A quiet revolution: relational mindfulness in coaching

Leadership coaches **Dr Emma Donaldson-Feilder** and **Liz Hall** demonstrate how relational mindfulness offers a welcome and timely approach to enhance presence, awareness, insight and compassion in coaching and beyond

We live in a world marked by increasing polarisation, conflict and disconnect, rising mental health issues, uncertainty about the impact of artificial intelligence (AI), and the climate emergency, to name but a few of the crises unfolding. As coaches, how can we stay relevant in an ever-changing, AI-embracing world? How can we be of service in this challenging period in humankind's history?

We believe that relational mindfulness (RM), an approach that explicitly brings mindful awareness, compassion and wisdom into relationships, has much to offer in helping us answer these questions. In these times of conflict and

disconnect, developing our capacity to be fully present and empathetic through RM practice can help us create transformational, insightful and healing compassionate dialogue and interrelatedness in coaching and beyond. RM is also a way to help us 'keep our edge' as human coaches, supporting us to effectively and joyfully build our capacity to develop high quality human-to-human relationships.

As we set out in our new book, *Relational Mindfulness for Coaches*, we are among a growing number of practitioners pioneering RM in coaching.[1] The benefits of doing so – which we go into in more detail below – include enhanced presence, attunement and compassion in relationships, heightened awareness of self and others, and greater capacity to generate insights and new ways of thinking and being.

RM can help us harness our humanity in our practice. As AI coaching agents become ever more sophisticated, this capacity is going to be increasingly vital if coaches are to remain relevant. Recent research by Passmore et al, for example, suggests that, while AI coaching agents offer significant advantages in terms of consistency, availability and data-driven insights, they currently fall short in areas such as the ability to develop human connection, demonstrate empathy as perceived by the client, and use of personal experience, metaphor and humour.[2] The researchers believe that, more than ever, human coaches need to differentiate themselves and amplify their humanity.

From solo to relational mindfulness in coaching

Practitioners who already have an individual mindfulness practice may be wondering what the difference is between individual and relational mindfulness. Surely, if we practise mindfulness on an individual basis, we will automatically benefit from a positive ripple effect into our relationships? However, RM takes individual mindfulness to a whole new level, dramatically amplifying the benefits gleaned from individual mindfulness.

Mindfulness is generally introduced as an individual practice focusing on what is unfolding in the present moment. Practice can be formal (ie, setting aside a specific time to engage in practices such as meditation) or informal (ie, weaving mindfulness into daily activities). The benefits of individual mindfulness have been widely documented and include greater emotional regulation, enhanced compassion and improved relationships, among others – so, there is indeed often a knock-on positive effect from individual practice into the relational sphere.[3]

When we practise RM, we take this process a step further. We hold a deliberate intention to bring the attentional focus and non-judgmental attitude inherent in individual mindfulness and apply them as we interact with others. RM brings mindfulness into the heart of our relationships, and thereby to the core of the coaching process, nurturing a deeply human and holistic coaching encounter.

> **In a world that prizes speed, productivity and certainty, relational mindfulness is a quiet revolution**

We define RM as: *'paying attention on purpose, non-judgmentally (or dispassionately) in the present moment, while speaking, listening, or otherwise interacting with others; it is about awareness of self, the other(s) and the relationship.'*[1] (p47) Rooted in the traditional definition of individual mindfulness, RM intentionally expands attention to cultivate moment-to-moment awareness and non-judgment to include the entire relational process.

As such, RM practice offers a way of developing our capacity to bring full awareness to experience as it unfolds in interpersonal interactions. As with individual practice, RM practice can be formal or informal. Formal RM practice involves setting aside time to engage in mindful dialogue/relational meditation with a fellow practitioner, whereas informal RM practice is about applying awareness, non-judgment and openness to insight in our daily interactions with others.

For coaches, practising RM offers a way to hold awareness of our own inner landscape while remaining attuned to our client and the relational field. It is an invitation to be more than a facilitator of change; it is an invitation to be a conscious participant in the relational dynamic, bringing compassion, curiosity and embodied presence to every interaction.

Mindful dialogue: coaching as contemplative conversation

The formal RM practice that we set out in our book and offer in our programmes has at its heart a framework and guidelines for contemplative mindful dialogue adapted from Insight Dialogue (ID).[4] Developed by Gregory Kramer, ID shares the orientation of the Buddhist Insight Meditation tradition, aiming to enable insights into the human condition, suffering and the end of suffering. The intention with ID is that developing present moment awareness and gathering the mind in calm concentration, while in dialogue with a fellow meditator, supports enquiry into the nature of human experience, fostering clarity and insight, cultivating greater compassion and wisdom, and freedom from suffering. For us, this overarching multifaceted intention aligns beautifully with our intentions in coaching, particularly in these times.

In structured formats, such as those we offer on our Relational Mindfulness for Coaches programmes, coaches practise mindful dialogue with each other. This develops presence and awareness right in the moment of interaction. A natural compassion and sense of common humanity arise as we are fully present, listen deeply and share authentically with one another. In addition, the depth of shared contemplation opens opportunities for new perspectives, insights into our own relational habits and the potential for broadening our worldview.

The more we practise, the more these ways of being in relationship become embodied and inspire how we show up 'informally' in our coaching and in all our relationships. Mindful dialogue encourages coaches to pause more often, speak from a deeper place of inner clarity and wisdom, and listen not only to words but to what is unsaid – tone, body language, emotional nuance.

Coaching presence: how are we being with our clients?

As coaches, we know from experience that presence is the cornerstone of transformational coaching. Tools and models can be valuable, but it is the coach's quality of being in the coaching relationship – grounded, open and connected – that often has the greatest impact. Our clients report feeling more seen, heard and empowered when we become fully present.

The coach's presence, authenticity and capacity to attune help to co-create a container in which the client can access safety, connection and insight. Developing RM deepens this container. It encourages us to ask: '*How am I being with this client right now?*' It invites us to notice our habitual relational patterns and inquire into whether they serve us, being choiceful around how we show up with our client, with a relatedness that emerges from grounded awareness.

Attending to how we are being as a coach determines how we hold space, how we listen and how we respond. Doing so through RM practice allows us to embrace spontaneity, emergence, authenticity and vulnerability, fostering trust, deepening rapport and creating the conditions for insight to emerge organically.

Enhancing coaching with RM

We define RM-enhanced coaching (RMEC) as: *'any coaching in which the coach's effectiveness, skill or presence has been enhanced through their practice of and familiarity with RM'* (p173).[1]

We carried out informal qualitative research for our book with 11 experienced coaches who practise RM and/or ID, asking for feedback on their experience of RM and its impact on their coaching. Their responses highlighted a host of capacities and qualities they believed were being enhanced by RM:

- **Becoming more fully present**: themes included presence and being fully with the client, enhanced levels of awareness, different types of awareness (including somatic), slowing down, 'being' rather than 'doing', and maturing beyond tools and techniques.
- **Finding connection:** themes included the relational aspect of coaching, improved listening, opening, allowing and resonating, space for the client, creating safety and reciprocity.
- **Insights – awareness of relational habits and choice:** themes included making choices rather than reacting or acting habitually, awareness of thinking and less buying into it, having more choice over what we embody and aligning to values, being less clouded by our own habits and more able to see client habits, trusting experience/self/not knowing, and ease and self-acceptance.
- **Insights – new ways of thinking and perceiving:** themes included openness to other perspectives, valuing others' views, new perspectives, supporting insight, understanding and wisdom for clients, being with suffering and existential enquiry, and connection to a wider, collective intelligence.

Our experience, and that of our interviewees, suggests that incorporating RM into coaches' development can yield profound benefits for coach and client alike. Coaches report greater emotional resilience, more intuitive decision making and stronger connections with clients. Clients, in turn, describe feeling safer, more empowered and more deeply understood.

The data we gathered also suggest that RM enhances coaches' capacity to attend to the ethical and inclusive aspects of coaching. It sharpens awareness of power dynamics, cultural assumptions and unconscious bias. When coaches are fully present, they are more likely to notice their own internal reactions and adjust with sensitivity and care, and to foster psychological safety, trust and authenticity.

Bringing RM practice into coaching: levels of capacity

Much of the RM work we have been pioneering so far has involved offering RM programmes to coaches. Most of the coaches we interviewed for our book reported using RM practice to help them develop their coaching capacities, including helping them prepare for sessions and embody mindful, compassionate presence in sessions. However, inevitably, there is a growing interest in how we as practitioners might bring RM practice directly into coaching sessions. Some coaches who have been trained in RM are already experimenting with how to do this, and we have plenty of ideas ourselves, which we share in the book. However, it is important that coaches do this safely. With this in mind, we propose four levels of capacity at which a coach might operate when bringing mindfulness and compassion, including RM, into coaching relationships.

- **Level one:** basic competency, where the coach has some grasp of mindfulness and compassion that enhances their coaching competency. They may or may not have RM experience, but our interview data suggest that practising RM will help the enhancement process.
- **Level two**: the coach has embodied mindful and compassionate presence – mindfulness and compassion have become a trait or set of traits for them. At this level, our research strongly suggests that practising RM helps coaches with this embodiment process and enables mindfulness and compassion to become their way of being in coaching relationships.
- **Level three**: the coach has not only embodied mindfulness and compassion but has undertaken some form of training so they can guide individual practices safely, sensitively and skilfully in coaching sessions. Here, RM practice can help the coach offer such guidance in an embodied and relational way.
- **Level four**: the coach has the competency to directly offer elements of mindful dialogue during coaching sessions (not as an RM teacher, which requires specific training).

As we consider these levels and bringing RM into coaching, it is vital to emphasise the experiential nature of RM. As is the

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case with individual mindfulness, we need to engage in RM practice at an embodied level. Simply knowing about – and even understanding – the theory and skills of RM is not enough: we need to *experience* RM practice, to get a somatic, felt sense of what it is, and regular practice is key so that RM becomes embodied.

A rich and multifaceted field

As we explore in our book, ID-based RM is just one of many jewels that can help us as coaches to become more relationally mindful and to better support our clients to be more aware, compassionate and wise in their relationships. Other approaches, models and techniques that are supportive of us becoming fully present and aware include somatic approaches[5] and Gestalt.[6] When it comes to relating and connecting, listening models,[7] compassion-focused coaching,[8] frameworks for building psychological safety,[9] attachment theory,[10] positivity resonance,[11] and nonviolent communication[12] come to mind, among others. To help us cultivate insight and wisdom in the relational sphere, we can draw on the gifts of parts work such as internal family systems,[13] Theory U, [14] and vertical adult development,[15] to name a few. There are many more jewels, and readers will have their own experiences and training that can help underpin and deepen their capacity for RM.

Relational mindfulness (RM) invites coaches to bring their full selves to the coaching relationship – attentive, embodied, open. It reframes coaching as not merely a skill set but as a way of being. Through RM practice such as mindful dialogue, coaches deepen their impact and invite clients into more authentic exploration.

We hold no illusions that RM alone can change the world, but we do believe – and have seen – that RM can make a positive difference, helping us, in the words of Margaret Wheatley, to *'create islands of sanity – places of possibility and refuge where the human spirit can thrive'*.[16]

In a world that prizes speed, productivity and certainty, RM is a quiet revolution. It reminds us that the most powerful coaching often arises from how fully we are present, not from what we do but from how we are – our being. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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To find out about Relational Mindfulness for Coaches programmes, visit **www.relationalmindfulness.net**

FOR FURTHER READING

Please see *Relational Mindfulness for Coaches: Enhancing Presence, Awareness, Wisdom, Compassion and Courageous Collaboration* by Emma Donaldson-Feilder and Liz Hall, Routledge, 2025.

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