

## BOOK REVIEW

# Ronald D. Siegel: *The Mindfulness Solution: Everyday Practices for Everyday Problems* Guilford Press, New York, 2009, 356 pp

Yona Lunsky

The mindfulness solution: *Everyday practices for everyday problems* does just that. It offers strategies and practical solutions so that both formal and informal mindfulness practices can be integrated into a person's routine, customized for their particular set of circumstances. It is a self-help book that comes with a web link to downloadable audio recordings of Dr. Siegel guiding mindfulness practices.

What makes this manual different from other books on the market on mindfulness targeted toward consumers is that it is not one "set program" (e.g., *Full Catastrophe Living*), it is not a set of readings, thoughts, or principles (although there are references made to Buddhist practices, it is not a book of Buddhist teachings), and it is not about mindfulness for a particular disorder (e.g., *The Mindful Way Through Depression*). To really know whether the book provides everyday practices for everyday problems, one would have to give this book to someone with either no knowledge or very limited knowledge about mindfulness and say: Did this help you deal with your everyday problems? In writing this review, I must admit that I did not give this book to any such person and so the opinions are my own, and they are colored by my own experience. The other caveat is that I read this book cover to cover, but it is really designed so that the first section is read first, and then only the relevant chapters at the time in the person's life when that chapter seems relevant.

This relatively inexpensive softcover book is divided into two main sections. The first part sets the stage for the rest of the book. The four chapters in this section explain what mindfulness is and what it is not, the research basis for mindfulness, formal mindfulness practices as well as informal mindfulness practices.

The first chapter tries to make mindfulness an approachable option for the reader by arguing that life challenges are universal. To demonstrate this universality, Siegel starts by describing his own mind and the plaguing thoughts that he has, and from there, he shifts to Fred and Wilma of the *Flinstones*. With humor and simple examples, he illustrates several common ways in which the thoughts in our mind combined with our experiences with others can make our lives feel very difficult. He interdisperses some research, includes some self rating and self reflection inventories, and provides case examples of his past clients.

The next chapter introduces what mindfulness is and why Siegel sees it as a solution. It begins by illustrating what "mindlessness" is and encouraging the reader to take note of how mindless they can be in their day to day functioning. He explains the construct of experiential avoidance very clearly and then reviews the origins of mindfulness and the research evidence showing its short and long-term benefits on the brain and on one's health and well-being. Chapters 3 and 4 teach the reader how to cultivate mindfulness, with step-by-step instructions. The first exercises in Chapter 3 focus on the breath and on concentration. Siegel provides several modifications on how to follow one's breath without suggesting that any one way is the right way. Then he gives explanations of walking meditation, the body scan, and eating meditation.

Part II of the book applies the mindful practices presented in Part I to several situations. In each chapter, Siegel explains the problem or issue and argues how a mindful approach might be an innovative solution to making the problem more bearable. At the end of each chapter, he reviews the various formal and informal practices that are helpful for that particular problem and then gives a detailed case example to illustrate how the practices helped a particular individual. He concludes with a list of formal and informal practices and life preservers. He describes life preservers as tools to adopt when the situation (e.g., anxiety) is very acute. The reader reviews this list and then creates a personalized practice plan which includes selected formal and informal practices and life preservers. If such a plan is not enough, Siegel also provides direction at the end of each chapter for when more help is needed.

Chapter 5 offers solutions to dealing with worry and anxiety. Each anxious experience, for example, is an opportunity to practice increasing our capacity to bear it as opposed to an opportunity to eliminate feeling anxious.

Chapter 6 is on sadness and depression and makes extensive reference to the mindfulness-based cognitive therapy program and includes some mindfulness practices from that program such as the 3-min breathing space.

Chapter 7 is the kind of chapter that would typically be in a different book than Chapters 5 and 6 because its focus is on mindfulness for physical pain. This is an area where Siegel has some expertise, having developed a program with colleagues called "Back Sense." In this chapter, he describes his own battle with back pain and his success in treating it through incorporating mindfulness. Back Sense combines understanding the problem, with resuming full physical activity and working with negative emotions. Following his discussion of coping with back pain, he discusses digestive problems, sexual problems (he explains how Masters and Johnson's sensate focus treatment is an extension of mindfulness), and insomnia.

Chapter 8 considers a mindfulness approach to all types of relationships with others. It starts with a philosophical discussion about the interdependence and links between all people, and then he goes on to offer exercises to help be mindful of oneself when interacting with another, be mindful of the experience of the other, and be mindful of the sense of connection and disconnection between self and other. From there, he gets more specific and discusses the construct of mindful parenting and offers some solutions and strategies to being present with one's children.

Chapter 9 explores a mindful approach to many bad habits. Siegel reviews mindfulness-based relapse prevention but also considers addictions like food, sex, and technology. Chapter 10, appropriately placed at the end of the book, offers a mindful approach to approaching aging and the end of life.

The remainder of the book provides information on finding a therapist, websites, phone numbers, and information on more reading, retreats, audio-guided mindfulness meditations, yoga information, research on mindfulness, and mindfulness for specific disorders. So long as these references remain current, they are useful and an asset to the book. Another very important component of the book is the audio MP3 recordings of mindfulness exercises.

I think this is a friendly and useful resource for people interested in exploring the concept of mindfulness as a way to better their mental or physical health. I think it also has some valuable ideas for the therapist who is interested in integrating some of the explanations and exercises with his or her client. Honestly, I had never thought before about how one could incorporate mindfulness practice as part of individual therapy. I appreciated the examples throughout the book to see how a therapist could work individually with a client by building a tailored toolkit for that client's preferences.

One question I had was whether a reader new to the area can successfully explore these activities with the book alone, with the audio download? In Siegel's examples throughout the book, past clients of his utilize these techniques in various situations, but these clients have him as a guiding therapist, and they tend to have taken formal practice classes either in meditation or yoga. I think it is important that the reader find enough support through the book and the downloads so they do not get discouraged or that they pick up the encouragement from the book to participate in either a formal class or a retreat. I would imagine that readers interested enough in picking up this book would find some aspects of it that they appreciate and that it would be looked at over time as a gentle reminder or resource. I would hope that readers would not approach the book too prescriptively but see it as a potential toolbox that can evolve over time, as I believe that is Siegel's intention. There is some irony in the back cover of the book. It explains that mindfulness can be cultivated without special training or lots of spare time and that a formal practice routine can be developed in "as little of 20 minutes a day." While it is true that there are simple ways to integrate mindfulness in small ways into one's life, there are no shortcuts or easy fixes as the cover may lead the reader to think. I believe that Siegel's real intention was to make mindfulness easier to understand, less foreign, and more inviting to a slightly broader audience than those who are perhaps drawn to this type of approach typically, and, I think, he succeeded in doing this. I would offer this book as a general resource to people who are open to but not yet familiar with mindfulness.