

# Demand for Mindfulness Courses

## A systems perspective

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## Background

Contemporary approaches to teaching mindfulness have developed over half a century, based on long-standing practices drawn from contemplative traditions, supplemented with some psychological teachings, with value evidenced by modern scientific methods. Public awareness and perception of mindfulness has changed dramatically over that period, from being largely unknown, or considered with suspicion, or considered a matter for spiritual traditions, to a general acceptance of its value and applicability for the world as a whole. Yet we are facing a situation where mindfulness courses are increasingly difficult to provide because of a seeming lack of demand. Why, if public acceptance is at an all time high does it seem difficult to engage people in the contemporary mode of learning?

This has major implications for organisations that rely on training mindfulness teachers for part or all of their income. Interest in training as a teacher peaked in the period 2020 to 2022, and then has waned in the UK, large parts of Europe and the USA. On the other hand interest in training as a mindfulness teacher has started to grow from 2022 in east Asia. There is obvious demand in some communities, but there are significant barriers there in economic viability and cultural acceptability of current modes of teaching.

What has caused this, and what remedies are there, if any? There are no simple or obvious remedies, or we would not see the pervasive decline in demand in some but not all regions where mindfulness teaching is long-established.

This short paper takes a systems perspective, based on Senge's approach in *The Fifth Discipline*<sup>1</sup>. Stepping back from the immediate perspective is, in itself, a very mindful way of reflecting on a complex problem. The view here is not meant to be evidence-based, but based on perceptions that are sometimes contradictory, but that combined appear to be creating a climate where mindfulness, despite all the scientific evidence of its value, and despite all its public acceptability, seems to be having a demand crisis.

This paper intentionally does not draw conclusions, and it does not justify or challenge any of the statements. Rather, it invites dialogue. It is through such dialogue that organisations and individuals might find new methods of further developing mindfulness-based approaches.

## Method

Senge argues that organisations often take a linear approach to planning, and often blame external factors beyond their control for loss of income. This can result in strategies that may have short term positive effect, but that do not resolve an underlying

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 1990, published by Random House, (revised 2010).

cause that in the end override any short-term solutions. This is because complex systems have feedback loops that can inhibit growth and sometimes dramatically reverse it.

In this paper we will consider two underlying models introduced by Senge: the limits to growth and shifting the burden models. Limits to growth considers two interacting feedback loops – one feedback loop that encourages growth and one that inhibits it. Shifting the burden introduces fixes to the limits to growth model that can in the short term improve growth, but long term does not resolve the issues.

For organisations to develop and grow, and not be the victims of ill-understood feedback loops, they need to understand the wider system and find more sustainable ways of surviving. That involves an open, honest, holistic assessment of the whole system in which an organisation operates. Only then can effective action be taken to remove barriers and increase leverage.

## Limits to Growth in Mindfulness

From 1979 when Jon Kabat-Zinn formulated the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction course, mindfulness has steadily grown in terms of public awareness and perception, and in terms of scientific evidence. A number of factors have facilitated the growth:

- The availability of effective courses to teach mindfulness
- Courses are unlinked from religious traditions and the commitments that come with those traditions
- The availability of training to become a mindfulness teacher
- Significant scientific evidence of the positive effects of certain mindfulness-based approaches on certain pathologies
- An increased awareness of the negative impacts of stress and the need to manage stress
- An increased awareness of mental health and the need for remedies and prevention
- A growing number of well-trained mindfulness teachers
- Adoption of mindfulness-based interventions by healthcare providers and educators
- Adoption of mindfulness by politicians
- Largely positive reporting in the media
- Advocacy of mindfulness and meditation by prominent individuals in areas such as sport, the arts, popular music.

The growing perception of the mindfulness as positive has triggered a small industry training mindfulness teachers, but those mindfulness teachers are now finding it difficult to recruit to mindfulness courses. The switch seems dramatic, but that is in the

nature of a system where a long period of under-supply is followed by over-supply. Complex systems with built in feedback loops can have dramatic changes after years of apparent stability (stock markets are the most prominent example, where periods of sustained growth are interspersed by dramatic falls).

Let us now look at the inhibitors for growth in mindfulness. The below are not necessarily true, and it is not the purpose of this paper to verify the truth or extent of these, but they are at least factors in some people's perception of mindfulness. Removing any one of these is unlikely to remedy the apparent decline in interest, but seen as a whole there may be ways of re-invigorating interest in learning mindfulness in the areas where it has stagnated or declined. We will look at each of these factors in detail:

- To learn mindfulness you must do an 8 week course
- Professional recognition of mindfulness teachers requires teaching from a restricted list of 8 week courses
- 8 week courses are a composite of different practices and approaches
- You should learn mindfulness in a group
- There are lots of different 8 week courses
- Mindfulness requires regular meditation
- Meditation is the same as mindfulness
- Meditation is about stopping thoughts and emotions
- Meditation is difficult
- Mindfulness is for people with a stress or mental health issue
- All meditation practices cultivate mindfulness
- You can learn mindfulness from an app
- You can learn mindfulness from a book
- Once you have done an 8 week course you are mindful
- Yoga is mindfulness, Buddhism is mindfulness, ...
- Mindfulness has not positioned itself effectively as a talking therapy relative to other talking therapies
- Mindfulness teaching is largely a cottage industry
- There is little public funding or grant money available for mindfulness-teaching
- There is now an over-supply of mindfulness teachers

Let's consider some of these in detail.

### To learn mindfulness you must do an 8 week course

Since the development of MBSR, the dominant mode of teaching mindfulness is an 8 week course. Of course, this is just one way of learning mindfulness – people learnt mindfulness long before MBSR, they continue to learn mindfulness in other ways, and it

is fair to say that many do an 8 week course and are not that much more mindful at the end of it.

A reputable teacher of an 8 week course will rightly emphasise the effort and discipline needed to benefit from it. Regular practice of up to 45 minutes a day will be stipulated. They will check out that a participant is able to benefit from the course by asking intrusive questions, and that there will be dialogue in the course about practice. People will be invited to discuss their experiences in the course.

To someone who is overworked, this sounds like an impossible additional burden. To someone who is concerned about sharing their thoughts and feelings with a group, this is anathema. In a culture where quick remedies are sought for complex problems, this is hard work. Little wonder, then, that 8 week courses often have people who have come to them after trying nearly everything else. An 8 week course is not an easy sell even to someone who could clearly benefit.

We front end the entry to an 8 week course with sensible barriers. The culture of care and caution is right and proper, but the subtext of the safeguarding process is to convey the challenge and difficulty without over-promising the benefits.

### Professional recognition is based on what you teach

Most training of teachers is targeted at teaching particular 8 week courses. Although there are generic assessment methods, notably MBI-TAC, the assessment of competence is based on compliance to a particular curriculum. This reinforces the perspective the mindfulness must be taught in 8 week courses.

This can be an inhibitor to creativity. Someone experienced in teaching MBSR, for example, who has developed a shorter programme for particular cohorts that is based on MBSR, and who only teaches that, could struggle to get registration as a mindfulness teacher, or to maintain a professional registration.

### 8 week courses are a composite

A typical 8 week course includes a range of formal and informal practices and psycho-educational components. This means that anyone committing to a course is likely to find some elements that are helpful. On the other hand, some elements may be over-challenging. For example, someone with ADHD may learn a lot about mindfulness if the teacher is a skilled mindful movement teacher, but struggle with the more still meditation practices.

MBCT, possibly the most researched psychological intervention, recognised some of the limitations of MBSR and re-balanced the practices for a particular cohort. However, that too is a composite offering.

Most of the research is based on whole, composite programmes. There is little drilling down into the effect of a particular component. So, if mindful movement is most effective for some cohorts, then it is not immediately clear how to orient teaching to that cohort.

### You should learn mindfulness in a group

There are some obvious advantages to learning mindfulness in a group, but that puts up a number of barriers, some indicated in the earlier section. Not everyone is comfortable in a group, and not everyone can schedule their life around a regular class.

The logistics of organising groups, whether in-person or online, limit the availability of mindfulness teaching. Finding a convenient slot for a number of participants can be a challenge. In addition, people are often wary of attending groups where they may be invited to discuss their thoughts and feelings. Careful management of the group is important, and disruptive members of a group can be a challenge for teacher and other participants.

### There are lots of different 8 week courses

MBSR has spawned a remarkably large number of adaptations for particular groups. This can be extremely beneficial, but it is also extremely confusing. From the outside it is difficult to understand the difference between (say) MBSR and MBCT, and which is the most appropriate. Research is often done on a particular programme, and whether there is valid read-across into a similar programme is not clear – early evidence of the benefits of mindfulness meditation supplementing triggered the development of MBCT with some adaptations to meet the needs of those with recurrent depression.

The motivation for adaptations is to fine-tune for particular cohorts. It is valuable in creating safe spaces and open dialogue about common challenges in a group. However, there is little evidence that a particular specialisation is significantly better than a standard MBSR, in terms of standardised controlled trials.

The diversity and growth of programmes is diluting the offer. It may improve accessibility for particular communities, and there may be valid motivations for adaptations, but it does complicate the offer.

### Mindfulness requires regular meditation

Although MBSR and similar courses emphasise bringing mindfulness into daily life, they all emphasise the importance of meditation. ACT, another approach to mindfulness, is much more focused on strategies for bringing mindfulness into daily life, and meditation is considered optional. Meditation is perceived by many as “too difficult”, or not something they could manage to introduce to their daily life, or too near to Buddhism, too spiritual, and they will translate that into mindfulness being too difficult or not acceptable.

## Meditation is the same as mindfulness

There are many forms of meditation, with varying intentions. Not all meditations are there to cultivate mindfulness; they may be intended to improve a particular form of focused attention, to block out thoughts, to achieve some special state of mind, none of which are core to the intentions of a mindfulness practice. Again, this excludes anyone who is wary of meditation from mindfulness practice.

## Meditation is about stopping thoughts and emotions

This is a widespread assumption about meditation, and indeed is the intention of some forms of meditation. For anyone who feels their thoughts and emotions are out of control, then the prospect of sitting down and meditating is not appealing; often meditation will, in the short term, amplify some of the symptoms of stress and make it seem like it is making the situation worse. Many will have tried some form of meditation and been frustrated by their inability to quiet their mind, or find that meditation has made their minds seem even busier and so assume that they can never meditate.

## Meditation is difficult

Aligned with the other assumptions about meditation and mindfulness, this adds to the sense that mindfulness is a big ask and unachievable for most people. This then gets projected onto mindfulness.

## All meditation practices cultivate mindfulness

This is debatable. However, someone who has found a nice calming meditation online with soothing music may assume that this is all mindfulness is – a way of calming the mind and having nice experiences. They might be content with that, or they may see some of the other teachings of mindfulness too much trouble. Alternatively, they may be drawn to meditation practices with a more explicit intention of calming the mind and miss some of the other aspects of mindfulness teaching.

## Mindfulness is for people with a stress or mental health issue

The success of mindfulness in treating chronic depression and other pathologies links it strongly to the medical model. This association means that people will often not want to engage with mindfulness as they perceive they do not need it (they don't have a pathology it is relevant for) or they see their particular issue as being too difficult for something as ethereal as mindfulness and meditation. Although public attitudes to mental health have changed, there is still a perceived stigma in admitting anything that is considered a mental health problem.

## You can learn mindfulness from an app

The proliferation of apps that include mindfulness meditations and guidance can be effective in a limited way, and it is an entry point for many. They exclude much of what a

mindfulness teacher might consider important. On the other hand they are relatively cheap and accessible. A lot of people will turn to an app as a first point of call, and assume they are getting a complete introduction to mindfulness.

### You can learn mindfulness from a book

Like an app, these can be very helpful, and there are some excellent books around. Again, they do leave out some of the value of a course delivered by a teacher.

### Once you have done an 8 week course, you are mindful

An 8 week course can be transformative, but not everyone comes away more mindful than when they started, and the value of a course can fade over time. For many who have done an 8 week course there is little support for them to continue practicing. Largely the field is neglecting support for continuing practice, which can be as important as initial learning.

### Yoga is mindfulness, Buddhism is mindfulness, ...

There are many contemplative traditions that have some component of mindfulness. Compared to the way mindfulness is currently offered, Yoga and Buddhism are often more accessible and offer ways of learning practice at a steadier pace and continuing to practice over a long period.

### Mindfulness has not positioned itself relative to other talking therapies

There are a number of other talking therapies in the same space as courses such as MBCT, such as CBT and person-centred counselling. The majority of academic research has been on the effectiveness of MBCT against pharmacological therapies. With a complex landscape of possible therapies, mindfulness is far from being a natural choice. There is little by way of cost and effectiveness comparison between mindfulness based approaches and other psychological approaches.

### Mindfulness is largely a “cottage industry”

Outside of healthcare providers and some education establishments, mindfulness is largely taught by individual teachers organising their own courses. Mindfulness teachers are, on the whole, not skilled entrepreneurs and are working from a passion and commitment towards mindfulness and its benefits. Without some overarching organisation, they are subject to the vagaries of supply and demand and unlikely to be able to establish a regular income sufficient to support them.

### There is little public funding or grant money available for mindfulness teaching

Outside of health, despite substantial evidence of its value, there are few funding vehicles to support mindfulness teaching. That means that mindfulness teachers have

to be self-sufficient financially, either having some income that enables them to offer mindfulness at a low cost or have good business skills enabling them to attract enough people paying a reasonable amount for a course.

### There is now an over-supply of mindfulness teachers

The over-supply of mindfulness teachers means that few can earn a living from mindfulness. This is demoralising for those who have trained, and it builds a perception that the interest in mindfulness is waning.

In systems terms, there is a delay in the system from an individual or cohort deciding to train to teach and having trained of a year or more. This is often a trigger for system change. When there is more demand than supply, good teachers can usually find a group. When there is more supply than demand, teachers will struggle to fill a course.

### The interacting cycles that limit the growth of mindfulness.

There are many factors that have generated the growth in interest in mindfulness. For a while this stimulated a demand for mindfulness teachers. This in turn stimulated a demand for teacher-training.

A typical teacher-training course takes over a year, and often much longer. So that once someone has trained, the actual demand for teaching can have changed dramatically.

The growth has been maintained in the face of inhibitors until we have got to a point where supply of mindfulness courses outstrips demand. Over-supply then itself becomes an inhibitor – the reaction to high demand is to turn up the supply. However, turning down the supply in a complex, distributed system is not easy.

The pandemic added to the fluctuations in supply and demand. People utilised the restrictions of the pandemic as an opportunity to train to teach. Coupled with online training becoming the dominant mode, this triggered a surge in supply that has not been met by a surge in demand for teachers.

### Shifting the Burden

To deal with a systemic issue, the usual first thing is to deal with the symptoms. In the mindfulness world, here are a few strategies that are being adopted:

- More marketing, emphasising the benefits of mindfulness
- More interventions targeting new groups
- Shorter, lighter-weight courses
- Offering to new markets
- Re-branding mindfulness

These may have some short term benefits, but are unlikely to do much to radically shift the underlying feedback loops that are limiting growth.

### More marketing, emphasising the benefits of mindfulness

This is likely to provide some short term marginal improvement, and overcome some of the barriers for some people. It will have an effect for all organisations in the mindfulness world, and it may improve the situation for providers who do the marketing. However, it is unlikely to generate a large shift in perception that will significantly uplift the uptake of mindfulness.

### More interventions targeting new groups

This is likely to extend mindfulness into new communities, but increase the proliferation of MBIs. Once a new community is opened up, it will be subject to the same limits to growth in the long run.

### Shorter, light-weight courses

This will lower the barriers to entry for some people. Alongside good marketing, this may increase demand for mindfulness courses and encourage some short term growth. However, someone focussing on that may also fall foul of professional registration requirements.

### Opening up new markets

There are some countries where mindfulness has potential but where the development of mindfulness implementation is a decade or more behind the USA and Europe. This will allow some providers to continue to provide courses for the immediate future. However, all new markets will be subject in the long term to the same limits to growth, plus some additional barriers around culture and language.

### Re-branding mindfulness

Renaming mindfulness courses to something like emotional resilience training will open up some opportunities. It does not resolve the underlying problems.

### So where is mindfulness going?

Although there appears to be a dip in demand for mindfulness, there is clearly a slow and steady interest in mindfulness that could sustain a small market for mindfulness teaching. Mindfulness is now so well established in the public consciousness it is unlikely to fade away. What is perceived as a drop in interest is arguably the effect of over-supply of particular forms of mindfulness course (8 week courses) coupled with people satisfying their interest in mindfulness with other ways of accessing it (e.g. apps, books, etc.).

From a market perspective we are now probably at the point where the enthusiasts needs and expectations are met. If we want mindfulness to be adopted more widely, it needs to be accessible to those who can see the potential value but who are unlikely to be enthusiasts. As a field we need to turn to questions such as:

- How can we change the perception of mindfulness as being mainly for people with a pathology?
- How can we cultivate a perspective that mindfulness improves wellbeing?
- How can we balance the demands of professional standards against the need for creativity in deploying mindfulness teaching?
- How can we engage people on standard training in a safe way while emphasising the benefits of the training?
- How can we provide experiences of mindfulness to people who are not in desperate need?
- How can we embed mindfulness teaching in general education?
- How can we organise teaching in a way that organises and supports teachers rather than puts them in competition with each other?
- How can we organise the cottage industry by providing (a) prominent organisation(s) that enable(s) trained teachers to reach the market.
- How can we create a more accessible means of people learning and continuing practice similar to the way Yoga is offered?
- Has the 8 week course had its day, and if so what would replace it if we want to keep the momentum on mindfulness going for another half century?
- Was the pandemic a perturbation in supply and demand, or has the overall system shifted permanently?

These are not easy questions. If, however, the field does not address them, we are likely to see the training of mindfulness teachers continue to decline, and for a number of training organisations to fold.

Each organisation in the mindfulness teacher training area will need to confront some or all of these questions, and no doubt many more. Some will succeed by good fortune rather than good planning. Some will inevitably have to fold if we cannot improve accessibility to mindfulness and encourage more to engage.

The mindfulness community teaches us to face reality, to see challenges in context, to explore the wider picture. Now is the time for the community to openly reflect on the wider context in which mindfulness teaching operates.