Williams & Penman, 2011). This model offers a useful description of how individuals are pulled into the dark pit of burnout when they fail to care for their own needs and stop making time for nurturing activities. Williams & Penman (2011), highlight how it is often committed and conscientious people, and *'those whose level of self-confidence is closely dependent on their work-performance'* who are most likely to burnout. Within the field of aid work, I have encountered highly committed people who often feel that there is no room to nourish themselves amidst conflict, poverty or natural disasters. The reality is that we all need respite in order to take stock and refuel.

## Open conclusion

A question that arose for me while teaching aid workers mindfulness was how

humanitarian organisations could integrate this practice into their way of working, given that burnout is not just an individual problem, but, as shown, stems from a particular type of organisational culture. Drawing on the work of Daniel Goleman on emotional intelligence, Jon Kabat-Zinn (Goleman & Kabat-Zinn, 2007) on the mindful workplace and Peter Senge (Senge et al., 1994) on learning organisations, I began to work with a number of small to medium sized NGOs, in order to foster organisational mindfulness. I define organisational mindfulness as the capacity of an organisation to foster a healthy work environment, which allows time for reflection, learning and care – bringing mindfulness into ‘the body’ of an organisation. It seems to me, in this way mindfulness can help to placate the culture of overwork, (hyper)activism and burnout that inhabits many humanitarian organisations. Through the ongoing cultivation of mindfulness we can sharpen our social and political edge by bringing attention to the intention and the impact of our work, and in this way contribute to making humanitarian aid work more humane.

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<sup>1</sup> For a deeper exploration of the differences between MBCT and MBSR please refer to <http://www.bangor.ac.uk>.

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