Mindfulness for Emotional Regulation: Reflections on a Pilot Mindfulness Programme with a Group of Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) Service-Users in the Community

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Summary: Mindfulness-based interventions teach participants how to regulate attention and increase awareness of the present moment, with an open and accepting attitude. Participants learn how to move their attention from cognitive processes to an awareness of bodily sensations. This can lead to a reduction in rumination and worry and reduced reactivity to provocation (Farb and Segal, 2024). The effectiveness of mindfulness for people on probation has not been robustly studied but there is some promising evidence of its potential benefits. This article centres on a pilot mindfulness-based programme offered to a small group of probation service-users in PBNI. The facilitator reflects on her perception of the programme's effectiveness and participants' evaluations of the programme. The evaluation of this pilot provides support for the possibilities that mindfulness can offer as a strength-based intervention to improve emotional regulation in offending populations.
Keywords: Mindfulness, offending behaviour programme, emotional dysregulation.

Introduction

Mindfulness training has been shown to increase the capacity for emotional regulation in general populations (Khoury *et al.*, 2013), and there is evidence that emotional dysregulation can be a precursor to various types of offending behaviour (Gillespie *et al.*, 2018). Research investigating the use of mindfulness within criminal justice systems is emerging with promising results, including reductions in negative mood states and improvements in self-regulation for service-users (Davies *et al.*, 2021).

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This article centres on a pilot mindfulness programme offered to probation service-users in the community who had experienced recurrent depression, anxiety, difficulties in coping with stress, emotional reactivity with others or a history of repeating unhelpful habit patterns. The six-week programme taught participants how to learn from their direct experience. They learned how to pause and experience how various emotions manifest in the body, and they were introduced to a different way of relating to difficult and unwanted mood states and thoughts.

The aims of this project align with the criminal justice recommendations in the *Mindful Nation* report (MAPPG, 2015, p. 53):

> The NHS and NOMS should work together to ensure the urgent implementation of National Institute for Health and Care Excellence's (NICE) recommended Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) for recurrent depression within offender populations.

This article provides a summary of the existing research linking emotional dysregulation to offending behaviour, followed by an overview of the current evidence supporting the use of mindfulness-based interventions to increase emotional regulation. It outlines the nature of the pilot programme and discusses the themes and patterns emerging from participants' evaluations and sets out how the pilot affected people being supervised in the community. The article reflects upon participants' perceived improvements in emotional regulation, with evidence of decentring from thoughts and emotions and an awareness that thoughts are transient. It reflects on participants' increased ability to cope with difficult mood states, reduction in rumination and worry, increased resilience, improved impulse control and increased self-compassion.

The next generation of offending behaviour programmes is currently being considered by PBNI, which includes strength-based approaches. This paper therefore makes recommendations as to how mindfulness-based interventions could provide a very useful adjunct to those service-users with particular issues with emotional dysregulation and assist their successful rehabilitation in the community.

Emotional dysregulation and offending behaviour

Emotional regulation deficits have been linked to a variety of offending behaviour, including violent and sexual offending. The integrated theory of

sexual offending (Ward and Beech, 2006) posits that offending occurs due to several interacting variables, which can impact neuropsychological functioning. This can manifest as poor impulse control, negative emotional states and obsessive ruminative thinking.

Ward and Gannon (2006) propose the Good Lives Model-Comprehensive (GLM-C) as a theoretical framework which combines the integrated theory of sexual offending with a strengths-based approach. This model emphasises the importance of psychological wellbeing in rehabilitation and risk management. Key to this is equipping people with the capacity to lead more fulfilling lives. Ward and Gannon discuss the role of self-regulation in offending pathways and specifically mention the need for techniques to restore inner peace.

Gunst *et al*. (2017) explored the role of affect regulation in sexual offending and the often-secondary importance of this as a target in treatment programmes.

Roberton *et al*. (2015) found that participants with difficulties in attending to their emotions had a more extensive history of aggressive behaviour. Garofalo and Velotti (2017) found an association between aggression and emotional dysregulation and concluded that 'treatments for violent offenders should target emotion regulation skills to reduce aggressive tendencies in the presence of negative emotionality'.

Tonnaer *et al*. (2017) used fMRI scanning (functional magnetic resonance imaging, a neuroimaging technique) to highlight changes in brain activity when service-users convicted of violent offending were deliberately provoked. They suggested that cognitive resources were quickly depleted in efforts to self-regulate, increasing the risk of loss of self-control and reactive aggression.

A growing body of literature indicates that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have a high prevalence rate in forensic populations (Craig *et al*., 2017). Meddeb *et al*. (2023) explored the links between ACEs, emotional dysregulation and aggressive anti-social behaviour, concluding that addressing emotional regulation deficits could be an important treatment target.

Common amongst these studies is the importance of attending to negative emotionality rather than attempting to suppress or even distract from such mood states. Substance misuse (a known risk factor for offending) is often rooted in an attempt to numb psychological pain. Mindfulness can increase the capacity to tolerate unwanted mood states, thereby boosting relapse prevention.

The effectiveness of mindfulness in general populations

Williams and Kabat-Zinn (2011) discuss how the term mindfulness has become ubiquitous, but it is often misunderstood and is tricky to define. Segal *et al.* (2013) summarise a mindful approach as 'holding thoughts and feelings in awareness rather than trying to change them' (p. 5). Kabat-Zinn (2013) emphasises the foundational attitudes of mindfulness to cultivate, which include non-judgement, acceptance, patience, beginner's mind, trust, non-striving and letting go.

Since Jon Kabat-Zinn developed Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction in the late 1970s, numerous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of mindfulness-based interventions in improving many biopsychological conditions, including anxiety, depression, stress and addiction (Zhang *et al.*, 2021). Developments in neuroimaging have added weight to these findings, showing the neuroplastic effects of mindfulness (Farb and Segal, 2024). The latest research using fMRI scanners not only demonstrates that mindfulness works, but, for the first time, now explains how it works.

Farb and Segal (2024) discuss how the brain's default mode network automatises so many aspects of daily activity, but it does so at a cost. Automatic reactions to stressors do not serve us when this keeps us stuck in harmful habit patterns. They have discovered via neuroimaging studies that mindfulness disrupts the default mode network by deliberately expanding awareness to take in a wider field of bodily sensations. Over a period of weeks these effects remained between periods of formal mindfulness practice, indicating longer-term changes to the structure of the brain.

In short, Farb and Segal (2024) found that mindfulness works via several processes: increased awareness of sensory experience, decreased proliferation of rumination and increased attentional stability and reduced reactivity to provocation.

Mindfulness for probation service-users

Ideally, service-users would be able to employ skills of cognitive reappraisal when faced with a challenge. However, this level of executive functioning tends to go offline when faced with acute stressors (Sheppes *et al.*, 2014). Common responses to feeling overwhelmed are suppression and avoidance, which can be successful strategies in the short term but are usually maladaptive in the long term (including substance use and reactive aggression). Individuals who struggle with emotional regulation are more

likely to have poorer impulse control and are more likely to abuse substances (Weiss *et al*., 2012).

Both anxiety and depression have been linked to poor interoceptive awareness (awareness of bodily sensations). Research on recurrent depression suggests that suppression of bodily sensations is integral to relapse (Farb and Segal, 2024). Awareness of bodily sensations can be increased with regular mindfulness practice (Schwartz *et al*., 2025). A 2024 meta-analysis by Molteni *et al*. supported the efficacy of mindfulness-based interventions for trauma-related symptoms and interoception.

A focus on bodily sensations disrupts rumination, creates a pause and allows participants to engage with what is actually happening rather than what might happen. It also allows participants to become aware of their own reactivity to particular stressors (Farb and Segal, 2024).

Many of the Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) based offending behaviour programmes ask participants to note their bodily reactions, but this assumes that people have the capacity to do so. Many people who have experienced trauma are even less attuned to bodily sensations or have dissociated from the body as a result of trauma (Molteni *et al*., 2024). A trauma-informed mindfulness approach ensures that individuals learn at a pace which feels safe for them (Treleaven, 2018).

The pilot programme

I have been employed as a Probation Officer with the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) for 23 years. Having begun practising mindfulness several years ago and, as it transformed my own wellbeing, I became increasingly convinced that many of our service-users could also benefit from this practice. It appeared to me that much of the maladaptive behaviour amongst our service-users was driven by attempts to suppress unwanted thoughts and emotions and that mindfulness could offer a means of non-harmful self-regulation for our service-users.

Having trained as a mindfulness teacher from 2019 to 2022 at the Mindfulness Centre Dublin, part funded by PBNI's further education study scheme, I am a certified member of Mindfulness Teachers Association Ireland (MTAI). I completed further training with Oxford Mindfulness, including teacher training for the 'Finding Peace in a Frantic World' programme (Kuyken *et al*., 2020).

The Finding Peace in a Frantic World programme (hereafter referred to as the programme) was developed by Oxford Mindfulness. It is an abridged

version of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, which has a strong evidence base (Gkintoni *et al.*, 2025). The programme teaches mindfulness skills and how to use these skills to improve wellbeing and resilience to stress. A core aim of the programme is reducing cognitive reactivity. I chose this programme as it covers the key components of mindfulness training in a course that is accessible due to its abridged format and shorter guided practices.

Each week has a different theme and builds on previous learning. The programme covers: recognising autopilot mode, connecting with the body, using breath and body to anchor attention, observing thoughts as mental events, facing difficult emotions, learning to respond rather than react, cultivating self-compassion and planning for long-term mindfulness practice.

In one Belfast-based team, I proposed facilitating a pilot programme to service-users on a community sentence or subject to licence. This was supported by PBNI's senior leadership team. I received regular supervision from an accredited, external mindfulness supervisor.

An information sheet was provided to the service-users, via their Probation Officers, detailing that the programme was suitable for those who had experienced recurrent depression, anxiety, difficulties in coping with stress, emotional reactivity with others or a history of repeating unhelpful habit patterns. It was explained that mindfulness can offer an alternative means of self-regulation and can lead to reduced reactivity. It was not suitable for those who were acutely unwell, as per Oxford Mindfulness guidelines on selection criteria.

It was important that participants self-selected for this programme. It was explained that attendance was voluntary and there would be no adverse consequences for those who chose not to complete the programme or if they missed sessions. However, it was noted that missing more than one session would usually mean that they should complete the programme at a later date as they would have missed too much of the programme.

Referrals were completed by Probation Officers with the service-users. The referral form screened for acute mental health issues and unmanaged addictions. Following screening, ten participants were assessed as suitable and all ten attended an orientation session. Eight participants attended the first session and seven completed the full programme.

The curriculum can be delivered in a six- or eight-week format. I chose the six-week programme (90-minute sessions), with the addition of a group orientation session the week before. The purpose of the orientation was to explain more about the programme and create a group agreement, which

was informed by trauma-sensitive mindfulness approaches. Treleaven (2018) explores how mindfulness teaching can be adapted to prioritise emotional safety and autonomy for those with a history of trauma. It was essential to co-create a space that felt safe and supportive. Integral to this was choice – freedom to choose to attend, to engage in the practices and to take care of any emerging difficulties.

Introducing the 'window of tolerance' (Siegel, 2020) in the orientation session appeared to be useful for many. The 'window of tolerance' illustrates the concept of zones of nervous system regulation. On either end of the optimal zone are the hyper-arousal and hypo-arousal zones. These describe states of heightened anxiety and overwhelm and states of disconnection and shutdown. Mindfulness can help expand the optimal zone of emotional regulation (Treleaven, 2018).

Most of the participants voiced an experiential understanding of being in states of dysregulation – both overwhelm and shutdown. There was a sense of hope amongst many in the group that mindfulness could offer a means of coming back into regulation when they experienced either anxiety or depression. The importance of hope is highlighted in a 2025 HM Inspectorate of Probation Academic Insights paper (Ali *et al.*, 2025/04). The paper notes the benefits of facilitating transformational hope as part of a strengths-based approach which supports desistance.

The group left the orientation session knowing that they were not unique in their struggles. This was a revelation for many; one participant commented, 'It was also positive to learn I was not the only person such severe anxiety affected'.

The programme taught participants how to learn from their direct experience, rather than learning about more abstract, cognitive concepts. They learned how to pause and to experience how various emotions manifest in the body, and they were introduced to a different way of relating to difficult and unwanted mood states and thoughts. Each week, participants were provided with handouts and audio recordings (approximately ten minutes in duration) to support ongoing practice. They were invited to complete home practice on a daily basis and reflect on their experiences in a daily log and in the subsequent session.

In line with a trauma-sensitive approach, there was regular communication between sessions, by text, email and phone or video calls, when needed. Supervising Probation Officers were informed of attendance and any presenting concerns.

During the sessions, I was attuned to participants' presentation and spoke with those I was concerned about after the sessions. Two participants reported difficulties with physical pain, very low mood and feelings of shame. When I noticed they were struggling, I met with these participants individually, and this, with the support of their own supervising Probation Officers, gave more space to their emerging needs and allowed both to complete the programme, with self-reported improvements in emotional wellbeing.

The themes of the programme included relating differently to thoughts and feelings and turning towards difficulty, accepting and allowing and rebalancing. By week two, there was already a shift in the language used by some participants, from getting rid of negative emotions to an emphasis on changing relationships to unwanted states. In discussing difficult experiences during the guided practice, one participant commented that difficulties are usually found in the past or in the future and when we pay attention to the present, we often find we are actually okay.

Participants were able to explore their experiences between sessions, through the lens of mindfulness. One man spoke about his reaction when his car broke down, spiralling into rumination and worry. He explained how mindfulness disrupted this habit pattern, evidencing decentring from his automatic thoughts and the utility of practice in everyday life.

Participants noted challenges in maintaining consistent daily practice, even with brief ten-minute sessions, and so were introduced to the benefit of a one-minute practice. This allowed those who were struggling to form a daily routine to establish a baseline and then increase the duration of practice.

In the last two sessions, participants reflected more on their learning. They spoke of a sense of being more than their past and allowing fear and anxiety to pass through them. One participant spoke of an abiding sadness, but he was now able to feel this more in the body, thereby bringing a more expansive awareness that he was 'more than just sad'. Another commented that he believed his thoughts were 'mad', until he heard everyone else sharing their thoughts.

At the end of the final session, participants were given an evaluation form. A brief introduction to the form outlined that responses were anonymous and some of the comments might be included in this article. The evaluation invited participants to share their motivation for attending the programme, what they found most and least useful about the programme and the impact (if any) it had on their day-to-day life to date. They were also asked how interested they were in continuing to practise mindfulness and whether they

would recommend the programme to other probation service-users. There was also space for any additional comments.

The evaluation form was completed by all seven participants who completed the programme. Their motivation for attending the programme included coping with difficult thoughts and feelings (particularly anxiety), relief from emotional pain, to increase self-worth and self-compassion and to address offending behaviour.

Participants reported perceived improvements in emotional regulation, with evidence of decentring from thoughts and emotions and an awareness that they are transient; increased ability to cope with difficult mood states; reduction in rumination and worry; increased resilience; improved impulse control; and increased self-compassion. Zhong *et al*. (2022) found that childhood trauma increased impulsivity in offending populations, and increasing self-compassion was more effective than cognitive reappraisal in mediating impulsivity. Therefore, self-compassion may be an important treatment goal for PBNI service-users.

When asked what they found least useful, three participants said that they found all of the programme helpful and offered no critique or word to this effect. One commented on his own social anxiety at the beginning but reported that he found this improved towards the end of the programme. The remaining comments focused on individual preferences for group discussion rather than pair work, and preferences for various practices used in the course.

In the evaluation forms, all seven participants reported improvements in their day-to-day lives, including:

> 'It's given me a clarity to be okay if things don't work or turn out how I want them to.'

> 'Enriched my life for the better.'

> 'That the thoughts will not be there forever.'

> 'Not ruminate on negative thoughts.'

> 'Anxiety is still there, still real but I do find I am coping better. I know this is step one.'

All participants were very interested in continuing to practise mindfulness and all said that the course would be useful to others on probation:

> 'Help in understanding emotions and thoughts and feelings. Being able to regulate.'

> 'First, it's brilliant for impulse control. I'm here ultimately because my internet usage got out of control. Recognising that I don't have to act on urges to watch porn has been brilliant for me. Also, there is a tremendous amount of shame and self-disgust because of the crimes I've committed. This course has really helped me deal with that shame.'

The success of the group was most apparent at the end of the final session. The participants appeared to be reluctant to leave, such was the sense of community, support and acceptance within the group.

The potential benefits of mindfulness for probation service-users are manifold, as is evident from the participants' comments. One of the benefits is a shared understanding of the struggles that every person faces, regardless of their background. Mindfulness offers a way of coping with universal problems, acknowledging the inherent worth and strength of each participant and equipping them with lifelong skills to enhance their own wellbeing for their benefit and for the benefit of others.

This project was possible only through the foresight of PBNI in supporting me to facilitate this pilot and, importantly, the courage of the participants to take part, and to engage authentically and openly with the pilot programme.

Conclusion

While mindfulness has become increasingly popularised in the west, there remains some scepticism due to the Buddhist origins of the practice. Farb and Segal (2024) suggest that given their most recent data, this practice 'isn't any more mystical than doing a few stretches in the morning' (p. 61).

Many of our service-users have a history of trauma, addiction and mental health issues, and struggle with emotional regulation. PBNI is committed to becoming a trauma-informed organisation, with the aim of achieving compassionate, nurturing, relationship-based practice, and building strong, resilient, healthy and productive communities. Mindfulness training can support recovery from trauma and can also support good mental health

outcomes. Mindfulness for criminal justice service-users is a growing area of research and practice, with promising results (Per *et al.*, 2019).

Mindfulness-based interventions could offer a low-cost and high-impact option for those who wish to learn a different way of coping with life stressors. The programme could provide direct benefit to service-users, in addition to providing some workload relief for their supervising Probation Officers. It has the potential to promote desistance and reduce reoffending.

PBNI is currently considering the future of offending behaviour programmes, including strength-based approaches. Mindfulness-based interventions could provide a very useful adjunct to those service-users with particular issues with emotional dysregulation. It will be important that participants are self-selecting. Moreover, while participants would be asked to commit to attending for the duration of the programme, there should be no sanctions for non-attendance.

A further pilot and formal evaluation of this programme with more probation service-users would allow for further research investigating the effectiveness of mindfulness for emotional regulation in offending populations.

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