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Finding Meaning in Mindfulness: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

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## Abstract

With deep origins in Eastern Buddhist philosophy, mindfulness practice (MP) has risen in popularity in Western culture due to an increased secular delivery of the practice in both clinical and non-clinical settings. Research has focussed largely on measuring the quantitative physical and psychological effects of MP and determining the efficacy of MP for treatments of various physical and psychological conditions. Through research, increased meaning in life has been correlated with positive well-being, and examinations into the link between meaning and MP has generated several theories. Negative experiences of MP have also been the subject of more recent research, with issues arising such as non-identification, depersonalisation, and depressive experiences. The current study attempted to answer the call for qualitative research into the experiential aspects of MP, to understand how MP may influence paths to meaning in secular individuals. This study aimed to complement existing quantitative data surrounding MP through qualitative Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Six participants took part in a semi-structured interview subjected to IPA by a single researcher. Three overarching themes as paths to meaning were apparent – ‘Awareness’, ‘Non-judgment’, and ‘Enhanced Connection’. The overarching theme ‘Enhanced Connection’ comprised of four themes – ‘Connection with Others’, ‘Authenticity – A new way of connecting to the self’, ‘Positive Perceptual Shift – A new way of connecting’, and ‘Connection and Spirituality’. ‘Connection with Others’ consisted of four subthemes – ‘Belonging’, ‘Co-creation of Meaning’, ‘Cycle of Positive Contribution’, and ‘Authenticity’. Negative experiences presented by participants consisted of issues of non-identification, performance expectation, the need for supervision/guidance, and a lack of holistic understanding within the Western secular framework of MP delivery. Despite the interpretive and subjective nature of analysis, and the small sample size, results of the current study were compelling, highlighting humanity’s inherent social nature, while touching on issues of decontextualisation of MP from the Buddhist framework.

## Acknowledgements

This study did not involve the participation of minors, individuals with intellectual or mental health disorders, nor did it involve any form of intervention, therefore it was classified as low risk. Notification of the low risk nature of the study was made to the Massey University Human Ethics Committee prior to commencement of the study. The author would foremost like to thank and acknowledge all the participants for their time, and open discussions – without your honesty and openness this research would not have been possible. I have learned so much from each of you and aspire to cultivate the open and accepting nature you have all developed through mindfulness practice. I would like to thank my supervisor Heather Kempton for her guidance, positive instruction and communication. Your trust in me through this process has taught me to trust and believe in myself more. Lastly, I would like to thank my family for their support and understanding, please know I have done this for you as much as for myself.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

### 1.1. The Origins of Secular Mindfulness

Recent research around the construct of mindfulness has experienced rapid growth since it was introduced into mainstream psychology in 1979 at the Stress Reduction Clinic situated in the University of Massachusetts Medical Centre by Jon Kabat-Zinn (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Despite the popularity of secular mindfulness in western culture, it has deep roots in Buddhism (Liselotte, 2014). The term mindfulness has origins in the Pali term Sati - lucid awareness, originally 'memory' but adopted/adapted by Buddha to mean an awareness. The meaning is similar to observation, watchfulness, and an ability to observe without judgment or emotion. It is a foundation of Buddhist practice "the Buddha treats each of the four establishments of mindfulness as a springboard to the seven factors of enlightenment" (Bodhi, 2013). Mindfulness is therefore an act of establishing presence, it is more than just 'bare attention'. 'Bare attention' can be a helpful descriptor for assisting newcomers in cultivating their practice, it does not however encompass the essential non-judgmental nature that is required of mindfulness practice.

The practice of mindfulness has become secularised and simplified in western culture, where the importance now in western society is on experience rather than beliefs and organizations (Liselotte, 2014). Maxwell and Duff (2016) state whether Buddhist or secular, mindfulness practice can have positive effects on both psychological and physical health. Pagnini and Langer (2015) distinguish between mindfulness and meditation, with mindfulness viewed as the quality in which an individual attends to the present moment which can be enhanced by numerous practices including but not limited to meditation. This concept is supported by Maxwell and Duff (2016), that meditation is not the only way to be mindful. In truth there are many opportunities to practice mindfulness, including yoga, focused attention meditation, and whole-body scan (Kabat-Zinn, 2014). Typically, secular mindfulness practice (MP) involves focussed attention - often focussing on the breath - gently pulling attention back to the focus when the mind

wanders, while employing a non-judgmental attitude toward both thoughts and practice.

## 1.2. The Focus of Previous Research into the Effects of Mindfulness

Mindfulness has become a well-established psychological tool, appearing as a core component of mindfulness based interventions such as Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), and Mindfulness Based Relapse Prevention (MBRP), as well as being integrated into treatments such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), and Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) (Lisolette, 2014; Stratton, 2015; Schmidtman, 2017). The rise in acceptance of mindfulness within Western culture is demonstrated in its success both inside and outside the domain of psychology. There are many ways individuals can come into contact with secular forms of mindfulness without being involved in psychological therapy, for example, mindfulness has branched into education, medicine, and business (Stratton, 2015; Thomas & Atkinson 2017). Fortune magazine noted that the mindfulness industry generated more than one billion dollars revenue in 2015 (Wieczner, 2016).

The success of mindfulness in a clinical setting has undoubtedly paved the way for acceptance and normalisation of these practices across a wide number of environments. The physiological and quantifiable effects of MP on physical states and mental ailments has been researched across numerous populations. For example, the stress reduction effects of MP have received significant focus across clinical (Goldberg et al., 2018), student (Maynard, Solis, Miller, Brendel & Campbell Collaboration, 2017), teaching (Klingbeil & Renshaw, 2018), and medical professional populations (White, 2014). This focus could largely be attributed to the origins of modern MP in Western culture stemming from the introduction of MBSR. Research outside of these four major areas is limited, as is research of a qualitative nature, where the idiographic perceptual changes individuals experience has received much less attention. This is partly due to the more time consuming and challenging manner of accessing an individual's experience. The nature of qualitative research attempts to go further than simply who or how many, seeking

to uncover the meaning of an experience. As such it frequently involves some form of in-depth analysis of case studies or narratives such as interviews, or diary entries. The process can be lengthy, but the depth of data gained cannot be matched by quantitative methods.

The majority of research into secular mindfulness has been quantitative, measuring both the physiological and psychological effects of engaging in mindfulness practice, often by way of rating scales and self-report measures. A significant amount of literature into the effects of clinical mindfulness-based interventions have found that MP can improve symptoms of both physical and psychological disorders including depression, chronic pain, insomnia, substance abuse, blood pressure, fibromyalgia and irritable bowel syndrome (Gillespie, Davey & Flemke, 2015; Jain, 2017; Maxwell & Duff, 2016; Schmidtman, 2017). There are numerous accounts of the efficacy of the practice in reducing 'negative symptoms' of psychological disorders, such as depression and anxiety by interrupting rumination and catastrophizing patterns (Leyland, 2018; Maxwell & Duff, 2016). Psychological benefits of MP include increased emotional regulation, empathy, attention, memory, intra and interpersonal relations, improved body awareness and increases in positive affect (Lacaille et al., 2018; Maxwell & Duff, 2016; Van Vliet et al., 2017). Research has also shown that mindfulness interventions create changes in brain function, such as significant changes in alpha and theta activity, prefrontal cortex and anterior cingulate cortex activations (Maxwell & Duff, 2016; Schmidtman, 2017), they can also lower cortisol and norepinephrine levels, and blood pressure (Gillespie, Davey, & Flemke, 2015). These effects are similar to what Benson (1975) termed the relaxation response (RR), essentially the opposite of the fight-or-flight response. It was concluded from Benson's studies that engaging in activities which elicited the RR could also affect spiritual perspectives, with 25% of individuals engaging in activities producing the RR feeling more spiritual as a result of practice. Greeson et al. (2011) also reported that MP resulted in increases in daily spiritual experiences, determining that increases in these experiences contributed to the enhanced well-being and mental health MP can provide.

While the popularity and evidence of the efficacy of MP has been growing, research has offered little in the way of understanding how mindfulness achieves such gains, or what the experience is like for the individuals who practice mindfulness. Also, while the benefits of MP generally appear to be positive for an individual's well-being, not all experiences of MP are positive. The negative effects and experiences of MP is a growing field and research indicates that while there are numerous benefits, MP may not be suitable for all individuals. Cebolla et al.'s (2017) quantitative investigation into unwanted effects (UE) of meditative practice - including focused attention (25.4%), open monitoring (19.3%), body awareness (24.3%), compassion (9.4%), imagination (7.9%), and informal practices (11.1%) - found that 25.4% of participants surveyed experienced some form of UE. The online self-report survey delivered in Spanish, Portuguese, and English languages accessed a majority female (68.4%) sample from over 12 countries predominantly across the Americas and European continent. Reported UE included anxiety, depersonalisation, derealisation, emotional lability, and dizziness or loss of consciousness. Only 10.3% of these participants reported the UE were continuous, the majority (50.5%) did not comment, and 39% reported that these effects were transitory. The UE resulted in 1.1% of respondents discontinuing meditation. Unwanted effects were found to be more common in individual rather than group practice and were more likely to occur with focussed attention practices in this particular study. These results supported the hypothesis that any UE would be mild and transitory in nature and would not result in cessation of practice. They also highlight the fact that meditative and mindful practices may not be suitable for all individuals and that the experience varies greatly across individuals; it is this individual experience that qualitative research such as IPA attempts to capture.

Lindahl et al. (2017) conducted semi-structured interviews with follow up questionnaires over 60 western Buddhist meditation practitioners to gain information regarding meditation related experiences. Attention was given to uncovering unexpected, challenging, and/or difficult experiences during meditative practice. Varied meditative practices were represented including focussed attention, insight, body scan, loving kindness, visualisation, and mantra, with a fairly

even representation of both Male (57%) and Female (43%) participants. A wide range of experiences were reported over seven phenomenological domains including cognitive, perceptual, affective, somatic, conative, sense of self, and social. Experiences of positive affect were reported by 75% of participants, collectively the negative affective experiences of fear, anxiety, panic, or paranoia were reported by 82% of participants often occurring as the result of some other negative experience. Experiences which could be deemed negative included loss of sense of self (25%), boundaries (53%), and self-agency (25%), depressive (57%), re-experiencing of trauma (43%), anger related (30%), emotional lability (28%), delusional beliefs (47%), hallucinations (42%) and social impairment (50%). Associated functional impairment from negative experiences ranged from minimal and transient to severe and long lasting. This demonstrates that negative experiences can be a common effect of meditative practice, and while many experiences are transitory in nature some can have long lasting impacts on individuals.

Lomas et al. (2015) investigated the challenges of MP among adult male meditators including mindfulness meditation (35.4%), loving kindness meditation (35.4%), six element (7.3%), and other (17%). Qualitative semi-structured interviews with 30 participants uncovered the following five broad categories of experience during MP: difficulties learning meditation, such as 'self-doubt' and 'feeling trapped'; troubling experiences of self, such as facing the 'negative qualities of their thoughts'; exacerbation of psychological problems, such as the difficulty in maintaining a non-judgmental attitude toward their thoughts resulting in 'poor self-esteem' and 'anxiety'; reality being challenged, such as 'dissolution of identity'. Overall however participants felt MP was positive with increases in compensatory positive experiences, such as feelings of 'happiness' and 'contentment'.

These findings are similar to those of Cebolla et al. (2017) highlighting UE such as anxiety and identity struggles, while also acknowledging that generally MP has positive impacts. The qualitative nature of this study provided more detail though, pointing toward the possible mechanisms behind these experiences such as anxiety resulting from the difficulties maintaining non-judgment. As both meaning

and mindfulness appeared to be significant contributors to wellbeing across the literature, it was felt that the interplay between the two among the growing western secular population deserved further attention. As such the current study sought to gain deeper understanding of the experience of MP, in order to uncover the mechanisms of meaning making processes of individuals.

### 1.3. The Significance of Meaning

Studies focusing on meaning found that low meaning in life, or search for meaning, resulted in poor outcomes for health and wellbeing, whereas high presence of meaning was associated with high positive outcomes on well-being (Bloch et al., 2017; Pedersen et al., 2018). Numerous studies support a correlation between religiosity and meaning, however these findings are irrelevant for a significant portion of the world's population. Online global 2010 census data released by Pew Research Centre (<https://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>) indicated there were at least 1.1 billion secular individuals worldwide, with high and growing concentrations in westernised countries across Europe and Northern America. It must be acknowledged that identifying as secular does not necessarily mean the individual does not hold some form of spiritual belief, rather they do not adhere to the doctrines and structure of organised religious belief systems. It is possible that spiritual belief in and of itself, could provide positive benefits for an individual's well-being in a similar manner to religious practice.

Pedersen et al. (2018) found differences in the sources of meaning amongst the various secular groups. The study was conducted with a Danish population of 554 adults, with a slight female majority (66%). Participants responded to an online delivery of self-report rating scales consisting of measures from the Danish version of the 'Sources of Meaning and Meaning in Life Questionnaire', 'Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale', and the 'Satisfaction with Life Scale'. The study found that agnostic individuals - who believe that the existence of a higher power is unknowable - frequently found meaning through acts of social commitment. Atheist individuals - who lack belief in a higher power - more commonly found

meaning through individual and achievement-oriented acts. The research also found that both marital status and children brought meaning to individuals, demonstrating the importance of relationships on an individual's overall well-being, and how individual perspectives were important in defining an individual's meaning.

Aligning with the findings of Pedersen et al. (2018), Kucinkas, Wright, and Riepl (2018) found activities involving engagement with others, community, and activities with purpose were significant contributors to meaning. Theorising that 'meaning has state like qualities' the study attempted to investigate how meaning varied over differing contexts and situations in everyday life; specifically, by hour of the day, activity, and who the participant was with at the time. Participants were required to possess smartphones to access two delivered short surveys each day, for two weeks. The sample comprised American adult participants, with a high representation of Protestants (72%) and a slight female majority (61%). As with Pedersen et al. (2018) this study found higher levels of meaning when time was spent with spouses, supporting intimate connection as a source of meaning. Meditative practices, along with prayer and worship were significantly linked to meaningful experiences, indicating their power to foster meaning in individuals' lives. Individuals who reported high engagement in conversation with others also experienced significantly more meaning. Work and music were also found to be significant contributors to meaning, whereas leisurely activities involving little cognitive engagement were linked to much lower levels of meaning.

A major drawback of this study was the requirement to possess a smartphone, as this was not representative of the general population, potentially excluding older less technologically savvy, or low socio-economic participants. Another drawback could be the time commitment required to answer the two daily surveys for two weeks; there is potential that individuals may not have given each survey equal time, thought and attention over the duration of the data gathering period. However, the data still provides evidence supporting the varying sources of meaning for individuals and how levels of meaningfulness can be affected by various activities across everyday life.

#### 1.4. Theories Addressing Mindfulness and Meaning

Research into the mechanisms of MP has provided some interesting observations, which have in turn generated several theories, many linking enhanced meaning gained through mindfulness to the positive effects observed (Bloch et al., 2017; Ward & King, 2017). Effects of MP including reappraisal, acceptance, relationships, awareness, congruency and enhanced spirituality appeared as prominent themes in the literature.

1.4.1. Reappraisal. The Mindfulness to Meaning Theory (MMT) - (Garland, Farb, Goldin & Fredrickson, 2015) was born from a drive to provide a causal model of how mindfulness promoted wellbeing. MMT posits that MP promotes reappraisal and savouring which are central to the development of meaning. Specifically, MP teaches individuals to decentre from stress and rigid thoughts, cultivating broadened awareness and attention to stimuli which support reappraisal of situations. Broadened awareness allows for acknowledgement of new data, resulting in cognitive flexibility, the creation of new cognitive schema and the reorganisation of cognitive patterns. This gives rise to acceptance, which is posited as a gateway for attention and a pathway to positive emotion associated with experiences. Noticing and savouring positive stimuli in turn motivates value driven behaviour, contributing to eudemonic meaning. This posits a connection between reappraisal and congruency as a path to well-being. Garland et al. (2015) discussed the notion that mindfulness contributed to spirituality, as states of nondual awareness encountered by practitioners of mindfulness facilitate attentional enhancement and psychological flexibility. They posit that these 'awakenings' are in fact reappraisals which lead individuals down a path of self-transformation where individuals transcend the thought of a separate self, realising and embracing nonduality, understanding that they are not separate from the larger universe. They also make an important point acknowledging that meaning is not inherent in stimuli or situations, rather it is personally constructed by each individual and their unique appraisal. Therefore, the act of MP and its effect on attentional capacity and

appraisal directly influences the meaning that individuals create in their everyday being.

Pagnini and Langer (2015) also highlighted the mechanism of reappraisal as a contributor to positive emotions and meaning. They did not view mindfulness as a technique to be practised, stating it was both state and trait and the mindful person was deeply aware of the constant change around them and how they appraised and interacted with change. Awareness of constant change and differing points of view demanded constant reappraisal, as such reappraisal was viewed as a subtype of mindfulness. They also noted the relevance of reappraisal as an important mechanism for change in psychotherapy, essential for contributing to realistic thinking, reducing rumination and catastrophising. Although reappraisal was posited as a contributor to meaning by both of these studies Pagnini and Langer (2015) viewed it as a subtype of mindfulness, where Garland et al. (2015) saw it as a mechanism resulting from mindfulness. The mechanisms for change in both studies point to cognitive flexibility and fluidity as a result of MP influencing perspectives and experiences.

**1.4.2. Acceptance.** The research of Burzler, Voracek, Hos, & Tran (2018) into the mechanisms of MP in the general population concluded that acceptance of emotions was central to the positive benefits MP had on mental health. The study identified 268 regular practitioners of mindfulness across a European adult (18-86) population with a roughly equal representation of male and female participants (54% female). Varied styles of meditative practice were represented including yoga, zen, vipassana and MBSR. The study used various rating scales to measure mindfulness, depression, anxiety, somatisation, attention regulation, body awareness, emotional regulation, and nonattachment. Acceptance of emotions as measured by the 'Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire' was indicated as a central tenet of mindfulness' influence on positive mental health. Nonattachment as measured by the German translation of the 'Nonattachment Scale' was also considered a major contributor due to its links to cognitive diffusion. Trait mindfulness as cultivated through meditative practices was found to have positive benefits on mental health for both seasoned and naïve practitioners, however

seasoned practitioners reported consistently higher levels of trait mindfulness. Burzler et al. acknowledged that MP did not provide individuals with new mechanisms, rather regular MP appeared to strengthen the effects existing mechanisms such as self-regulated attention had on positive mental health outcomes. This suggests that benefits of MP are available to all who practice but are likely more readily accessible to individuals who engage in formal mindfulness activities regularly.

1.4.3. Relationships/Connection. Research suggested that strong feelings of connection fostered by MP contributed to the development and enhancement of meaning. Theories generated included that increased meaning was developed via increased relational capabilities (Siegel, 2009). Positing that MP enhanced intrapersonal relations via a process of integration, becoming attuned to oneself while realising the connection to a greater whole. They discussed the process of turning ingrained external focus inward during MP, allowing individuals to explore and expand their sense of self. This intrapersonal attunement teaches individuals that awareness is multi-layered, promoting flexibility with oneself. Flexibility resulted in an acceptance of multiple perspectives, cultivating understanding and transformation. Also noting that neural social circuitry is activated during MP, it is an act of learning how to 'befriend' the self, skills which were then transferred to relations with others. This learning and realisation of alternative perspectives is similar to the concept of broadened awareness and cognitive flexibility resulting from reappraisal as discussed by Garland et al. (2015) and Pagnini and Langer (2015). These theories highlight the influence of mindfulness on cognitive mechanisms and the positive effects of the development of cognitive fluidity.

A multi discipline study across four separate adult populations (Lambert et al., 2013) appeared in line with Siegel's (2009) theory, stating that meaning was developed via a sense of belonging through relationships. Using essay analysis researchers found participants frequently cited relationships with family and friends in response to the questions "Why is life meaningful?", and "What makes your life meaningful?" Their study using a bespoke belonging rating scale in conjunction with the 'Meaning Presence Subscale' of the 'Meaning in Life Questionnaire' found that

a sense of belonging was a strong predictor of meaningfulness. In the third study involving priming participants with either sense of belonging, feelings of social support, or high social value, the sense of belonging condition caused higher increases in perceptions of meaningfulness. The fourth study highlighted potential differences between cultures, as the sample moved from an individualistic western population to a collectivistic Indian population. Unlike results seen in the individualistic culture, the collectivistic culture found increased meaning through both belonging and social support. This finding does not detract from belonging being an important contributor to meaning, rather highlights the differences between social structures in differing cultures.

Lambert et al. (2010) also found relationships – particularly with family members - to be a primary source of meaning in the lives of adolescents. One study in this research found the relational constructs of family and friends to place first and third respectively on a ranking task selecting various sources of meaning out of twelve possible sources of meaning, the second highest being happiness. Other possible sources of meaning included religious faith, achievements, self-acceptance, personal growth, self-worth, justice, personal goals, intimacy, and helping others. A second study used an open-ended format query instructing individuals to pick the one thing that made life most meaningful for them. Again, relational constructs scored highly with family placing first and friends placing second. The influence of meditative practices on an individual's sense of belonging as studied by Chisman and Brooks (2018) found mutual interaction. This study employed interview studies with practising meditators using constructivistic grounded theory methods of interpretation and analysis, finding that being and belonging were experienced as interconnected. They posited that meditative practice provided space for individuals to discover how to be with others, while belonging provided opportunities and learning space of how to be.

These studies highlight the perceived importance of relationships and belonging to individuals' meaning across individualistic and collectivistic cultures, and adolescent and adult populations. The breadth of the samples lends credit to

the concepts of relationships and belonging being a core contributor to meaning among individuals, and that MP can positively influence these constructs.

1.4.4. Awareness and congruency. Studies have also shown that the positive link between mindfulness and meaning is due in part to increased self-awareness resulting in greater consistency between an individual's values and actions (Allan, Bott & Suh, 2016). Using an online delivery of the 'Mindful Attention Awareness Scale', 'Authenticity Inventory Version 3', and the 'Meaning in Life Questionnaire', across 250 participants they found support for the following significant mediators for the mindfulness – meaning in life relationship: mindfulness and authenticity, and authenticity and meaning in life. They found that relational orientation and behaviours were not significant mediators, and that unbiased processing had a negative relation with meaning in life. Allan, Bott and Suh (2016) posit that this pathway to meaning in life via awareness cultivated by MP can be explained using Self Determination Theory perspectives, where individuals' behaviours can be explained by innate self-determined and self-motivated drives. Heightened awareness was seen to provide an individual with the clarity to realise their own values and subsequently choose behaviours more aligned with their core values. On the surface these results are somewhat in contrast with Siegel's (2009) theory which highlighted the importance of relationships as a source of meaning. However, both are based on the broader premise of greater awareness of the self, contributing to increased meaning.

Warren, Wray-Lake, and Syvertsen (2017) investigated the relationship between mindfulness, and the consistency between an individual's values and the behaviours the individuals engage in; termed value-behaviour-concordance (VBC). The sample of over 6000 adolescents spanning seven nations with diverse ethnic, cultural, religious and gender representation utilised self-report rating scales to measure the constructs of mindfulness, VBC, and meaning in life. The study showed that individuals higher in mindfulness experienced higher VBC, and that VBC partially mediated the link between mindfulness and meaning in adolescents. They discussed a process where the awareness cultivated by MP may make values more salient and easily accessible as individuals have more consistent access to their

thoughts and emotions. They posited that this salience of values enabled individuals to engage in more value congruent behaviours. Heightened awareness also allowed for individuals to be readily aware of feelings of dissonance and incongruence, this feedback allowing for behaviour adjustment. The diversity of the sample appeared to support the generalisability of these claims to the general adolescent population.

Research by Christie, Atkins and Donald (2017) supported findings by Warren et al. (2017) within an adult population, in that VBC was linked to well-being via MP facilitating meaningful behavioural change. This study hypothesized that MP removed barriers to VBC allowing for greater recognition of opportunities to engage in meaningful behaviours. Their first study with over 600 predominantly female Caucasian participants, delivered an online survey focusing on three areas: values, mindful attention, and satisfaction with life as measured by the 'Valuing Questionnaire', 'Mindful Attention Awareness Scale', and the 'Satisfaction with Life Scale'. Results supported an indirect association between MP, positive affect and satisfaction with life, via values-progress and values-obstruction. The second study employed alternative mindfulness and well-being measures - the 'Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire', the 'Flourishing Scale' and the 'Scale of Positive and Negative Experience', in a replication of the initial study across a sample of 199 participants. Support for the hypothesis was again confirmed with similar findings to study one. Positive effects on well-being were found to be due to values-progress and values-obstruction, enhanced by the awareness and non-judgment cultivated by MP. These studies demonstrate the power of internal rather than external reward, with reference again to self-determination theory. The harmony of being in balance with their own values was what motivated individuals to behave in accordance with their values, these values appeared more easily accessible to individuals due to MP. The support for this concept across both adolescent and adult populations suggests a potential mechanism for change which may not be limited to age or developmental phase.

1.4.5. Spirituality. Friedman, Myers and Benson (2001) utilised the term 'relaxation response' (RR) to describe the physiological effects of engaging in 1)

sustained focused attention, while also 2) maintaining a 'passive' attitude toward thoughts. The physiological effects equated to a sense of calm, with reductions of respiratory rates, norepinephrine, and cortical arousal (Friedman et al., 2001; Greenwood & Benson, 1977). Although the terminology differs, passive equates to a non-reactive state, semantically similar to the use of non-judgmental in the current study, making this definition equitable to this study's definition of MP. When these two steps were followed elicitation of the RR was found to occur over numerous activities such as prayer, yoga, meditation, or progressive muscle relaxation. Regular practice led to the benefits of RR continuing past periods of set practice into participants' daily lives. Stemming from research into the benefits and applications of the RR, it has been theorised that enhanced spirituality may be a function of RR/MP; resulting in positive impacts on health and wellbeing (Chang, Casey, Dusek, & Benson, 2010; Kass, Friedman, Leserman, & Zuttermeister, 1991). Spirituality has long been considered to contribute positively to meaning in life, recent studies have managed to produce scientific support for this concept. Research by George and Park (2017) across two samples of heart failure patients and cancer survivors found higher levels of spirituality positively influenced meaning over time. The finding across these two diverse samples lent weight to the support of a generalisable relationship between spirituality and meaning in individuals facing adverse situations. Bamonti, Lombardi, Duberstein, King, and Van Orden (2016) also found higher levels of spirituality were linked to higher feelings of meaning in life; their results showing that within individuals with elevated depressive symptomology, spirituality raised levels of meaning in life to comparable levels with non-depressed individuals. Studies such as these indicate the importance of spirituality as a pathway to increased meaning.

Cloninger (2011) described spirituality in terms of self-awareness, with self-awareness being the path to well-being, a development occurring over three stages. Stage one involved emerging self-awareness, characterised by an ability to embrace acceptance and let go of negative emotions, cultivating higher levels of understanding. Stage two involved moderate self-awareness, an illuminative stage where individuals observed self and others with non-judgment. Stage three

required maximum awareness, awareness of an individual's own outlook and perception. Stage three is seen as contemplative, encouraging the development of non-dualism, self-transcendence, and unity. In their discussion on spiritually oriented psychotherapy, Sperry (2018) acknowledged the alignment of MP with spiritual development; suggesting mindfulness comprised of three levels - mindfulness, wisdom and compassion. Although distinct from spirituality we can see how these levels could inform the development of spirituality as individuals move from an individual focus to a focus which transcends the self through the cultivation of awareness, non-judgment, and acceptance.

Greeson et al. (2011) also discussed a mechanism where the increased awareness cultivated by MP created a spiritual shift, caused by attention and connection to the transcendent aspects of everyday life. Their research delivered an online survey, both pre and post an eight-week MBSR programme to 279 predominantly Caucasian female (75%) participants. The sample comprised a majority of religiously affiliated participants including Christian (39.4% denominational, 8.2% non-denominational), Jewish (5%), Unitarian-Universalist (5%), Buddhist (1.1%), Muslim (0.7%), Other (2.9%). While a substantial number of the sample identified with no religious affiliation (36.9%), this portion was not unpacked further so it was not possible to determine what secular beliefs if any these individuals held. The self-report online survey consisted of items from the 'Cognitive and Affective Mindfulness Scale-Revised', the 'Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale', and the 'Short Form Health Survey'. Results indicated an average physically healthy sample, however the mental-health score of the sample indicated emotional distress; being more than one standard deviation below the norm for average self-reported mental health within the adult population. A deeper sense of spirituality after engaging in the MBSR course was reported by 54% of respondents. The research demonstrated that increases in daily spiritual experiences were directly related to increases in mindfulness within this population. As participants within this sample were predominantly religiously affiliated, it must be considered that these individuals were primed to experience events as spiritual, also results could not necessarily be generalised to public who were not experiencing some

form of mental distress. While the results indicate an interesting concept, the generalisability of these findings are limited.

Vieten et al. (2018) posited that phenomena associated with meditative practice - such as nonduality, awakening, self-transcendence, experiences of higher powers- may be important mediators or mechanisms of their positive benefits, such as authentic being. These experiences are typical of spiritual and religious traditions, the study reported 52% of participants had experienced a connection with a non-physical entity at least twice during meditative states. The study accessed an adult population with prior meditative experience, designed to measure 'personal experiences' of meditative practice. Over 1000 Participants from 66 predominantly western/individualistic countries were represented in the 59% female/41% male sample. As in Greeson et al. (2011), many participants during childhood identified as Christian (73%), with only 3% identifying as spiritual but non-religious. This representation had changed significantly by adulthood, with only 15% identifying as Christian, and 36% identifying as spiritual but non-religious, indicating a shift in perception. The research showed that a significant number of regular meditators experienced some form of mystical/transcendent experience during solo meditative practices. The 'Revised Mystical Experience Questionnaire' was incorporated into the online survey to probe for mystical and transcendent experiences (42%). Other areas of interest were probed via bespoke questions targeting facets such as social/relational experiences (35%), anomalous physical (46%)/perceptual (46%) experiences, extended perception (41%). This study highlighted the commonality of these experiences across the sample, while also highlighting the spiritual change meditating individuals had experienced. Due to the sample being restricted to predominantly western individuals with previous meditation experience the generalisability of these results is somewhat limited. Although due to the sample size, gender balance, and breadth of the data, generalisability to a Western sample of meditators with a predominantly Christian upbringing appears reasonable. While studies such as this provide evidence for the presence of spiritual experience and development through mindful practices, they

do not acknowledge how these experiences are perceived by the individual, or how they may affect change on an individual's meaning or well-being.

Kristeller and Jordan (2018) discussed that the range of spiritual experiences could include development of inner meaning, unity, purpose, connection, compassion, altruism, engaging in 'right actions' actions that are congruent with prosocial actions, and self-transcendence. They also note how little research has focussed on the spiritual aspects of meditation, questioning how MP may affect spiritual engagement. In discussing MP, they acknowledge that awareness and a non-judgmental attitude are cornerstone to MP positing that the non-judgmental attitude when transferred to others could be the basis of acceptance, compassion and altruism. Also, that non-identification with thoughts allowed for less reactive behaviour allowing for realisation of 'actual self'.

Facets of the above theories had been earlier presented by Shapiro et al. (2006) as part of the Intention – Attention – Attitude model, introduced to understand the mechanisms of MP and associated positive effects. Intention focuses on the personal vision that an individual brings to MP, the reason they persist with their practice, which is often tied to a goal such as stress relief. Attention is the observational quality one brings to both internal and external stimuli in the present moment, free from interpretation and perceptual layers. Attitude refers to the open and non-judgmental way that individuals learn to attend to experiences, allowing individuals to observe events with curiosity, then let them pass without holding on to them. This model posited that re-perceiving was central to positive change, cultivated through intentionally attending to moments, with an open and kind attitude. Re-perceiving was proposed to result in greater self-regulation, values clarification, cognitive and behavioural flexibility, and exposure. This theory also discussed how intentions toward MP change overtime, describing how self-regulation is developed initially, transforming into self-exploration, becoming self-liberation and finally developing into compassionate service. The studies above demonstrate how separate aspects of the model have since been well researched and supported, for example the importance of re-perceiving as discussed in the above reappraisal section by Garland et al. (2015), and Pagnini and

Langer (2015). Awareness, or attention as Shapiro et al. (2006) termed it, and the activation of value congruence was also presented by Allan, Bott, and Suh (2016), Christie, Atkins and Donald (2017), and Warren et al. (2017). Attitude is represented in Burzler et al.'s discussion of the importance of acceptance. The development of compassionate service through MP mentioned by Shapiro (2006) is in line with Sperry's (2018) suggestion of development of compassion as the highest level of mindfulness, and Kristeller and Jordan's (2018) suggestions of MP cultivating self-transcendence to inform spirituality.

### 1.5. Comparison of research exploring mindfulness and meaning

Across the literature there was an overlay of many concepts, particularly with regard to awareness, which appeared to be an essential contributor to meaning across multiple pathways. Literature suggested that awareness was an integral component of acceptance, relationships, congruence, and spirituality. Both Garland et al. (2015) and Burzler et al. (2018) viewed the development of acceptance through MP as an influence on meaning making processes, with acceptance relying on the awareness of, and non-judgmental appraisal of alternative perspectives. This awareness and subsequent acceptance cultivated realistic thinking and cognitive fluidity which was applied to both the self and others. The research of Siegel (2009) posited that awareness and acceptance of both the self and others resulted in enhanced relationships, with relationships adding to meaning through a sense of connection and belonging. In contrast to Siegel (2009), Allan, Bott and Suh (2016) did not find that relational behaviours enhanced meaning. As with Christie, Atkins and Donald (2017), and Warren et al. (2017) they found value behaviour congruency was a path to meaning. Congruency within the self, relied heavily on self-directed awareness, though meaning itself was enhanced by the congruency developed as a result of this awareness. Cloninger (2011), and Greeson et al. (2011) found meaning was enhanced through spirituality, directly equating spirituality with heightened awareness. The literature pointed to awareness resulting largely in cognitive flexibility which contributed directly to meaning through the realisation of new ways of relating to the self, others, and

situations. It suggested awareness was an initially required mechanism enhanced by MP, but it was not awareness itself that ultimately added to meaning rather awareness enhanced many mechanisms and pathways to meaning.

Dahl and Davidson's (2019) discussion on future mindfulness research highlighted gaps in the understanding on how MP may influence well-being including whether MP facilitated aspects of other contemplative practice such as cultivation of kindness, compassion, and insight. In their discussions prosocial qualities (kindness/compassion), insight, and meaning were separated as three distinct types of contemplative practice, they queried the relationship between MP and these qualities, as all have been linked to psychological well-being. Also, that research demonstrated that contemplative practice positively influenced the quality of interpersonal relationships, another indicator of positive psychological well-being. Lastly, they queried how another strong indicator of positive psychological well-being - purpose and meaning in life - increased with MP. MP is an attentional practice traditionally taught as a foundation skill for other constructive and deconstructive contemplative practices. In their meta-study of effects of meditation on pro-sociality, Kreplin, Farias, and Brazil (2018) noted the prevalence of investigator bias and experimenter effects, with over 40% of studies found to have the meditative technique taught by an author of the study. This directly influenced the effect the meditative practice had on compassion; the meta-analysis found only limited support for MP increasing prosocial behaviours. These findings indicate the potential issues of some intervention-based studies, while providing a critical view of the assumptions surrounding contemplative practices and their influence on prosocial behaviours. Whereas, the current study presented here attempted to uncover influences MP had on individuals as perceived directly by participants.

Dahl and Davidson (2019) discussed how, due to the broad application of MP over numerous traditions, there was no 'right' way to engage in MP, however they did query whether benefits and experiences individuals attained from MP differed depending on their initial motivation to practice and their worldview. While research has shown that MP can enhance meaning in life, Bellin (2015)

specifically called for qualitative study into MP in order to ascertain the mechanisms underlying this influence. Bloch et al. (2017) suggested further research was required to uncover the mediators in the mindfulness – meaning in life relationship, including interpersonal relationships, health and well-being, existential or religious beliefs, or personal growth and actualisation. Kristeller and Jordan (2018) discussed the lack of research into the spiritual effects of meditative practices, in contrast with the growth of spiritual health as a therapeutic consideration. They highlighted the importance of investigating the processes of meditative practices - including MP - and their influence on spiritual change.

#### 1.6. Review of literature supporting qualitative research into mindfulness

Quantitative research has provided numerous insights into the efficacy of MP and has an important role in providing evidential and generalisable data for the research community and practitioners alike. However, it is unable to capture and report on all facets of MP, the experiential facets of MP cannot be reached by quantitative methods. Qualitative research is a naturalistic form of inquiry, attempting to gain insight into how an experience is perceived by an individual and the meaning they make during the experience. Qualitative methods such as Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) provide understanding from inside an individual's world, as opposed to forcing the premises of the external world on the experience of the individual. Unlike quantitative data which uses a large sample designed to be representative of a wider population, IPA focuses on the intimate sample of an individual's perspective. Perspectives are subjective and coloured by all the prior idiographic experiences, beliefs and knowledge of the individual. No other individual will have had the exact same experiences; therefore, the perceptions of individuals are likely to vary. This idiographic perception also applies to the interpretations of the researcher during analysis. Every word or phrase read is subject to the personal understanding the researcher holds, as such researchers must attempt to contain their own understandings of experiences during interpretation to ensure that the participant's meaning is being clearly heard. IPA involves the interpretation of narratives such as interviews or diary entries,

searching for the emergence of themes, firstly within and then across narratives. The in-depth exploration of individual perspectives can uncover both differences and similarities between accounts, providing insight into essential aspects of the experience. Despite limitations in generalisability due to the idiographic nature, the meaning garnered from a qualitative account is much richer than superficial quantitative data (Smith et al., 2009).

Participants in an IPA study on the experiential aspects of MP (Solhaug et al., 2016) developed a shift in perspective resulting in increased curiosity, self-acceptance, patience, improved relational capabilities and decreased reactivity. Main themes discovered by Bermudez et al. (2013) IPA research into MP for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) sufferers included struggles to practice meditation, a vision of growing and helping, personal improvements, and interpersonal improvements. Other themes of note included serenity, self-compassion, intra/interpersonal awareness, emotional regulation, interpersonal improvements, increased socialization, assertive communication, and quality of relationships.

### 1.7. Summary of findings

While research into mindfulness has increased over the years, the majority of this research has been of a quantitative nature. There have been numerous studies exploring the efficacy of mindfulness and the positive effects that mindfulness provides both physically and psychologically (Leyland, Rowse & Emerson, 2018). Yet the subjective facet of mindfulness has been largely un-researched (Griffiths, Camic & Hutton, 2009; Himelstein, Hastings, Shapiro & Heery, 2012; Thomas & Atkinson, 2017). It was suggested a perspective-oriented approach could provide rich insight into how individuals experience changes resulting from mindfulness, meaning making, and how they make sense of these experiences (Bloch et al., 2017; Christopher & Maris, 2010; Hemanth & Fisher, 2015; Nakamura & Ho, 2015; Solhaug et al., 2016; Yi, 2017). Bellin (2015) specifically stated the need for more research into how individuals use mindfulness to cultivate meaning in life, and that qualitative research is a valid method to understand how something can

influence cognitive change (Higginson & Mansell, 2008; Van Vliet et al., 2017). Qualitative research can investigate the variations in subjective experiences that individuals experience in a way that quantitative research cannot.

It was also noted that the literature had a large focus on clinical populations, many referring specifically to the MBSR program. Accessing non-clinical patients may provide alternative views, expectations and attitudes towards mindfulness, depending on where and why individuals practice it. This could provide insight into mechanisms of change and the depth of effect mindfulness may have on an individual. Solhaug et al., (2016) found that individuals who engaged with mindfulness on a deep level experienced richer and farther-reaching positive effects of mindfulness in their lives than individuals who perceived mindfulness merely as a tool. This finding highlights the difference in perceptions of mindfulness which impacts on both the results of practice and the definition of the construct. This also highlights intent; an individual's intent and perception of mindfulness can influence their level of engagement, gain and experiences.

Benson (1996) acknowledged the enhancement of spirituality following engagement in what he termed the 'relaxation response' in non-religious individuals, so how are spirituality and meaning related? The English Oxford Dictionary (2018) defined Spiritual as: Relating to or affecting the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things. The human spirit or soul references an individuals' essence, who they feel they are, how they feel inside, and their perceived connections to others. Spirituality can inform meaning through numerous paths which may not necessarily be related to religion, aiding individuals in making sense of their existence and purpose in life (Galanter, 2005). Both spirituality and meaning are highly personal constructs, with each individual likely to have their own perspective on what they mean, and how meaning and spirituality are influenced in their lives.

Meaning in life is rooted in the experience of the individual (Bellin, 2015) therefore, to fully capture the essence of this construct research must be conducted using qualitative methods which can access the perceptions and experiences of individuals. The current research was deemed useful because it

could potentially provide insight into how individuals develop meaning and how mindfulness influences meaning. It could also provide insight into how adding meaning to an individual's life (or reducing the search for meaning) can have positive impacts on mental and physical health (Bloch et al., 2017). Furthermore, it would add to the fields of both qualitative perspective-based research and mindfulness research. It would also inform clinicians providing valuable insight into an individual's perception of the benefits and effects of mindfulness, providing deeper understanding on the mechanisms of how change can occur in individuals practicing mindfulness. This study aimed to shed light on sources of meaning for individuals, adding to the knowledge of both mindfulness processes and meaning making processes in individuals (Bloch et al., 2017). Concern has been raised in the literature regarding the decontextualisation of mindfulness from the Buddhist framework (Lee, 2017; Lomas, 2017). This qualitative exploration into mindfulness practice may also provide insight into the concerns regarding the loss of original meaning and intent of practicing mindfulness outside of the Buddhist framework.

Secularism also appears to be on the rise worldwide (Woodhead, 2017), meaning practitioners can expect to encounter more individuals who may not have a religious framework upon which to base their meaning making processes. Raising the question: Outside of the confines of religious belief and dogma, how do modern secular individuals develop meaning in their lives? With both mindfulness and secularism on the rise, how do these constructs influence one another? Could mindfulness provide a path to enhanced meaning which in turn positively influences both psychological and physical well-being? Are the concerns regarding decontextualisation of mindfulness from the Buddhist framework valid or does the essence of personal growth and enlightenment naturally occur by engaging in mindfulness.

This research aimed to investigate the relationship between mindfulness and meaning in life in secular individuals from individuals' unique perspectives through the question: How do secular individuals find meaning in mindfulness? IPA was employed to analyze semi-structured interviews conducted with regular practitioners of mindfulness. Recognizing that MP could be employed across

numerous platforms (Kabat-Zinn, 2014; Maxwell and Duff, 2016), the act of mindfulness was not confined to a set style of practice. The interview schedule was developed to provide opportunities for individuals to describe their experiences of the relationship between MP and meaning in their own words. Each interview was transcribed then reviewed for the appearance of recurring themes; themes were extracted using interpretation of the participant voice, a journey of context, and lexical semantics. Analysed transcripts were then compared for co-occurrence of themes across transcripts, with presence of co-occurring themes suggesting evidence of similarity across experiences. Co-occurring themes were further scrutinized and analysed to uncover potential key meaning making mechanisms of MP. This quantitative method of research was employed in an effort to complement the existing quantitative data, and contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms of MP.

## Chapter 2: Method

### 2.1. Participants

To ensure the safety of participants the following criteria were developed to establish that individuals selected were able to demonstrate competence to participate. Participants were required to be adult, over the age of 18, not be involved in any current psychological or psychiatric treatment program, or be regularly taking any form of psychotropic medication or illicit substances. These criteria were necessary to make certain any information gathered could be related to the construct of mindfulness rather than a treatment modality, medication, or substance. Participants were required to be regular users of mindfulness, regular defined as continuous rather than sporadic practice. No further definition of regularity was applied so as not to place constrictions on the type of practice individuals engaged in, this was to enable inclusion of individuals whose MP had evolved beyond formal practice into constant application of mindful techniques. An equal gender representation was sought as participation was open to both genders, however there were only two male respondents both of whom participated in interviews. All participants were screened via questionnaire upon registering their interest in participation to ensure they met the above criteria (See Appendix A).

Participants were invited through advertisement in nationwide mindfulness organisation newsletters, websites and social media pages including Mindfulness for Change, Mindfulness Education Group, and Mindfulness Works. Invitations were also sent out through: yoga centres in Tauranga - Ashtanga Yoga Tauranga, via social media - Facebook, and via noticeboard advertisements across Tauranga (See Appendix B). This contact was designed to reach a broad sample of participants from wide demographic and geographic environments. Despite the small sample size and qualitative scope, it was hoped that sampling from a broad base could increase relevance of findings and avoid reducing findings to a narrow representative sample. Compensation for participation consisted of a \$20 voucher from MTA funded by the Massey University Post Graduate Research Fund.

Potential participants were informed via information sheet that the study would be investigating the link between MP and meaning making processes

through interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), for a Massey University students Masters research project (see Appendix C). The information sheet informed individuals of the qualitative nature of IPA, the use of interview to access participant experiences, and provided an overview of the interview procedure. Participant exclusions were outlined and explained, as were the following rights - individuals could halt the recording at any point, decline to answer any question, withdraw from the study, and their confidentiality would be maintained.

The above advertisements resulted in 16 replies of interest. Of the 16, two were discounted due to the importance of understanding and meaning of the English language in this IPA study, as they were foreign travellers to New Zealand and English was their second language. One individual did not return their screening questionnaire. Six questionnaires were returned by individuals who were deemed unsuitable, two for religious belief (as this was a study focused on secular practice) and four for current engagement with a form of psychological treatment modality. Seven suitable applicants returned questionnaires, all of who were interviewed, one interview could not be included in analysis as the transcript release authority was not returned, leaving six suitable interviews to analyse.

**2.1.1. Summary of participant mindfulness practice.** The length of mindfulness practice for participants ranged from 1.5 - 25 years with a range of motivations and an even split of eastern and secular training (see Table 2.1). Three separate secular psychotherapeutic deliveries of mindfulness were represented but were sought out for education rather than personal therapy; Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, Dialectical Behaviour Therapy, Mindfulness Integrated Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. Eastern training was predominantly from a Buddhist perspective, although none of the participants engaged with Buddhism as a religion.

Table 2.1

*Participant motivation, training, and length of mindfulness practice*

	<b>Motivation</b>	<b>Eastern v Secular Training</b>	<b>Current Practice</b>	<b>Length of Practice</b>
<b>P1</b>	Spiritual understanding of Yoga and desire for calm	Eastern – India, Yoga Teacher Training	Informal implementation across tasks and formal daily practice, seated breath focus and/or mindful yoga	1.5 Years
<b>P2</b>	Searching for tool in a time of stress	Eastern – Buddhist community meditation course	Daily formal seated practice 30 minutes	25+ Years
<b>P3</b>	Viewed as a natural progression from Yoga practice	Secular – Online Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Class Followed by ongoing secular mentored instruction	5-6 Days per week formal seated breath focus practice 20-30 minutes	3 Years
<b>P5</b>	Initially learned for programme delivery in mental health sector. Desire for more awareness brought practice into private life	Secular – Dialectical Behaviour Therapy facilitator training	Informal practice across tasks Formal daily physical mindful yoga practice	9-10 Years
<b>P6</b>	Initially learned for clinical understanding. Brought practice into private life as a tool to utilise in a time of stress.	Secular – Mindfulness Integrated Cognitive Behavioural Therapy	Formal seated practice 20-30 minutes 3-4 times per week Informal application of mindful principles across tasks	3.5 Years
<b>P7</b>	Introduction through meditation	Eastern – Structured Thai Buddhist delivery	Daily constant application of mindful principles across all tasks Formal breath focussed mindful ashtanga yoga	24 Years

**2.2. Clarifying the Constructs**

Development of the interview schedule first required clarification of the concepts the researcher was trying to access, namely mindfulness, meaning, and secular. Mindfulness itself had broad applications and though gaining in popularity and use, it was still not a mainstream activity in western society. As such the definition had to be relevant to western use and open enough to ensure inclusion

of sufficient participants. The definition of meaning also needed to be open enough to accommodate the idiosyncrasies of meaning relevant to each participant, as each individual may source meaning through different aspects of their lives. It was essential to clearly define the term secular as this study specifically sought perceptions of individuals who were non-religious. Both the mindfulness and meaning definitions were presented to participants during the interview, the definition of secular was presented to individuals as part of the screening questionnaire.

2.2.1. Mindfulness defined. The English Oxford Dictionary defines 'Mindfulness' as: A mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting one's feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations, used as a therapeutic technique. Jon Kabat-Zinn the founder of MBSR defined mindfulness as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn, 2014). These definitions were very similar to Friedman, Myers, and Benson's (2001) two essential components eliciting the relaxation response "mental focusing and adopting a passive attitude toward distracting thoughts."

A combination of the above definitions was utilised:

"Mental focusing in the present moment, with a non-judgmental attitude toward thoughts."

While there is further debate regarding the definition of mindfulness, the simplicity of this definition was favoured, as it allowed the inclusion of a number of idiosyncratic methods that participants could have engaged in. This definition also encompassed key aspects from other definitions such as: sustained attention (Bellin, 2015); and Garland, et.al., (2015) "non-evaluative engagement with experience."

2.2.2. Meaning defined. The English Oxford Dictionary (2018) defined 'Meaning' as:

1. Important or worthwhile quality; purpose.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2018) defined 'Meaning' as:

1. Significant quality.

Steger (2009, p. 682) went further to define meaning as:

“the extent to which people comprehend, make sense of, or see significance in their lives, accompanied by the degree to which they perceive themselves to have a purpose, mission, or overarching aim in life.”

Steger's (2009) definition was used in this study, it was comprehensive, inclusive of the Oxford and Merriam-Webster definitions and flexible enough to accommodate the idiosyncratic definitions participants may have held.

2.2.3. Secular defined. Defining the term secular was a task of unwrapping lexical semantics, the English Oxford Dictionary defined Secular as:

1. Not connected with religious or spiritual matters

with Religious defined as:

1. Relating to or believing in a religion; (of a belief or practice) forming part of someone's faith in a divine being

and Spiritual defined as:

2. Relating to or affecting the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things
3. Relating to religion or religious belief

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2018) defined secular as:

1. Of or relating to the worldly or temporal
2. Not overtly or specifically religious

In contemporary English, "secular" is primarily used to distinguish something (such as an attitude, belief, or position) that is not specifically religious or sectarian in nature.

with religious defined as:

1. Relating to or manifesting faithful devotion to an acknowledged ultimate reality or deity

As individuals often feel spiritual even when undertaking a secular practice (Chang et al., 2010), for the purposes of this study secular was defined as:

“Non-religious - not relating to or believing in an acknowledged religion, ultimate reality, divine being or deity.”

### 2.3. Interview process

Seven participants engaged in a semi structured interview administered, transcribed, and analysed by a single key researcher, using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Prior to interview commencement written informed consent was obtained from each participant (see Appendix D). Interviews were conducted in person where possible (two participants) or via video call using Skype or Whatsapp (five participants). An open-ended semi structured interview schedule was used to adhere to the principles of IPA, gathering the individual's insight and perception without imposing outside influences on their experience (See Appendix E). Initial questions were designed to establish rapport and elicit information regarding where and when the participant came to practice mindfulness. These included questions regarding type of instruction, current practice, and length of practice. Questions related to motivation to learn, and initial attitude toward mindfulness were designed to access whether motivation and/or attitude was related to the level of meaning they derived from practicing mindfulness as suggested by Solhaug et al. (2016). Subsequent questions sought to elicit information regarding the relationship the participant had experienced between mindfulness and meaning. A number of questions were developed to directly elicit the individual's concept of mindfulness, their concept of meaning in their lives, how they perceived mindfulness to have influenced their meaning making processes, and how they perceived the meaning they had developed affected their daily lives.

While it was important to ensure the schedule was open and flexible and not imposing the frameworks of others onto the participants, it was also important to attempt to access the many facets of meaning. Research had presented numerous theories suggesting the basis of meaning making for individuals, therefore some questions were designed to probe for and potentially access these theories. Bloch et al. (2017) highlighted a number of areas for further research including whether relationship quality, personal growth and actualisation, and existential beliefs were possible mediators in the mindfulness - meaning in life relationship. The question 'How do you find practicing mindfulness affects your concept of meaning?' was designed to directly elicit a response regarding whether the participant perceived that MP had directly affected their concept of meaning. Expansion questions following this thread probed for the perceived effects mindfulness had on purpose in life (Bloch et al., 2017), connection to objects outside of the self (Maxwell & Duff, 2016; Siegel, 2009; Van Vliet et al., 2017), self-awareness, and views of values and actions (Allan, Bott & Suh, 2016, & Bloch, 2017). Regarding the above theories, questions were developed to probe participants for their perception regarding the topic, while allowing room for participant's own perceptions and experience to come through.

To maintain the integrity and essence of IPA, subsequent questions were not designed to specifically probe for links to previous research. Rather the participants own perspective, beliefs, and explanations were sought in order to access the idiosyncratic mechanisms of the mindfulness - meaning in life relationship of each individual. The question 'Can you describe the sense of meaning that you have developed?' was an opportunity for the participants' to vocalise specifically what meaning meant for them personally. Expansion questions sought to elicit what they perceived as important, significant, or what gave them purpose in their lives. This was an opportunity to see whether participants found meaning in similar or diverse pursuits. The following question 'How would you explain the link between your mindfulness practice and the development or enhancement of meaning in your life?' was an opportunity for participants to vocalise their understanding of the processes behind how MP affected their

meaning making processes. Subsequent expansion questions sought to clarify 'how' participants perceived MP to have influenced the development of their significance and purpose in life. 'How has this perception of meaning affected your daily life?' was designed to elicit information regarding how participants felt that the meaning they had created or discovered was presenting in their day to day living.

Each interview was recorded using smart phone voice recording software then manually transcribed, dictation software was avoided due to reliability concerns. Once transcribed each interview was then listened to twice more whilst reading through the transcript to ensure accuracy and allow for amendments. Every participant was emailed a copy of their transcript and was asked to ensure that the transcript had captured their experience accurately. Participants were given the opportunity to amend transcripts if necessary and were required to return a signed transcript release authority (see Appendix F). No emendations were made to the transcripts by participants. At the conclusion of research each participant was provided with a summary of the research findings.

#### 2.4. Analysis

This research aimed to gather participant perspectives on how mindfulness had influenced their meaning making processes. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen to analyse the data, as IPA specifically seeks to uncover how individuals perceive and make sense of their experiences. Once all interviews were transcribed, checked by the participants, coded and stored securely the process of IPA commenced. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2009) suggested six analysis stages to complete IPA, which provided the basis of the analysis for this project.

The first stage involved immersion in the raw data, reading and rereading each transcript, taking the time to read carefully and slowly, ensuring the participant's perspective was the focus. Initial notes were made where themes or patterns emerged. As a researcher immersing oneself in the data was important as it allowed the reader the opportunity to fully absorb the messages the participant had offered. This began the hermeneutic process, interpretation considered both 'the

part' and 'the whole', words were interpreted both at face value and within the context of the sentence, passage, and the complete text. This interpretation was both dynamic and circular in nature, discovering and interpreting meaning which in turn further influenced the original interpretation. IPA is double hermeneutic with the researcher interpreting the participant's interpretation of the phenomena. For example, each individual perceives each experience differently due to their own past experiences and cognitive schemas, this included the researcher listening and reading through the participant's dialogue. In order to minimise interpretation bias, the researcher engaged in monitoring of their own thoughts during interpretation, reading and re-reading participant transcripts continually questioning the origins of interpretations. Importance was placed on acknowledging that participants were the experts of their own experiences, as such preconceptions and expectations of the interpreter were set aside, to avoid own beliefs, feelings, and prior knowledge colouring interpretation and missing the true message.

Stage two involved initial coding of data, which began during the first few readings as notes were developed. Each transcript was manually analysed line by line, key words and phrases used by the participant were noted, patterns and themes were assigned codewords such as 'connectedness' and 'awareness'. These codewords began to form the basis of themes and were used to highlight significant and/or recurring points of interest (see Appendix G). To capture the full multifaceted experience of the participant, comments were considered at 'descriptive', 'linguistic', and 'conceptual' levels (Smith et al., 2009). Descriptive comments focused on describing content within the transcript, linguistic comments explored the use of language by the participant, such as repetition or highly emotive terms, and conceptual comments involved a higher level of interpretation.

Stage three involved discovering and recording emergent themes. A move away from the transcript itself began, as the focus moved to analysing the comments and codewords created by the researcher. A table of coded themes and comments was created for each participant, linking the code, the participant and the supporting quote. Themes were initially recorded in the order in which they appeared in the transcript. The object was to further refine the participants'

message into concise themes while retaining enough detail to maintain the essence of the communication.

Stage four involved searching for connections across themes within the same transcript. Themes which were related identified overarching themes, where subsets were noted and coded. Detailed notes about the different coding processes were made in order to create evidence to back up the analysis process (see Appendix H). As developing themes from the transcript was an interpretive process, and can involve questioning the participants meaning and abstraction, it was important to document this process to explain how interpretations evolved. Once data was sorted by theme/subtheme it was presented in table form for ease of comparison to other transcripts.

Stage five involved reviewing subsequent transcripts, where steps 1-4 were repeated. During this phase previous themes and codes were kept on hand to aid in faster coding where relevant. However, it was important to remember the idiographic focus of IPA and avoid reviewing each transcript through the lens of past transcripts. Bracketing of both researcher perspectives but also the themes which have emerged from the previous transcript(s) was essential, transcript data was not compared until all individual transcript analysis was completed.

During step six a search for commonalities and repeated themes across transcripts took place. Evidence supporting each theme was grouped and presented in a table form for ease of viewing. Finally, psychological theory was linked to the data, where observed and appropriate (Finlay, 2010).

## 2.5. Reliability and validity

IPA as a qualitative study is subject to a number of criticisms particularly the interpretation required of the participant's voice. Interpretation is a key aspect of IPA and if the researcher does not bracket their own assumptions and prior beliefs adequately there is potential for this to bias the interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). It was important for the researcher to keep an open mind and immerse oneself in the data fully, appreciating each new transcript as a fresh perspective and not

allowing previous concepts to influence interpretation. During individual interpretations a list of code words/themes was not present, rather each interesting point was noted ensuring that the focus was on the current transcript, rather than being influenced by previous codewords. It was also essential that the researcher document all steps of interpretation so that a logical chain of evidence can be developed to back up interpretations. Extracts from multiple participant transcripts which supported interpretations would be included in this final report to demonstrate links.

Another possible limitation was that the presence of the interviewer may have influenced the information the participant was willing to divulge (Anderson, 2010). Participants may not have been willing to fully share all their information with a stranger, or they may have tried to present to the interviewer what they thought they wanted to hear. Reactions from the interviewer may also influence the type or depth of information the participant is willing to share. In order to counteract these issues, the interviewer sought to frequently remind participants that it was the participant perspective and insight which was of importance. Initial questions were designed to establish rapport between interviewer and participant to establish a relationship of respect, trust, and safety. The interviewer employed the skills of active listening, unconditional positive regard and validation to encourage honesty and openness in participants. Due to the small sample size and idiographic nature of IPA, generalizations from the data were tentative and cautious in nature (Smith et al., 2009).

Assessing qualitative research against criteria for quantitative reliability and validity is difficult due to the idiographic and descriptive nature of the data being gathered. The aim of this study was to understand the individual perspectives that participants had developed regarding how MP affected their meaning making processes. Also, to understand whether they felt MP had enhanced the meaning and significance they felt in their everyday lives and how they felt this may have occurred. To enhance the reliability of the study the following considerations were made: Participants were encouraged to fully explain multiple facets of their meaning making processes, in an attempt to capture their full idiographic meaning

making process; Open ended questions were used to encourage full discourse, with terms such as 'how', 'could you explain', and 'can you describe', these terms were specifically chosen to access the participants understanding and experience without reference to how constructs were interpreted by others; Interference from the interviewer was minimised and kept to validation of participant voice and repeated reference to the participants' perspective; All interpretations were considered as possibilities as the data was double hermeneutic - an interpretation of an interpretation. However, to support the validity of interpreted themes, quotes from multiple participants were gathered in support of each theme. Where themes did not receive support from the majority of participants they were not included.

## Chapter 3: Results

### 3.1. Prior Participant Attitudes Towards Mindfulness

Despite some unfamiliarity with mindfulness the overall attitude of participants towards mindfulness was neutral, open and curious regarding what mindfulness entailed and what it could offer. Both P2 and P3 felt open toward the concept *“I was open to meditation”, “I would say I had a really open attitude towards it [mindfulness], I just couldn't make it habitually stick....”* Informed by research, P6 went in to practice with a positive attitude *“I thought it was...a really great concept.”* Both P5 and P7 had neutral perceptions of the practice *“It was one of ignorance in regards to...actually what it is”, “You know, I really didn't, I didn't really have any fear, or like, it did-, I didn't, I don't think I had any sort of connotations really.”* Two of the participants were somewhat informed by research or previous meditation experience prior to beginning MP, P6 first learned about MP through research:

*“I first came across mindfulness ah, I guess, through research, um, so I, when I was doing my undergrad, in psychology. Yeah, I was reading some books and I guess like the neuroscience of meditation.”*

P3 commented on the familiarities of MP with some aspects of Yoga:

*“But I had been practicing Yoga for....oh, um over a decade before that and so, so some of the, a lot of the things that I studied or that I was interested in, in terms of mindfulness really overlapped.”*

The other participants were unfamiliar with what mindfulness entailed when first beginning practice. Two of the participants initially felt that mindfulness was not an activity they would engage in, with P1 stating *“I'd seen on movies...meditating and I'd thought Oh it's never me [joint laughter] you know? But it was kind of like, I was quite curious about it”* and P5 expressing *“Perhaps you know I'm not someone who would do meditation, it's a waste of time, I've got lots to do [laughter].”* These quotes which were in contrast to the current regular practice these participants engaged in highlighted their initial unfamiliarity with the practice. All participants had an inherent interest in well-being and in particular

developing the well-being of others, with three participants working in the mental health sector and three working as Yoga/fitness instructors.

### 3.2. Motivation to Learn Mindfulness

A number of participant comments were indicative of an undercurrent of dissatisfaction with Western Culture (WC). Participants indicated that WC was unable to provide them with holistic understandings as indicated by P1 *"I went to India because I wanted all the spiritual stuff with it, I thought if I tried to do it in Australia or NZ I wouldn't get what Yoga really was."* This statement indicated that the way in which P1 viewed western individuals' engagement with Yoga, was not participation in all that Yoga has to offer, that there was an essential deeper side which is as important as the physical component; a side which our culture may not fully embrace. This lack of holistic understanding was echoed by P7 as they explained *"there was sort of glimmers of something that they'd discovered something over there (Asia), um, through you know, through their philosophies and religions and stuff, that I couldn't find in our, present day."* P7 went further to comment on how the ideals and experience of growing up in WC were not aligned with their own values *"So um, I didn't feel that...um, what's the best way to term that...that our, the society that I was kind of growing up in...didn't, I didn't feel met at all."* Together these passages indicated a lack of satisfaction in the understandings that WC could offer.

Participants provided numerous references to the stress of western life, with many instances of negative adjective use to describe themselves when explaining their initial motivations for engaging in mindfulness practice. Both P1 and P5 spoke of the need to cope with the frenetic pace of their life:

P1: *"I just need to chill out, like I'm quite, not a high-strung person, but I just, I get frantic and I get, I need to be organised",*

P5: *"I'm an absolute rusher! [shared laughter] I'm squeezing in as much as I can into my day and thinking you know, yep, my mind is one that, that, that is constantly on the go but also myself I'm constantly on the go, and um I do*

*you know, I'm a terrible multitasker and, um, you know I'm aware that that's not fully, you know, experiencing what I'm doing...I kind of realised yeah I really need this myself because I'm a rusher, and I'm not fully experiencing the wonderful things I'm wanting to do."*

P2 spoke of their grasp for sanity:

*"I thought, I am gonna have to do something for myself to stay sane, and so I looked around and found a community course on meditation, and so I went along."*

A number of these negative terms are feeling based and indicative of states of mental distress, participants provided no reference to the physical health benefits science has suggested mindfulness can provide. A definite theme of a need to feel calmer and more organised was present. With origins in Eastern culture the search for mindfulness as a tool to alleviate mental distress could be indicative of well-being aspects lacking in WC.

Participants were motivated to engage in mindfulness practice based on the perceived benefits of mindfulness as a tool to achieve a state of calm or to gain knowledge, understanding and awareness. P6 embarked on a mindfulness journey both from an academic and personal stance acknowledging the knowledge gained from MP would benefit not only their future clients, but also them self with their current stresses.

*"...Um, yeah a, a number of motivations I suppose, like that was one kind of, if I was going to be implementing this with clients you know, it's such an experiential thing...That you need to ah...know the territory experientially...um and then also, like...I guess, for me personally as well for my own benefit, I was going through a doctoral program it's, it's really intense, and um, kind of there's a lot of uncertainty and stress in that, so it's like well, this could be really great, 'cos I'm passionate about this area, and I'm doing my research in it, so I'll learn things that will help me through it."*

This search for knowledge was echoed by P3:

*“But I had been practicing Yoga for...oh, um over a decade before that and so, so some of the, a lot of the things that I studied or that I was interested in, in terms of mindfulness really overlapped...”*

Combined the above passages indicate a desire to obtain knowledge, and an acknowledgement that MP could provide alternative perceptions.

### 3.3. Presenting Themes

This research presented three overarching paths to meaning from mindfulness practice: Non-judgment, awareness, and enhanced connection. Non-judgment and awareness cultivated enhanced connection, which pervaded all aspects of the participants' lives resulting in four subsequent paths to meaning: connection with others, authenticity, enhanced spirituality, and positive perceptual shift (See Figure 3.1). MP cultivated a non-judgmental attitude resulting in greater acceptance of others and the self. MP also developed awareness resulting in the realisation of values and of the connectivity between things. The acceptance of others and realisation of connectivity enhanced connections to all things outside of the self. The acceptance of the self and realisation of one's own values resulted in greater authenticity, which in turn also added to enhanced connectivity. Enhanced connectivity and spirituality appeared to be closely related and influential on one another. A positive shift in perception influenced the development of more realistic and positive schema to interpret and engage in experiences, enabling participants to draw increased meaning from their experiences. Non-judgment and awareness were foundations for meaning creation, greatly enhancing connectivity and the way individuals engaged with all aspects of their lives. These paths to meaning often influenced one another and meaning concurrently, as encompassed in the quote below which simultaneously referenced authenticity, non-judgment, connection, and awareness.

*“I would say that I've come to decide, or at least for now be content with my purpose in life as being authentically and genuinely who I am, and being*

*really calm and contented and accepting of that. So not really what I do at all it's just being who I am that, that's my whole purpose in life and hoping, um, that that has...a positive, positive impact on people that I'm, situations and people that I'm in contact with, you know" – P3*



Figure 3.1 Pathways to meaning through mindfulness practice.

3.3.1. Overarching theme – The path of the non-judgmental attitude to enhanced meaning.

*"It's made me much more able, um, to let go of...my opinion...and much more open to other people's experience and ways of thinking I suppose...I don't know that I'm always, I'm not always that virtuous but that's my [laughs]*

*that's my, when I stop and be mindful, then I can be much more...um...open and accepting of other people.” – P2*

Cultivating a non-judgmental attitude is a cornerstone of mindfulness practice, with the initial application of this attitude toward one's own thoughts. Non-judgment appeared to lead to enhanced connection, and with awareness was an essential mechanism to improving connections with others, developing authenticity, cultivating a positive perceptual shift, and enhancing spirituality (see Figure 3.1). All participants initially developed this perspective of non-judgment toward the self which then evolved into a perceptual shift toward relating both intra and interpersonally. This shift was demonstrated in the ability to let go of judgment and the concept of right and wrong as discussed by P1:

*“I think the whole non-judgmental thing is really important...Because you know, a lot of people are judgmental and you are also judgmental on yourself and you can think 'Oh I'm doing it wrong' but there's no wrong.”*

P1 discussed that realising and applying less judgment – referenced in the term ‘let things go’- diminished internal suffering and increased acceptance of both the self and others:

*“that really hit me there too...You know I think about well...um, there's really some people who do practice Yoga but they're [laughs] not really practising Yoga, but then that was me being judgmental about them, so I was really, it just sort of like all came together, it sort of like, you know, you've just got to let things [laughs]...Let things go [joint laughter]...let it go.”*

This passage demonstrated the transfer of non-judgment from intra to interpersonal interactions as does the following passage from P7:

*“because you're letting go of judgment you know you're letting go of identification with all the shit that goes on, um, you drop that within yourself and you start to, you know, you can't carry those judgments onto other people, you know...”*

At a basic level, non-judgment paved the way for perceptual changes and acceptance of others.

It appeared that mindfulness created a state which encompassed more than simple non-judgment, with enhanced acceptance, permission, trust, curiosity, kindness and compassion all attributed to the cultivation of a non-judgmental attitude. P2 expanded the concept of non-judgment to include curiosity and kindness towards the self, presenting acceptance as a mechanism for change:

*“Um...and then with a non-judgmental attitude toward thoughts, well yes sure, non-judgmental, but also a curious attitude and an open attitude, and a kind attitude.”*

*“And so, it’s not only your thoughts it’s also the, feelings that are then...if I allow them to be...and to do their thing...Then, then something will change...and I’ll come out in a different place. That’s my experience of it. So for me allowing the feelings to be what they are, often gives me a deeper understanding of what they’re about. And what may be sitting underneath it, and that’ll help to, resolve them.”*

Here negative states were validated by P2 ‘allow them to be’ eluding to a process of growth from removing judgment, staying with internal sensations and states, trusting the process and not engaging in avoidance. For P2 resolution came through compassion and curiosity toward their own thoughts, leading to acceptance, understanding and knowledge resulting in a capacity to engage with experiences in a positive manner. P3 also expanded on non-judgmental to include ‘curiosity and kindness’, resulting in flexibility and realism *“I would add to it would be ah...curiosity and kindness to it.”*, and spoke of the importance of maintaining this non-judgmental and flexible perspective to avoid negative feelings of being ‘disappointed’, as expectation and reality can differ:

*“P3: Um...the reality of practising [MP] is...I think...I think if you hold that definition as your expectation for practice, then reality gets pretty tricky because, you, when you're sitting that's not actually what happens.”*

*I: No, exactly. The mind wanders.*

*P3: Exactly and so I think that it takes a bit to come to that definition on your own, so, and it's tricky because if, if there's an expectation that that's what's gonna happen when you sit, then you're always gonna be disappointed... And it's the ability to recognise the disappointment and sit with that “*

‘Discriminatory awareness’ was a term coined by P6, an expansion on the concept of acceptance:

*“The word non-judgmental can kind of...throw some people off, in terms of, there is kind of, you're accepting whatever's there, but there's also kind of a, discriminatory awareness of, what is a wholesome thought and what's an unwholesome thought...Or...what kind of thoughts and actions are gonna lead to...you know, less suffering and, and which ones are gonna lead to more suffering...like...like self-referential processing...this idea of kind of like, there's a fixed self that has problems with it or, or what have you, that's often gonna lead to suffering, if we kind of, promote those thoughts, so there's a...there's a kind of...task to just be with whatever thoughts are coming up...But also know...be able to distinguish between wholesome and unwholesome thoughts, and kind of feed the...the more wholesome ones, and, and um, stop feeding the other ones so much.”*

P6 viewed this as an ability to recognise thoughts as either positive or negative and ‘learning a different way to relate to them [negative thoughts]’. A form of critical thinking demonstrating an awareness and acceptance of negative states, joined with a conscious decision to avoid rumination. The discussion of a ‘fixed self’ which ‘leads to suffering’ endorsed the need for flexibility, similar to above where P3 discussed avoiding disappointment by avoiding fixed views.

P7 suggested that non-judgmental attitude fostered by MP was essential to truly experiencing reality. Personal growth resulted (‘grow and change’), via honest genuine experiencing as a result of a non-judgmental

attitude and avoiding attempts to manipulate or change how experiences were perceived. P7 explained:

*“The non-judgmental is the key, um, of whatever you’re experiencing, letting it be, and um, not labelling it, you know, because you can’t, you can’t experience reality if you’re constantly trying to manipulate it into something you want, whether it’s good or bad, or you’re laying with it or trying to change it in anyway. So in order to actually grow and change you have to actually experience things as they are, and that non-judgmental is essential to that process. You can’t be putting your version because it’s just another layer, you’re just caught up in that.”*

This removal of layers, the validity of both good and bad experiences and the necessity of seeing them as honestly as possible was necessary in order to effect change. Here we began to see reference to how non-judgment and the cultivation of acceptance fosters authentic being. Removing perceptual layers is the first step to genuine being as it then creates the space for authentic responses.

Numerous participants referenced the difficulty in maintaining a non-judgmental attitude. The habit of passing judgment highlighted the conscious internal conflict within the self, against an inherent presumption that there was a right or wrong way of being or thinking. Sticking with these presumptions and perceptual filters prevented individuals embracing new perspectives, whereas discarding judgment created an open and accepting space for exploration and realisation. P2 discussed in depth a shift within the self as a result of putting effort into observing and understanding, sitting with discomfort and feeling experiences with full presence rather than avoiding negative states:

*“Being able to sit with stuff and...actually allow it to be there, which gives an opportunity to process it, to actually, come out, come out with a deeper understanding or come out at a different place. I mean I’ve several experiences that were totally, mind boggling, because I was able to go, OK*

*let me just feel this...and, and allowing that feeling to be there, kind of completely switched it.”*

This perceptual shift created by MP resulted in realistic appraisals of situations and an acceptance and trust that all states serve a purpose:

*“I really strongly feel that mindfulness allows an opportunity to have transformative experiences like that...because it gives you the, well it gives me, um...ah, the, ability to trust that it’s OK to feel what I’m feeling. And it’s, yeah, I’m not gonna die as a result, I’m not gonna fall apart as a result, I can just trust in myself to feel the thing, and it will do something, something will happen and it will be different.”*

Trust in one’s own feelings also contributes to genuine being by providing permission to truly accept our genuine states without feeling the need to change them. P2’s contrast of desperation and despair with ‘endless possibilities’ highlighted the impact these aspects of MP can have on transforming an experience, taking a negative state and turning it into a positive experience of opportunity:

*“I couldn’t find anything and it felt really desperate, and in the end I thought well, I’m just gonna have to sit here and, sit here and feel it, and the moment I said that, and I felt it, the whole thing changed, and this blackness became a cloud, not a cloud a cloak, black and velvet and endless possibilities. And that feeling of despair, of blackness, was just gone.”*

This honesty, trust and engagement with negative states led to transformation, the term ‘endless possibilities’ speaking to the openness and resolution one can achieve through this process. A process affecting the whole body with ‘feel’/‘felt’ indicating it was a physical as well as mental experience. This statement also references acceptance of the darker side of ourselves, trusting that this is a necessary part of being. Indicative of non-judgment contributing to authenticity through individuals accepting all facets of their being. Sitting with one’s discomfort and darkness became accepted as natural, a process which led to knowledge and trust that we have permission to feel this side, that both sides are

necessary to be considered genuine. P3 described a process where non-judgment led to deepening self-awareness. With MP resulting in an honest acceptance of reality and the ability to recognise and accept imperfections in the self and flexibly adapt:

*“So it's this um...these deepening levels of self-awareness and recognising that that definition is an ideal. And it's not...it's not the...it's not often the reality of what actually happens on the mat, so there's a gen...there's an openness that has to happen on the mat in order to recognise the moment that that is not happening...So the contest being your expectation versus reality. And being able to be open minded and non-judgmental and accepting and curious about that, that...that's that space where the learning actually happens.”*

Awareness was equated to learning, which was construed positively even if it did not change the outcome.

Like P2 and P3, P5 also viewed non-judgment as a mechanism for change, through the development of awareness, understanding and acceptance, that these qualities guided choices and actions. That positive change resulted from being aware and facing discomfort with a non-judgmental honesty:

*“When you are...aware of what you're doing, what you're feeling as well because you're, it's part of being you know uncomf, sitting with uncomfortableness but also the fact that I'm being aware and non-judgmental about that also does help you know, guide and direct as well. You know, kind of, you know well actually something isn't sitting right with me. It's just sitting with it, but also you know using that as a guide to...you know, make, making changes or doing something differently, or whatever.”*

This passage provides a direct example of how the participant felt that MP directly influenced perceptions and actions.

Half of the participants discussed the further development of non-judgment into non-identification with thoughts. An ability to decentre from

thoughts, let them flow and be, without becoming embroiled in the origins or meanings individuals may apply to thoughts as presented by P1 *"I just let them [thoughts] come and go."* P6 described how this non-identification was attributed to increased awareness and an objectivity which allowed participants to challenge the origin of their thoughts cultivating an attitude of curiosity and exploration:

*"It's kind of helped me see that, the thoughts that maintain that [negative rumination], are not necessarily true but the impacts that those thoughts have on me in the present moment are really important...and so it's like, when I kind of come at it from that...awareness, then it kind of breaks the cycle. And just kind of removes the power of it. Yeah, so it's, um...affected how I relate to thoughts...um, and kind of loosened the grip of, of what I believe about myself, and made me more aware that whatever's going on are, are more just stories...and that I can, um, can be aware of those stories, and then I can also change the stories and question the stories."*

This passage demonstrated the power of thought, and the empowerment and control awareness and non-judgment developed through MP can provide individuals. It was also representative of fluidity and flexibility within the self and in how individuals can relate to themselves and their environment.

This objectivity provided an awareness of emotions and thought patterns, empowerment appeared to result as participants realised that thoughts were not truths, and were subject to perceptions and other influences, and therefore could be rewritten as P6 explained:

*"Part of the teaching that I've had is around non-identification as well...Thoughts, um...which is yeah, whenever you have, a mental event, a thought, or a sensation, it's like, that's realising that's not...me, it's just an event. And it's just a sensation. That goes really deep [laughs] it's like 'Oh, not that either, I'm not that either' and then that raises questions about what...what the 'I' really is."*

This realisation that thoughts did not define them led to freedom but also raised questions about self-definition. Like P6, P7 also used the term 'stories' when discussing thoughts. P7 spoke of individuals 'merging between their thoughts and themselves', how individuals were over identified with their thoughts and how this hampered objectivity:

*"That sort of merging between your thoughts and yourself and um, yeah that's hard to be, to learn how to be- remain objective and seeing things as they are. It's very difficult because we're so identified to everything. You know, our experiences, who we are, what we think you know, all the emotions we feel, our bodies, our jobs, our lives, that's all identification, so it's kind of, yeah to be objective to that is very difficult, in a moment to moment basis to...without bringing in time, and like joining up pieces of time together to make a sort of mosaic it's, and deconstruction of that is super complicated."*

This passage presented the struggle of detaching the self from thoughts while also retaining a self. This struggle was also referenced by P2 who had resolved this dilemma through a Buddhist perspective:

*"I found it really helpful to have a Buddhist perspective on you know, the kind of, the small mind if you like, and then the big mind, so that's the open space and the silence that I connect with, when I do meditate, so...um, I don't always feel it...but often I do, um...so that answers my question, to what am I, or who am I when I'm not my thoughts. That's what I am, I'm the silence, I'm the big, big mind."*

This concept of the big and small mind is discussed by Suzuki, Wenger and Weitsman (1999). The small mind is deemed narrow and tethered to our discriminations and desires. The big mind is the concept of a calm observational consciousness, seeing things as they are without applying discrimination; it is an awareness that the mind holds all that can be experienced within itself, everything can be found within the self; it also refers to a realisation that everything is part of one whole being. For P2 this

realisation that they are part of a greater whole appeared to resolve questions of individual identity, allowing P2 to experience nonduality and a connectedness which transcended an individual self.

P7 posited that true awareness and presence required letting go of the layers, stories and narratives people construct to avoid or cope with difficult experiences, similar to P6's view that stories can be changed and questioned:

*“Well they, they pretty much, all your pain and suffering comes from identification with those thoughts, but when you're deep in your process of...you know, meditation or mindfulness, you see, you know like, you see a thought and it comes...And it comes, and it goes. And yet you haven't, you know, the awareness that is...you, it, it's not the thought. The thought is so separate to us, it's like, you know, like looking at a car driving past. You know, but you start identifying with that car, like as you are that car, once you have that it really, just in terms of a knot, it just loosens the knot up. So any thought you have in the future, has, been, loosened, you know, to that point. Where, um...it's like so that identification with those thoughts becomes less and less. And that's the key, because, you, once you've experienced that those thoughts are not, you, you know, It's like a process, it's like almost mechanical.”*

It appeared that mindfulness created a process where the individual learned to sit with their discomforts, accept all feelings, face truths and engage in experiences in an authentic manner. This created a shift in the individual's engagement with future experiences. Through non-judgment individuals gained permission to let thoughts pass, and empowerment by gaining control over thoughts by letting go of attempts to control them.

To summarise, non-judgment appeared to enhance meaning making through the following mechanisms: The removal of judgment developed fundamental skills of compassion, acceptance and openness, which were then applied to both intra and inter personal connections. Connection was a strong overarching theme presented by all participants which is discussed in further detail

below. Non-judgment toward the self also created a space to cultivate genuine being, where individuals replaced shame with acceptance and validation, promoting genuine being. Removing judgment reduced the need to apply filters to make situations more comfortable for individuals to process. Discriminatory awareness developed as individuals allowed feelings to present without judgment and choose to follow paths and actions which promoted congruency within the self. Acceptance as a by-product of non-judgment was applied more broadly by individuals across situations, people and associated emotions. Individuals felt this resulted in more presence, curiosity, objectivity and realistic perceptions. Non-judgment added to meaning making processes by cultivating foundation skills to connect and experience in a more genuine manner. These mechanisms also opened up areas of struggle for some participants, with questions surrounding identity being raised through non-identification with thought.

### 3.3.2. Overarching theme – Increased meaning through awareness and presence.

*“As you stop merging with thought back into more presence then, you know...you just become healthier.” – P7*

Awareness developed through MP, and with non-judgment appeared to directly influence overall connection contributing to meaning in life through enhancing interpersonal connections, authenticity, spirituality, and developing a positive perceptual shift (see Figure 3.1). MP was attributed to developing a clarity of perception, as individuals dropped their judgments allowing them to accept what was presented as it was. Overall P1 felt that engaging in MP helped them comprehend what was significant in their life by providing clarity. A clear mental space to perceive and work through events, creating a positive frame to interpret and approach both intra and inter-personal events *“Yeah, I guess, and but I think, just, being aware of everything and just setting up for my day...Like having a clean bench while you're cooking, instead of a messy bench.”* This clarity as a result of perception with less clouding by filters or layers also appeared to enhance engagement. For example, P1 provided a contrast to functioning before engaging in

MP, indicating that MP provided improved perception and cognitive clarity leading to improved adaptability and decision-making abilities:

*“P1: Yep, I remember before I started practising it, like honestly if I got frustrated at something, I just wouldn't deal with it very well but now I deal with things pretty well.”*

*“P1: Yeah it's definitely helped.*

*I: Yep because you're able to...*

*P1: I can work through problems.”*

Awareness and presence were attributed to increased discernment – an ability to more easily focus on things deemed truly important to individuals such as connection with others as described by P1 *“ You know, um I think just, I think it leads to being more adaptable, so just choosing, yeah, making better decisions.”* P1 equated ‘not noticing’ with being unhappy, awareness provided an ability to notice and appreciate:

*“I think just because, um, you know, my kids, the present tense, you know, I sometimes dwell on the past...And I know some people are always thinking about the future, just like, I don't wanna, I don't wanna miss these days that I have with my kids...With so much going on you know, you can end up being like well, where did that 5 years go? So, I actually I just need to take that time to realise that life is right now. And so that's definitely, um...part of being present, and just being like, noticing things. 'Cos sometimes you don't notice stuff, and you complain about everything, and you're unhappy.”*

Awareness also provided realisation that ‘life is right now’, it was not in the past or the future. An ability to discern what was important, worth time and effort, was seen in the participants desire to engage fully with their children. P2 used the term ‘waking up’ to describe the awareness gained by MP:

*“I think without mindfulness I wouldn’t be nearly as self-aware as I am...cause that’s what it’s all about isn’t it, it’s about waking up, about becoming aware of what’s going on.”*

Waking could be seen as the epitome of awareness as in its opposite – sleep – individuals are completely unaware. Indicating that without MP they had less awareness of themselves and the world around them. Increased self-awareness was a theme acknowledged by the majority of participants which developed through the general refinement of awareness during MP.

References to deeper connections to and awareness of the physical self were observed among participants as P1 described:

*“But your um...just trying to have some time out just so your brain reorganises [laughs] I think, and then make, and it does make your body and brain connect more, and you just, I dunno, you feel so good after you do it.”*

The mind-body link was strengthened by MP as individuals were able to hone focusing skills and apply them to their physical selves. P2’s discussion demonstrated the awareness of thought and using the awareness of one’s physical self to control thought:

*“Um...well the mental focus, I mean it’s definitely a part of it [mindfulness]. It’s about, not getting caught up, or overwhelmed, or um, taken away by thoughts or feelings, so being able to come back to the present moment and to either connect with my body, or my breath, or whatever.”*

Awareness provided individuals with an expanded full body sensory experience, enabling them to experience more than their mental events and truly experience the present moment through a felt connection as described by P6:

*“So, part of it is a focus on sensory experience...um, which, if you look at it from a, a neuroscience perspective it’s kind of activating different parts of the brain than if you’re thinking about, or if you’re in a thought. If you’re in that kind of rumination state...um, and so that seems like a really important factor to me of, yeah getting out of the thoughts and in to the body, the, the,*

*the felt experience, the sensations which are also, are like a hook into the present moment.”*

Here we could see the connection to the physical self, likened to a lifeline, a link to safety from mental turmoil. Participants felt more grounded in the present, establishing a genuine connection with themselves and their surroundings . This connection allows individuals to disconnect from the perceived reality they have formed inside their own minds, providing an opportunity to experience alternative perceptions. It is this enhanced connectivity which informs meaning through enhancing inter and intrapersonal connections, the way individuals interpret and interact with experiences, and can enable individuals to realise the greater connectivity within all things (see Figure 3.1).

Realistic thinking increased as awareness of thoughts enabled individuals to reduce rumination and remove perceptual filters. This cognitive clarity improved decision making, flexibility and acceptance of others. P3 discussed how realistic appraisal presented as a by-product of enhanced awareness, and how this influenced understanding, acceptance and interactions with the self and others:

*“When I start my day with a meditation I've started my day really paying attention to how I'm feeling, what I'm thinking, if...you know...even if I, like say um...I'm tired...So if I'm tired I recognise that I can be, I can feel grumpy, I can concentrate on more negative things when I'm tired. And that's fine, it's just recognising that that's what it is. And, um, so for me that, that mindfulness aspect helps me be more aware of how I'm, how am I approaching my life right now and the people in it. And...how does that affect the people that are around me?”*

This awareness of the self and the ability to question the effects of the self on others links in with the connectivity theme presented in more detail below. Here awareness was presented not as a panacea, but as allowing opportunity for self-determination, change and growth.

This immersion and greater awareness allowed individuals to realise the meaning present in all moments, fostering presence, participation and appreciation of life as it unfolded. Awareness directly influenced P3's perception of how meaning was constructed:

*"Meaning is made in the moment, and that it's, the meaning comes from meeting whatever moment you're in with a level of awareness because that's where you're actually living your life. You're not living your life yesterday or tomorrow. And so...um...the idea that time is a commodity and you don't get more of and you don't get less of and you don't know how much is left...um...that would be...and, and how I choose to spend it...is important, that would be the most meaningful aspect that I've...gleaned I guess, from mindfulness practice."*

Living life was equated to presence, where to create meaning individuals must be aware and present, spending time on meaningful pursuits and engaging in them with awareness. The awareness of our finite existence was touched on expressing a sense of urgency, highlighting the concept of making good use of the time we get.

The awareness that MP fostered was expanded on further by P3, acknowledging and validating differing realities experienced by individuals:

*"It tends to be just a lot of work of...cultivating these different levels of awareness and with that often comes the necessity to examine 'Well am I looking at this non-judgmentally' or to realise that actually I'm looking at these things through my own eyes...And my own experiences, and that is going to be different from how somebody else is seeing things...Like there's gonna be copious perspectives on these things and, so these inconsistencies these values that are laid down...um... are mine. And they may not be shared and the understanding may not be shared, so again there's a need for...um...non-judgmental attention, and an openness, and understanding...as well as a compassion, because everybody's having all these experiences and they're simply coming at these things from their own experience. Which doesn't dictate the*

*reality of the situation at all. So for me it's really simple, it's really complex at the same time and, um, I think it takes a lot of effort then to respond to things with that, from that foundation of knowledge, so if there was a value I think that I would try to ground my practice it would, that would be, it would be that understanding and that compassion of...we're all bringing about our own reality and our own experiences and our own understanding, and we really need to be, um, we need to be aware of that."*

This passage highlighted the activation of non-judgment, realistic perceptions through awareness and the need to accommodate the disparities between perceptions and reality. This knowledge fostered compassion toward the self and others which would ultimately lead to positive validating connections.

For P5, MP had provided them with the ability to notice when they were not fully present *"Just being...mindful of the fact that I'm often thinking about the next thing while I'm sort of doing the other thing, and that's not, not how I want to live."* Engagement and presence were more congruent with P5's values, which helped them engage with life in a more satisfactory manner. This awareness provided P5 with a recognition of rumination processes and their impacts, which provided an acceptance of states in reaction to situations:

*"Yeah and my internal body states as well, um, and my emotions...um...yeah just and in that kind of you know, not, not rushing to...you know be concerned about either of them but just noticing. Just being aware and noticing and not kind of rushing in to problem solving or...um...or also sometimes obviously being aware that if the emotion actually is about that fact that I'm not being mindful and I'm worrying about the future or whatever."*

Removing the need to reflexively effect change on thoughts and feelings which allowed P5 to experience events with genuine engagement. Improved awareness was circular with non-judgment, as individuals became more aware of judgmental thoughts, in turn improving awareness.

P6 spoke of a similar relationship with their thoughts as P5, with MP cultivating recognition of thought processes, allowing for a clearer view of the self as separate from thoughts:

*“Mindfulness has affected the...the quality of that self-awareness, or like, so not getting so lost in thoughts, but seeing thoughts as a, as a mental event, and then...the impact of that, that thought whatever that thought is having on me in the present moment.”*

This non-identification allowed P6 to critically analyse thoughts and their effects. The analytic mindset MP had cultivated led to enhanced meaning through allowing P6 to clarify their own concepts of meaning. P6 spoke of the indoctrination of individuals into accepting Western definitions of meaning, some of which were actually incongruent with the values participants possessed:

*“It’s better in so many ways, kind of like deconditioning from the stories that I had had around what’s meaningful. So it’s given me a chance to re-evaluate them, and some of them have stayed the same and some of them have shifted quite a lot. Um, and then helped me process things, and kind of ideas have come to me...which are like seem to be synthesis of, a synthesis of different thoughts that I’ve been exposed to, or that I’ve had, they just come to me during meditation practice.”*

Here MP was attributed to an ownership of values, where MP created a space for the exploration and realisation of values originating from within the self.

As such MP appeared to be a path for many to uncover their own values and discard the incongruent values imposed on them by society, as P3 explained:

*“More and more I recognise the inconsistencies that perhaps happen between from the space, from, from the um, the foundation of values and into say behaviours.”*

Breaking free from the previous mindset allowed P6 to become open to receiving meaning through new sources, this new-found awareness enabled them to discover and enact their purpose and meaning if they were aware and receptive:

*“I’ve got a sense of, there was something that I was put here to do, and that there’s different signs in the universe that will point me towards that, and I’ve just got to pay attention to the signs...and, um...um, and that will provide meaning for me.”*

The awareness and presence that P7 had cultivated from MP was transformational, attested to by the term ‘most valuable’:

*“I probably instead of spiritual I’d use the word presence...So it’s like for me it’s like that’s the most valuable tool, I’ve ever experienced in life, um, so it’s improved, my experience of reality and my, and everything that’s, you know, pertains to that. So to share that is, it just became a natural thing to wanna do...”*

The ability to wholeheartedly be present in all moments provided P7 with purpose and meaning. It was meaningful to experience and engage in moments fully, meaningful to help others engage fully and this level of meaning was not present prior to MP.

To summarise MP assisted individuals in deepening awareness both within themselves and of their surroundings, leading to more presence and congruency. Awareness resulted in a reduction of cognitive distraction and more engagement with experiences. Individuals became more aware of incongruencies within themselves and were able to align actions with values. Meaning was derived from true presence and the satisfaction of engaging in meaningful activities which were congruent with their values. Congruence itself is discussed in more detail below.

### 3.3.3. Overarching theme – Connectedness enhances meaning.

*“What’s important to me? Yeah, having a sense of connection.” – P2*

Initially there were a number of points of interest which appeared in the transcripts, however not all were supported to the same extent and as the process evolved it became clear that some of these points were actually part of larger overarching themes. The theme of connection was a strong example of this. Participants referenced a number of separate enhancements of connection including stronger connections with others, nature, objects, and the self. Initially these were coded separately in order to examine whether they influenced meaning through separate avenues. Ultimately however it was realised that through MP, participants felt stronger connections with every aspect of their lives through the greater awareness and presence MP cultivated. Connection was enhanced by the awareness and non-judgment developed through continued MP, four main areas of connectivity influencing meaning became apparent: connection with others, connection with the self (authenticity), enhanced spirituality through realising connectivity, and the development of a perceptual shift enabling a new way of connecting (see Figure 3.1).

#### 3.3.3.1. Theme – Meaning through enhanced connection with others.

Connection with others was enhanced by greater awareness and non-judgment through MP. Four subthemes specific to interpersonal relations appeared throughout the transcripts: Belonging, co-creation of meaning, cycle of positive contribution, and genuineness in relationships (see Figure 3.1). Together these subthemes provided their own pathways to meaning while reciprocally influencing the pathways to meaning of authenticity and spirituality.

3.3.3.1.1. Subtheme – ‘Belonging’. Appearing as a subtheme of ‘Connection with Others’, ‘Belonging’ as a path to meaning in life presented when MP was attributed to enhanced feelings of belonging and connection to the ‘world’, both physical and social. P3 explained *“And it [mindfulness] also brings a feeling of connectedness”*, this all-encompassing connection was presented well by P2:

*“It’s a, interesting kind of, juxtaposition of feeling that insignificance of what we are, in the massive kind of environment that the South Island is, and at the same time knowing that we’re an integral part of it all. Really that we’re made up of the same stuff that the Earth is made of.”*

This concept was supported by P1 *“you know I just think I feel like we’re all connected yeah, part of a biodynamic, you know, kind of...universe”* and P6 *“this being is not separate from the rest of...all that there is”*, P6 explained further:

*“And now, like I have a sense of kind of a cosmic order of things, it’s kind of chaotic but it’s, there’s order in it as well, and so there’s like a, I have a sense of belonging.”*

Discussion from P6 referenced their own individuality while firmly acknowledging belonging:

*“I’ve...come to believe I suppose that I’m, I’m really connected and there is no kind, there’s not such a distinction between myself and the rest of the world. But um, my day to day experience, still feels quite separate.”*

Increased connection resulted in less divide between the self and others, as deeper awareness created acknowledgement of similarities and acceptance of differences. P3 discussed the commonalities and connection they perceived among all individuals:

*“And it [mindfulness] also brings a feeling of connectedness...we’re all trying to get towards the same things, we’re all trying to, you know have safety, security, acceptance and connection...mindfulness practice helps me to focus and concentrate more on what connects us, than what divides us.”*

This demonstrated the in-group mentality and sense of belonging that P3 had developed through MP. The use of language reinforced this with the repetition of ‘we’re’ and ‘us’, terms clearly indicative of affinity with others. Interestingly socially constructed barriers were removed and a collective mentality developed, use of language was key, ‘them’ which creates division was rarely if at all used, whereas ‘us’ and ‘we’re’ which foster connection were presented frequently by participants.

The removal of barriers ignited mechanisms of in-group mentality, where individuals became more identified with others and therefore more motivated to engage with them in a positive manner. P2 detailed this further *“Yeah, the sense of meaning...yeah trying to support, each other, and, and the earth actually...To, to live harmoniously...together”*, indicating that meaning was directly linked to others and the positive influence individuals can effect on their environment.

3.3.3.1.1. *Subtheme - ‘Co-creation of meaning’*. The theme ‘Connection with Others’ also comprised a subtheme where meaning was realised through, and associated with joint activities with others. This ‘Co-creation of Meaning’ enhanced connection with others while directly influencing meaning in life (see Figure 3.1). MP appeared to result in deeper awareness not only of the self but particularly the effects one had on others, manifesting into a desire to help or improve aspects of other individuals' lives. This was evidenced by a strong theme of contribution and positive influence in the lives of others, for example P1 placed high value on the relationship they had with their children and the impact of this relationship *“I just think being a good mum, being a good person, and trying to help. Well that makes me feel good, so that's my reward anyway.”* This importance supported that meaning is co-created, as the first item listed it was indicative of high significance to P1 and this meaning could not exist separately from the children. The terms ‘being good’ and ‘help’ were also supportive of the cycle of positive contribution, particularly as they resulted in rewarding feelings for P1. This is indicative of a positive emotional cycle fostered by awareness, increased empathy, understanding and compassion as a result of MP which is discussed in more detail below. The term ‘reward’ itself indicated something was gained which was to be prized and valued. References to our finite existence by P3 below, phrases such as ‘how I spend my time’ highlighted that time is limited and appeared to influence individuals to use their time in both wise and positive manners. The acknowledgement of the effect we have on our community, that the meaning we harness and engage with directly influences the meaning of others was demonstrated by P3:

*“But I really try to remember, especially because I've got kids, and a family, and that my um...I guess one of the most meaningful aspects of my life*

*would be that the way that I'm choosing to spend my time. In meaningful moments with them...creates meaning, creates the most meaning for me because that's what's gonna go on, so whatever I'm sharing with my kids, they're gonna carry that into their experience, and they're gonna create their own meaning based on, in part that reality that we're creating together, and that understanding that we're creating together."*

This passage was indicative of co-creation of meaning, and belonging, as reality was created together. The repetition of the term 'the most meaning/ful' indicated the high level of importance this co-creation had for P3, creating meaning with others was deemed the most valuable experience. P6 also articulated co-creation clearly:

*"I've come to understand it, purpose, as something that's kind of...co-created...with the rest of, the universe in a way [laughs] Um, whereas before...purpose was maybe something that was more like self-created"*

*"yeah meaning is something that's, co-created."*

A contrast between achievement-based meaning and feeling-based was also discussed by P6:

*"I'm trying to think back to how I made meaning, or how I thought about meaning before I started practising.....and I guess...mmmm, it was quite achievement focussed...like...I could make...make up a goal, and then search and then try and achieve that goal and that would give me, my life meaning. Yeah, and, I still do that, like I still...like I still make meaning out of achievements and things, but also...um, I guess some of the little things or some of the...maybe not little things, but maybe more feeling based things, take on more meaning as well. Like love, and connection."*

P6 freely admitted they found more meaning and life satisfaction through MP and higher importance was placed on feeling-based achievements. Terms such as 'love and connection' and 'what really mattered' all referred to people, connection with them and how we spend our limited and precious time with others. MP was attributed with creating growth in these areas.

3.3.3.1.3. Subtheme - 'Cycle of positive contribution'. Presented under 'Connection with Others' (see Figure 3.1), this third subtheme was a path to meaning through contributing positively to the lives of others. Spending time in a manner which contributed positively both to others and feelings toward the self, appeared likely to increase meaning and happiness through increased congruence with values and satisfaction. For P2 meaning was derived directly from contribution and positive influence in the lives of others, supporting both the cycle of positive contribution and the co-creation themes *"if I live this life, then I want to contribute to...improving or making better the lives of others around me."* Also, language features used by P2 such as the repetition of 'we' and terms such as 'together' and 'harmoniously' support a sense of belonging:

*"It seems to me that the meaning, we have to create the meaning, we have to, make sense of it, and since we're all in the same boat, for me meaning is about trying to...is that what you were meaning, is that...Yeah, the sense of meaning...yeah trying to support, each other, and, and the earth actually...To, to live harmoniously...together. Because there seems to be, there is no other point in doing anything else. What's the point in, in you know in what we see going on in the world, in terms of the war and the misery."*

P5 spoke of 'helping' when questioned about what was meaningful, helping others is a direct example of co-creation of meaning and the cycle of positive contribution:

*"Things that are, are meaningful to me, I guess I'm thinking about things like the environment and passion, and um, helping, and I'm thinking those sorts of things...I guess um that kind of stretches into all sorts of other areas of my life as well you know, when I think about how I spend my time."*

The situation and acts involved derive their meaning from the other individual who requires help, without the individual who requires assistance there is no meaning.

Repetition of 'really' and use of terms such as 'less important' by P6, highlighted contrasts in perception with and without MP:

*“So one of the things to happen in the first sort of 6-12 months, of practising, was, my ego became less important...Um, so all these kind of fixed ideas of what I thought was important, sort of faded away and like, a lot of the struggles and difficulties that I'd been struggling with, around getting lost in thought and not being able to concentrate, and, all that kind of stuff just like, was much less of an issue. So then it sort of revealed a layer beneath that of like what I really cared about, um, things like climate change...um, and the environment, and...society in general and I kind of like...it helped to, bring those things to the forefront so It's like, I wasn't struggling so much with the little day-to-day things so suddenly I had more energy, and it was more clear to me what, what really mattered and this kind of, one life that I had, I didn't want to, waste that.”*

When individuals referred to MP allowing them to see ‘reality’ it indicated that previously they were engaging in a form of perception removed from the truth. The clarity provided by MP enabled individuals to realise a purpose outside of themselves, which would ultimately contribute to their own wellbeing through contributing to the wellbeing of others.

3.3.3.1.4. *Subtheme – ‘Genuineness in relationships’.* This final subtheme under ‘Connection with Others’ (see Figure 3.1) presented a path to meaning through genuine interpersonal interactions. MP enabled individuals to develop more authenticity in their connections with others, through bringing presence and genuineness to interpersonal interactions. P3 presented the relational benefits of MP as understanding, which developed initially through understanding of the self:

*“But I think it [MP] just smooths, it, it, it increases levels of awareness to the extent that it can just smooth out those rough edges a little bit, and...um...cultivate a level of understanding both of yourself and in, and in relationships with others. Because again we affect each other, we're connected.”*

Non-judgment allowed individuals to employ more acceptance toward their own thoughts and actions, resulting in more positive intrapersonal interactions. Non-judgment fostered acceptance and empathy toward the self, this discussion supported the application of these skills into relations with others. Individuals learned how to promote genuineness in others, through the same mechanisms with which they had achieved genuineness within themselves - acceptance and compassion.

P6 spoke of how MP enhanced connection to reality, and referenced the genuineness that MP evoked:

*“We’ve got this kind of story of how things operate in society and that we’ve gotta change that story...um, into one that’s more involving inter-being, and inter-connectedness. Um, and that the story’s not kind of abstract either, so part of changing that story is actually healing ourselves and becoming more aware...in, in the way that mindfulness helps us to do, um, of what’s really going on. And connecting to what’s real. And that I believe that the more that we connect with what’s real, the more we all actually have the same values, that we all care about each other, and ourselves, and the environment. Um, that, the problem is, like all the fake stuff that we’ve added on top, all the masks that we wear, and all the kind of systems that are serving, money, or themselves, rather than the people and planet.”*

‘Healing’ versus the term ‘problem’ indicated the negative connotations P6 had regarding ‘fake’ behaviours. MP was attributed to a stronger connection to reality, a realisation of values and the opportunity to behave genuinely. Terms such as ‘inter-being’, ‘inter-connectedness’ indicated a realisation that genuine being was connected to others. The phrase ‘We’ve gotta change the story’ displayed a strong desire to share genuine connected being with others.

P7 discussed the mechanisms through which individuals could foster genuineness in others through their interpersonal actions:

*“A person becomes like, you used to be like this but now you’re like this, and now you behave like this, and it upsets me like this, and I wish you didn’t do this, or you know, you should be more like this and then I’d be happy you know, it’s just like Oh my God, it’s, you just, it’s complicated there’s a lot of pain and suffering through that process, you know? So when you let someone just be, if you can be with that person as they are, however state they’re in, then you’re in a state of acceptance and it’s unconditional and it’s, it’s a loving place, and then, there’s less struggle with life...”*

These mechanisms included removing control and preconceptions of others and replacing these with unconditional acceptance:

*“And let, let, letting things be as they are and you start to experience them more, you know, in a more real, not, not for how you’re conditioned to experience them, more how they actually are...Being with people as they are without you, needing to change them in any way.”*

Acceptance and realisation of their own genuine self and the removal of masks and layers previously employed in interpersonal interactions allowed individuals more energy to be fully present, accepting and responsive to others. These mechanisms accommodated the flow and change of human behaviour and provided a space for individuals to present their genuine selves. Flexibility and acceptance in relationships created love and ease compared with the negative adjectives used - ‘upsets’, ‘pain’, ‘suffering’- when describing how control and inflexibility negatively affected relationships. This passage also demonstrated how genuineness was achieved through letting go of expectations of others, being open to, and accepting of who people were and how they were behaving. Individuals developed more congruence and authenticity within themselves through non-judgment, awareness and acceptance as a result of MP. Removal of desires to control or receive things from others was cultivated, presence was enough, and a true connection was the reward. An ability to foster more positive interactions and avoid negative

effects on others resulted. The quality of these interactions directly influenced the meaning that individuals discovered.

Therefore, enhanced connection with others through MP was a strong contributor to enhancing meaning in individuals, contributed to by non-judgment, awareness and authenticity. Relationships appeared to develop more meaning when they were authentic and there was space for each individual to be genuine. The need to control the self and others was discarded allowing freedom of expression, authentic being allowed others to be authentic. Non-judgment resulted in the removal of attempts to control/change others, accepting them as they are. Acceptance could be construed as approval, when someone accepts another they get a sense that they are approved of, which may boost esteem and in turn makes relationships feel more positive. Meaning was co-created with other individuals, it came from a sense of belonging, and was enhanced through a cycle of positive contribution. Meaning was also enhanced by presenting a genuine self in relationships and providing conditions for reciprocal genuine interpersonal interactions. Genuine being is also presented as a path to meaning in itself below.

#### 3.3.3.2. Theme – Connecting with the self: Authenticity as a path to meaning.

*“Um...yeah I guess it's [meaning] about kind of, you know, living life by your values and your beliefs and that's what's important.” – P5*

Authenticity presented both as a standalone path to meaning stemming from enhanced connection, while also reciprocally influencing the path to meaning through connectivity with others (see Figure 3.1). Non-judgment cultivated towards the self, resulted in individuals becoming more accepting of themselves and less inclined to apply layers and facades to social interactions. P1 indicated less future or past focus, acceptance of the current self, more presence and awareness, indicating that a genuine desired self had resulted from MP *“So...I think that...it's [MP] just helped me, um...be me now [laughs].”* The term ‘be me now’ itself so parsimonious and effective in its simplicity, removed from added elements mirroring the authentic being which had been cultivated within the individual. Like P1, P7 presented the phrase ‘be me’, a genuine version of the self, free of layers which was gained through MP:

*“I think, well, the mindfulness practice has given me more...that process of becoming more present, has given me more of myself. So, it allows me to be me, whatever that is. Um...so you know, that is...I dunno whether that is any more meaningful than anything else, but, um...it, it gives me more meaningful relationships. Because I can be me, and other people can be themselves, therefore we have a you know, a nice beautiful heartfelt connection.”*

Here genuine being was directly transferred to interpersonal interactions linking back to the genuineness in relationships subtheme. Growth, greater access to and recognition of the self is referenced in the phrase ‘given me more of myself’. A realisation that authentic being was not as confined as non-authentic being.

Awareness paved the way for greater congruence within the self as values were realised, and layers were realised and discarded. The significance that MP had on P6’s meaning appeared strongly associated with value alignment, both internally and externally. Both awareness and non-judgment were directly referenced in this process of establishing value congruence within the self:

*“it’s interactive with my daily life, in that I’ve sought out different kinds of people, different kinds of experiences, and then over time, and then I’ve gone back to practice and then so it’s kind of like they feed each other....um, so it’s, yeah it’s transformed my, day to day life, I’m, I’m with a different crowd of people. Now than I was when I started practising. Um, I’m doing much more meaningful things, I’m kind of, got more love in my life...um...yeah, I feel...just more aligned with what I, what really matters to me, and also having more pleasure at the same time, so.....Like it’s kind of...it’s been the result of seeing things more clearly and kind of being confronted by that and not turning away from it, and you’re like, OK what does that actually mean? If, if these things are important and I’m not doing these things...then Oh, I need to do more of those things, and then you do more of those things and it’s like*

*Oh this is great. But It's like I don't take it personally, that I was like doing something wrong, or, it's like there's less judgment."*

The use of the term 'transformed' spoke of the power that MP had in realising values and providing strength to make appropriate changes. Increases in meaning, love, and pleasure were all attributed to the meaning that MP had fostered. The acceptance resulting from non-judgment appeared essential in creating this space for growth without developing negativity and rumination.

Behaving in a genuine manner congruent with values resulted in positive experiences which reinforced the development of a genuine self. P5's discussion below presented a number of positive terms - 'satisfying', 'enjoyable', 'peace' - describing the effect of living genuinely with the full presence that MP cultivates:

*"Satisfying, and enjoyable, and um... yeah and I guess you can sort of feel more at peace with um, yourself around what you are choosing to do, if you are actually experiencing it, rather than just doing it."*

Meaning and significance was directly attributed to adhering to realised values *"Um...yeah I guess it's [meaning] about kind of, you know, living life by your values and your beliefs and that's what's important.."* When non-judgment was applied to the realisation and adherence of values, individuals were able to readily accept changes within themselves. This process of self-correction supported the term 'discernment' presented earlier by P7, while acceptance is touted as a by-product of non-judgment, these passages support the notion that while states and actions may be accepted initially, they may not be accepted indefinitely. If there are aspects of these experiences which are not positive, change will occur to diminish negativity. It is the acceptance that events have occurred in response to a situation, rather than absolute unconditional acceptance.

Non-judgment removed internal defences and layers, individuals faced honest feelings and honest experiences which helped them learn and understand themselves better; who they truly could be, and what they stood for. This provided strength to be genuine, strength learned through facing up to difficult experiences

honestly without fear of judgment. P2 expressed multiple attempts over the years to cover up internal states and present different selves over time:

*“Yeah, well it’s [mindfulness] also allowed me to, to um, to sit with experiences, and strong feelings and...um, kind of personal history type things, in a way that allowed me then to kind of, peel away layers, that um, that were very tightly bound up.”*

The discussion indicated the power of facing difficult experiences, the term ‘tightly bound’ implied a strength gained that could allow genuine being to break through strongly ingrained non-genuine behaviours.

In summary authenticity was prized by all participants and contributed to meaning as it was purposeful to be genuine, and individuals felt that it enhanced the quality of their engagement and connection both intra and inter-personally. Presenting oneself genuinely allowed for opportunity to receive genuine positive feedback about their authentic selves. Genuine being was achieved through awareness and acceptance of an authentic self. Awareness preceded the development of congruence between values and actions, while non-judgment promoted acceptance of all facets of genuine being. This allowed for individuals to behave in a genuine manner and to allow others to behave genuinely, strengthening connectivity. Meaning was derived from behaving in a genuine manner and engaging in genuine connections with others.

#### 3.3.3.3.Theme – Connection and the evolution of spirituality through mindfulness practice.

*“I: So it’s not necessarily that you were looking for something spiritual.*

*P2: No.*

*I: It’s just happened along the way.*

*P2: Yeah, it did”*

Enhanced spirituality led directly from enhanced connectivity, while presenting as its own pathway to meaning, 'Connection and Spirituality' also led to meaning via a reciprocal and evolving relationship with the 'Connection with Others' theme (see Figure 3.1). When queried whether MP had enhanced feelings of spirituality the majority of participants acknowledged a shift in perception with regard to their spiritual understandings, without adhering to a religious framework or belief system. In discussing spirituality, the majority of participants referred to a theme of connectivity and energy that resides within all things and eluded to something greater than the individual self. P3 directly equated the term 'spiritual' with enhanced connectedness *"The definition of spiritual for me means more ah...a feeling of connectedness. To myself...and to others, and a feeling of acceptance."* The term spiritual was not used in a religious manner, rather representing a realisation that everything was interdependent and all things effected change within the network of existence:

*"And also knowing that everybody is connected in what, some way, shape or form, to, to pretty much everything else. There has to be this symphony of, um....happenings in order to create anything that is around. So that now we're getting sort of into, and this would, now we're getting into that, that nothing exists independent of anything else..."*

Direct references to an awareness of energy by half of the participants reinforced this concept of connection to something outside of the self. MP made participants more aware of this which fuelled a realisation that individuals were all part of the same, that there was an energy within all things, and that existence itself as part of this greater network was a spiritual experience. P1 explained:

*"P1: I felt this light..."*

*I: Yep. Like an energy type of...?"*

*P1: Energy, yeah, energy."*

P2 described it as follows:

*“And that plants, and trees, and animals are...are, that they exist is a spiritual thing to me, because it’s all part of creation and it’s all sort of imbued...something that’s a spirit, alive, or energy, or whatever.”*

This concept was reiterated by P6:

*“There’s kind of like a flow of energy as well, and you can feel that with other people, you can feel it when you walk into a room, and....it’s like if someone’s just had an argument you can, you can tell.”*

Connectivity again was a strong and broad recurring theme indicating that spirituality and connectivity were closely related, P1 explained:

*“I do find them interesting [concept of gods] but um, for me it’s like I um, I definitely feel a connection, and I guess a way...to describe it, is...um, so during Yoga when you actually do focus on your breathing...And you’re connecting...with yourself, and I guess in Yoga terms, they do, they talk about connecting to, like a supreme self, which you could interpret as...um, just the world, like the world and life, some people might interpret that as being a God...Or Gods, um, you know, and...it’s all about, the, I think it’s all about connectivity, it’s about being part of something.”*

This reference to something greater than the individual self, appeared as an awareness that individuals were merely a small part of something bigger. Indicative of a realisation of our place in the world as a part of a greater network, part of a greater whole which we could influence and effect positive change demonstrated by P5 as follows. When queried regarding feelings of spirituality P5 did not feel the term ‘spiritual’ was suitable instead directly acknowledging that mindfulness enhanced their meaning and purpose:

*“...um...yep...I don’t know if I’d use the word spiritual but just...probably I would use the word meaning and purpose actually. And that I know that it wasn’t on the forms but I’m actually an occupational therapist,*

*and my whole being is about meaning and purpose and activity. And, you know, we use those words...you know...a lot...um...meaningful and what-have-you, so I'd probably use those words more than spiritual."*

The term 'purposeful' is synonymous with intention, 'meaning, purpose and activity' indicating a conscious choice to spend time on things with purpose. Although not verbalising it explicitly we can see connection adds fulfilment to the life of P5. As an occupational therapist P5's meaning and purpose came from engaging positively in the lives of others, positively contributing to the network. P5 had found their purpose, had found fulfilment seemingly within themselves but ultimately through contributing positively to the greater network of being.

P2 spoke of the development of their spirituality through mindfulness with great depth, directly referencing Shapiro's (2006) IAA model the mechanism of mindfulness. For P2 the delivery of mindfulness from a Buddhist perspective was happenstance, spirituality was not a goal rather mindfulness was sought out in a time of stress:

*"I, I mean, for me it like, my journey of mindfulness and through mindfulness followed what um, um, Shauna Shapiro wrote about in 2006 I think it was, I don't know if you know that article about mechanisms of mindfulness, and she identified the All kind of model, Attention, Intention, ah, A...Intention, Attention, IAA, and Attitude model. And in that article she wrote about how many people start off by wanting some kind of stress management approach...managing your life, and then they, they realise as they go deeper into it that it becomes like a personal development process as well, where you start to, you know, emotions come up, and memories come up, and unresolved stuff comes up and so...and then as they keep on going with that it becomes bigger still and it becomes like a spiritual experience, and the, the, that's how it's been for me as well...been a kind of a combination of personal growth and development and spiritual...understanding, awakening."*

Key elements of Buddhist understanding resonated with P2 such as non-identification of thoughts, but P2 was ultimately unable to subscribe to the concept of these understandings as a religion which must be adhered to in specific ways. The term 'spiritual' was not used by P2 in a religious manner, rather its use appeared to transcend the material and referred to the reverence and celebration of the network of existence:

*"Yeah, yeah, definitely, I mean, like I said earlier for me, I came in to it not knowing what I was getting in to, and it turned out it was like a Buddhist perspective, and so that, I really resonated with that, I still draw on that a lot, but I haven't continued going to the centre, because it became...too much of a religion, that I wasn't interested in. There were certain expectations about certain behaviours, and certain paths that you needed to follow and all that kind of stuff, and I wasn't interested in that, but some of what, how they explained the mind, and how they explained, you know if I'm not my thoughts, then what am I...That to me is a, has been really helpful. And to me it's, that's a kind of spiritual realm...however...I've kind of moved along from that as well in that I think everything is spiritual [laughs] you know I mean, the fact that my body is alive, is a spiritual thing to me. And that plants, and trees, and animals are...are, that they exist is a spiritual thing to me, because it's all part of creation and it's all sort of imbued...something that's a spirit, alive, or energy, or whatever."*

MP at times allowed P2 to transcend the material and experience something greater than the individual self - a different dimension:

*"And also you know, if you do have a very still practice, which happens occasionally, or an experi-, if I experience that, to me it feels like that's a different dimension, than everyday...and it feels spiritual, yeah."*

This indicates that MP allowed P2 to broaden their perspective and achieve a deeper engagement within themselves and their surroundings.

An open-minded approach toward things greater than the self was cultivated through the mindfulness practice P6 engaged in:

*“Like, the idea that we are not separate from, the rest of, nature and, and the universe. Um, and that it doesn't end at the kind of edge of our skin. Um, the self and so it's like there's, there's a kind of, um, like fixed sense of self that is like, I view it more as like a habit of mind...and then once you get under that habit of mind you sorta see that it's not separate from...well this being is not separate from the rest of...all that there is.”*

The above themes of connection, nonseparation and a belief that feeling separate was a learned ‘habit of mind’, implied this feeling of separation was not an individual's natural state. Being non-judgmental and open-minded appeared to allow participants to accept and entertain alternative perspectives, allowing them to be more open to unfamiliar concepts. For example, a heightened interest and awareness of many different spiritual understandings as a result of MP was acknowledged by P6:

*“Yeah, I think yeah definitely um, like I wasn't...religious going into it and I'm still, I still wouldn't classify myself as religious in terms of an organised religion um, but, it has opened me up to...I guess, I've got some knowledge of different religions...Especially Christianity and Buddhism. Um, and then indigenous cultures as well, and it's kind of like the truths that are within those seem more....like they make more sense.”*

The term ‘make more sense’ indicating the removal of barriers to acceptance and acquisition of knowledge and broadened perspectives.

The openness, awareness, curiosity, and exploration that mindfulness fostered in P6 led to the development of a perspective that purpose came from outside of the self, that being receptive and aware enabled individuals to discover and enact their purpose if they were willing to see it. Access to concepts previously inaccessible prior to engaging in MP as indicated by use of the term ‘unlocked’, P6 explained:

*“Mindfulness has kind of unlocked an exploration into different spiritual understandings of the world and things like that. And so, yeah I’ve got a sense of, there was something that I was put here to do, and that there’s different signs in the universe that will point me towards that, and I’ve just got to pay attention to the signs...and, um...um, and that will provide meaning for me, and a sense of trust that I’m gonna like doing the stuff that’s there, even if it’s hard.”*

This concept and the term ‘consciousness’ - a personification applied to the universe - referenced the notion of something greater than the individual self which mindfulness had helped P6 access:

*“Like there’s a consciousness to the universe, that, creates order in the chaos, um, even amongst all the suffering and things like that, um, and that kind of runs counter to the story of the world that our society’s...based on. Which is more like, scientific and materialist, where kind of, nothing kind of has any inherent meaning, other than that we create for ourselves.”*

The comparison presented in this passage again provided reference to a realisation that everything has meaning and purpose, which are greater than an individual.

Like P1, P2, and P6, P7 also directly acknowledged that engaging in MP provided awareness of something greater than the individual self. MP was also attributed to allowing P7 to access a more genuine self - ‘just being’, and to the development of spiritual traits including compassion, love, acceptance, and empathy as a result of a non-judgmental state applied to both the self and others resulting in enhanced intra and interpersonal connections:

*“I’d say, it [mindfulness] gives you, it gives you a sense of there’s something else...definitely, something deeper and bigger at play, um...a, and...yeah, just that groundedness in life itself, you know, just being. So, and experiencing the play, of you know, what the Hindus call Lila you know, it’s just this divine play, and, and process, and you get to be*

*involved in it, so there's something magical about that, you know.....Then the more in touch you get with that part of your being you know, I think, so then, I think, that, could be termed being spiritual, or being more alive, or you know...and you become more compassionate, you become more loving, more accepting so all those sort of spiritual traits that happen through mindfulness, because you're letting go of judgment you know you're letting go of identification with all the shit that goes on, um, you drop that within yourself and you start to, you know, you can't carry those judgments onto other people, you know..."*

This passage directly referenced the mechanisms of deepening awareness of and connection to life as it unfolds, how this connection in combination with non-judgment result in positive intra and interpersonal interactions, greater understanding and deepening spirituality as a direct result of MP:

*"So you become more empathetic and compassionate to people, just purely through that process, so...yeah I guess if that's your definition of spiritual then it's, you know, it's, it's a natural occurrence of the deepening of mindfulness for sure."*

The mention of these traits which are related to positive personal interactions lend support to the concept that connections enhance spiritual being, and were a mechanism which enhanced meaning in individuals' lives.

In summary, enhanced spirituality through awareness cultivated by MP allowed participants to realise the connectivity between all things in the universe. At times surpassing the known physical realm and acknowledging a greater network of interdependent existence, a connection that resonated through all things. This nonseparation enhanced meaning as participants gained personal understanding of their place and effect within this network of existence and how they could contribute to it in a positive manner. Meaning was derived from being part of this larger network of being and contributing to this positively.

#### *3.3.3.4. Theme - Positive perceptual shift: A new way of connecting*

*P1: "it [mindfulness] just betters everything in life."*

*"I think it just helps with everything to be honest."*

The greater awareness and non-judgment resulting from MP, created overall enhanced connections which developed a positive perceptual shift in individuals, which contributed positively to meaning making (see Figure 3.1). Throughout discussions a general thread indicating a positive perceptual shift among participants appeared. For example, negative adjectives were used when describing life without regular MP such as 'disorganised, crazy, messy', compared with positive adjective use when describing aspects of life while engaging in regular MP such as 'relaxed', 'calm', 'ease', highlighting a contrast in how their lives were currently perceived. P1 explained *"It helps me be calm. It helps me study and focus better...work better, it helps me be a better parent"*, providing a direct contrast as follows *"And if I don't, I feel disorganised, and crazy and messy."* These adjectives relate to P1's increased feelings of control within themselves, a stability which improved important aspects of the self: the parent, the student, the employee.

The domains mentioned indicated that P1 placed value on their ability to contribute and interact positively within their home and society. The term 'Better' was often used by P1, terms such as 'helps with everything', 'everything is enhanced' imply the far-reaching benefits perceived by this participant as follows *"I think ultimately practising mindfulness...does make everything better. I think it just makes you more aware."* If 'everything' is better, this points to a change in perception, a shift within the individual as MP could not affect everything outside of the person, rather it influences the ways individuals process their experiences in a more positive manner. This shift demonstrated the development of appreciation, greater acceptance, and happiness with what they had. In this passage P1 equated enhanced awareness to overall positive improvements in their life, mirroring a mechanism of understanding and knowledge put forth by P7.

P7 spoke of perceptual enhancements as a result of MP, again a contrast to a time before MP *"it's improved, my experience of reality and my, and everything*

*that's, you know, pertains to that.*" The term 'everything' referencing the widely applicable positive effects MP has had on the individual. P7 referenced understanding as a mechanism for this perceptual shift *"it just makes life better on every level, like cause you understand the cause and effect."* P7 mentioned cause and effect on numerous occasions, awareness of cause and effect informing a deeper understanding of the relationships and connections between all things as they explained further:

*"As you, as you stop merging with thought back into more presence then, you know...you just become healthier. D'you know? It's just, it's just a natural occurrence because the cause and effect, you'll start to see what's unhealthy in your life, relationships, food, the way you move, you know...um, and the way you interact with reality."*

The term 'healthier' contrasting to a time before the awareness cultivated through MP informed behaviour. This passage also demonstrated the breadth of perceptual influence and positive change in P7's life, both internal and external interactions, covering physical and mental domains. This contrast and reference to a perceptual change influenced by MP was also discussed by P2 *"...well when I'm connected with it [being mindful], which isn't always, because I get caught up with stuff, um, it allows me to live with greater ease."* P2 continued, directly referencing the shift in perception that MP can provide *"I'm able to...take a much more open and relaxed, and easeful, um, attitude really or perspective."* This passage strongly presented the effects MP had on internal processes and the effect they can have on behaviour, these concepts again presented with multiple positive adjectives in contrast to non-mindful times.

That these participant discussions on the positive benefits of MP encompassed internal, external, physical, mental, behavioural and perceptual domains, supported the development of a positive perceptual shift caused by MP. The positive effects were so pervasive it indicated a perceptual change in the individuals, that they had developed a more realistic and positive framework to connect with and interpret experiences. Participants referenced a decrease in negative experiences and increases in positive experiences, it is possible that this

perceptual change caused by MP resulted in a positive schema shift resulting in an increase in positive affect. A shift caused by the reduction of negative filters and interpretations, achieved through awareness and higher metacognitive thinking. Therefore, for some individuals, MP may contribute to meaning in life via an increase in positive affect, due to more realistic and less negative interpretations of events.

#### *3.4. A Note on Finalisation of Themes*

Not all initial codewords translated into their own paths to meaning. Presence was subsumed under aspects of the awareness and connectivity themes. Presence alone did not appear to inform meaning, rather presence translated into the enhanced connection participants brought to their experiences, where meaning was derived from the perceived value of the experience e.g. the value of belonging, contributing, and authenticity (see Figure 3.1). There was no doubt that presence was essential for enhanced connection, however without the constructs individuals were perceiving their experiences through there was no meaning.

Positive benefits of MP were also noted during initial coding. Again though, these positive benefits as such did not inform meaning, rather it was realised that the participants' acknowledgement of the wide array of positive benefits could be translated as a positive perceptual shift. Again this related to perception, as participants presented interpretations and perceptions of their experience with MP. The positive perceptual shift was seen to inform meaning through an enhancement in the engagement with experiences and the subsequent value that was attributed to them.

The concept of making the most of life was presented directly by half of the participants, referenced by P1 *"I think it's just about making the most of what you've got"*, P3 *"time is a commodity and you don't get more of and you don't get less of and you don't know how much is left"* and P6 *"this kind of, one life that I had, I didn't want to, waste that."* Here each of these participants had referenced the realisation that life is finite, coupled with a choice to use that finite time well.

Initially it was considered a possible motivator for engaging in meaningful activities in its own right, however after consideration it was interpreted to be part of the overall perceptual change participants experienced through MP. Without explicitly stating in direct terms as in the above examples, other indirect examples of this concept could be found in participant discussions regarding positive contribution – having a positive impact- and the development of authenticity – being the most genuine version of oneself.

### *3.5 A Brief Exploration into Negative Effects of Mindfulness Practice*

In order to gain a well-rounded snapshot of the participants' experiences with MP, they were directly asked about whether they had experienced any negative effects or experiences when practising mindfulness. Rather than 'negative', participants spoke in terms of challenges and difficulties, such as the issue of self-identification, difficulties reigning in the wandering mind, and having to face difficult internal experiences.

Reigning in the wandering mind or feeling pressure to maintain focus was highlighted as a difficulty by numerous participants. P1 referencing the difficulty of letting go of thoughts and giving oneself permission to step back from the constant pressure they produce:

*"I was like 'Ah, I've gotta make the coffee and do the IRD and' [joint laughter] and I was like chill, I've gotta take this 20 minutes for myself and it is hard to do sometimes."*

This acknowledgment of difficulty is balanced by P1's insistence that overall MP was positive *"And it becomes a positive thing. So I think I personally haven't experienced anything negative, I think it's all good."* This passage highlighted the sense of reward that the participant gained from pushing through the difficulty of focusing the wandering mind. A difficulty referenced again and again by participants, not just the difficulty of the task itself but the associated expectations that individuals placed on themselves for mastering this task as explained by P3:

*“Um...the reality of practising is...I think...I think if you hold that definition as your expectation for practice, then reality gets pretty tricky because, you, when you're sitting that's not actually what happens.”*

An understanding from participants regarding the constant fluid nature of the mind was presented. A perspective that our mind, so evolved, needs to be trained in order for us to fully experience and benefit from all that it is capable of. P7 presented the effort required to overcome the struggle:

*“it doesn't come easily, in my experience you have to work incredibly hard to maintain that because the nature of the mind, the mind's always looking for the easiest options, the lowest common denominator, you know.”*

P5 summed up both the struggle and the benefit of facing the challenge as follows:

*“Sometimes when um, my mindfulness is, is as much of being aware that I'm not being mindful...I will often say to people, you know, like well the mind and the brain was invented for thinking about all sorts of things and that's what it does. That's what it does well [joint laughter] It's doing its job [laughs] and it's our job to, um, you know, make sure that it's focusing on what we choose for it to focus on and that it's working for us.”*

It is a struggle that we must own in order to reap the benefits, represented by the terms ‘our/we/us’. Here a perspective of a naturally busy mind was presented, that a still, calm and focussed mind was not an easy state to attain.

In discussing negative experiences, P6 preferred the term ‘difficult’ and accepted that these experiences were a necessary and natural part of MP. P6 explained:

*“Like there's, there's been difficult experiences, and I, and I s'pose...not, maybe not directly, as part of the mindfulness practice, although part of it is sitting with difficulty and that's fine...but more like...it's ah, revealed to me, I feel like It's revealed to me like a, a different way of orienting to life & reality, of like, if I'm not a self, then who am I? And then that's quite confronting and challenging.”*

P6 directly referenced the challenge of confronting these thoughts within a secular framework of MP, and the need to explore outside of this realm in order to address these thoughts and feelings:

*"I guess in the programme that I've come from, that I've learnt it from, it's um, it's a pretty secular practice it doesn't talk about spirituality at all... it's, taken a lot of exploration kind of outside of just mindfulness practice. Yeah, gone and sought out different um, spiritual texts and books and authors and, so, yeah just people in the community that are more...on that path."*

This search referencing a lack of understanding and knowledge within the Western secular delivery of MP, indicates the need for further guidance on the MP journey.

P2 acknowledged that guidance can be necessary as MP can bring to the fore previously unattended emotions and thoughts, stating that the journey of self-exploration through MP was not always a positive journey. However, their perception of this experience was one of necessity for growth, realising that in order to experience the rewards that MP can offer, one must face and conquer the pre-existing struggles within. P2 explained:

*"Yeah it's an interesting question, I mean there's been kind of, a lot more written about that, you know, the dark side of mindfulness and all that. To me it's not the dark side of mindfulness at all, it's about mindfulness allows the dark side of us to come to the fore."*

Again, MP was presented not as a panacea, but as an opportunity for growth with the need for guidance when these difficult experiences arise:

*"You know you're sitting with yourself, some pretty big stuff can come up and if there is, if there's not somebody who knows how to respond to that, or how to help you through that, then that can be pretty dangerous actually."*

P3 also echoed this theme of negativity arising from within the self, an experience as a by-product of the processes of MP rather than a negative aspect of MP itself *"there is discomfort and you do rub up against things about...I know I've definitely*

*rubbed up against things about myself that I'm not particularly enamoured with."*

Like P2, P3 reiterated the importance of guidance when required, accepting that without this guidance certain internal experiences could be construed as negative *"And go to my supervisor for clarification, and um, I think I feel like if, those could be really negative experiences if I didn't have the support of a teacher."* These comments were all indicative of the process and journey that individuals take through MP, a journey that at times required a knowledgeable guide to aid in understanding.

Overall participants acknowledged that MP was a process and that difficulties may be faced along the way as they learned to confront and accept aspects and experiences within themselves which at times caused discomfort. This point was key, MP itself was not construed as negative, rather within individuals there may lie aspects of the self that may prove confronting. The power of these experiences was also acknowledged with the acceptance that at times individuals may not hold of the resources required to deal with these experiences within themselves. Highlighting the importance of experienced supervisors and/or mentors to guide individuals through these experiences in a positive manner. This point would be of particular importance with individuals who may have experienced trauma or may be experiencing clinical mental distress.

## Chapter 4: Discussion

In this study the relationship between MP and meaning making processes was investigated in secular individuals. The purpose of this investigation was to uncover common themes and mechanisms across individuals regarding how MP added to the meaning individuals found in their everyday lives. Research into the literature presented numerous theories of how MP influenced meaning, such as MP enhancing reappraisal skills, increasing acceptance, improving relationships, cultivating awareness and congruency, and directly enhancing individual spirituality. Before beginning MP, participants of the current study were generally open and curious regarding MP and what it could offer and were seeking to utilise MP as a tool to alleviate the stress of Western life. None of the participants specifically entered into MP with a view to enhance meaning in life or feelings of spirituality, yet all indicated that MP enhanced their meaning making processes, with the majority of participants acknowledging an expansion of spiritual understanding due to MP. This indicated that within this cohort enhanced meaning and spirituality were a by-product of some fundamental mechanism/s of MP, regardless of original intent and/or method of MP.

Despite an open invitation to participate in the current study, all participants had a pre-existing interest in helping/improving the lives of others as indicated by their professions in health, fitness, and mental health. As such the results of this study could be limited to individuals with an 'other-oriented' disposition, the sources of meaning indicated below may not be valid for individuals with a more 'self-oriented' focus. Throughout participant discussions to varying degrees there was evidence of a dissatisfaction with Western Culture (WC), raising the question whether individuals entirely satisfied with WC would experience the same influence on their meaning in life and spiritual understandings as those in the current study. However perhaps the current study has highlighted general well-being aspects lacking in WC, aspects that MP with its origins in Eastern culture could inform.

Notwithstanding these caveats support was found for several aspects of the theories of MP and meaning posited by research as discussed previously. This study found three main themes influencing meaning present across all individuals, these

included a non-judgmental attitude, awareness, and enhanced connection (see Figure 3.1). 'Enhanced Connection' was a broad and pervasive overarching theme encompassing greater connection with others, the self – authenticity - positive perceptual changes, and spiritual connection. The themes 'Connection and Spirituality' was reciprocally linked with 'Connection with Others', as individuals recognised the connectivity of all things and enhanced interpersonal interactions in turn enhanced the feeling of connectedness which informed spirituality. A similar reciprocal relationship was found between 'Connection with Others' and the development of 'Authenticity'. As individuals developed their own authenticity they interacted with others in a more genuine manner providing a space for others to act genuinely, both validating their own sense of self and improving interpersonal connections. These themes mirror closely the findings from previous research lending support to their involvement in meaning making processes . For example, the theme 'Connection with Others' as a path to meaning is similar to findings of Chisman and Brooks (2018), Lambert et al. (2013) and Siegel (2009), with meaning found through relationships and a sense of belonging. The 'Positive Perceptual Shift' theme as a path to meaning is similar to the findings of Garland et al. (2015) and Pagnini and Langer (2015), where reappraisal of situations was posited as a significant path to meaning. 'Authenticity' as a theme supports findings of Allan et al. (2016), Christie et al. (2017), and Warren et al. (2017), where increased meaning was linked to greater consistency between an individual's values and actions. 'Spirituality' as a path to meaning through the realisation of connectivity and the reciprocal relationship it held with 'Connection to Others' supports suggestions by Kristeller and Jordan (2018) that unity, connection, altruism and prosocial actions contribute to the development of inner meaning.

The role of acceptance as previously discussed however appeared to be more complex, participants spoke of not only acceptance but also the development of discernment, and change, indicating improved metacognition and evaluative capabilities. Burzler et al. (2018) spoke of acceptance of emotions being an essential aspect of the positive effects of MP. While this was referenced and the term acceptance was often presented by participants, it was not always used in a

manner meaning approval, rather a non-judgmental recognition. Recognising the relevance and occurrence of emotions, thoughts and behaviours without disapproval, but also applying discernment and realising when efforts should be made to enact change where appropriate was evident. Acceptance was often presented with non-judgment; this concept is discussed in more detail below.

Non-judgment first cultivated toward the self, led to openness, flexibility, curiosity, and acceptance toward thoughts and behaviours. These skills cultivated 'Enhanced Connection' an overarching concept which had wide-reaching effects on how individuals conducted themselves in their daily lives. This 'Enhanced Connection' allowed for greater 'Connection with Others' (see Figure 3.1), as participants became more accepting and compassionate toward others after learning to apply these skills to themselves. When combined these skills appeared representative of higher-level critical thinking, in the sense of careful, rational evaluation. More than mere acceptance, MP appeared to develop the acknowledgement of aspects of the self, others, and situations, combined with higher level metacognition - thinking about thought processes. This was demonstrated by the likelihood to question the origin of thoughts and feelings, and an openness to a greater number of explanations.

Though the term acceptance was often presented there is a difference between non-judgment and acceptance, and there is a difference between accepting that something has presented and acceptance that it will remain irrevocable. All-inclusive acceptance of behaviours and situations could have negative consequences for individuals, for example they may stay with violent partners. Individuals need to feel discomfort in order to effect change, they also need to have the cognitive resources to enact effective change within themselves and their environment. It appeared that non-judgment developed through MP, fostered both deeper awareness and critical metacognition. These findings lend support to the reappraisal aspect of Garland et al.'s (2015) Mindfulness to Meaning Theory (MMT). MMT posited that reappraisal was an essential element of both the MP to meaning process, and self-transformation. Critical thinking is an essential element of reappraisal where individuals are required to rethink their perceptions,

appraisals and options. Participants in the current study directly referenced the development of newfound curiosity through MP and the act of rethinking past beliefs and long held assumptions. Su and Shum (2019) found it was the perceptual shift created by MP which mediated the influence of metacognition on cognitive distress via metacognitive regulation – how we control our thoughts - positing that metacognition alone without regulation was not sufficient.

Participants mentioned on numerous occasions a shift in perception created by MP represented by the 'Positive Perceptual Shift' theme (see Figure 3.1), and that they felt calmer and more in control of their thoughts, emotions and themselves with MP in their lives. This appeared suggestive of the development and application of metacognitive regulation, the way in which individuals monitor their own thought processes and their outcomes. This metacognition, monitoring and knowledge-based evaluation of experiences is what this author proposes to be seen as acceptance by the participants of the current study. The ability to explain and understand an action, a thought, or a feeling, a new way of relating and connecting to the world. This process removed fear and negative connotations attached to the event, leaving in its place an acknowledgement of its meaning and purpose. This critical metacognition as a mechanism produced by 'Awareness' and 'Non-judgment' resulted in the removal of perceptual layers and the development of a 'Positive Perceptual Shift' (see Figure 3.1). This allowed for more meaning to be derived from experiences as individuals were able to engage with and understand them with more depth and engage with experiences in an honest and meaningful manner. As such the author suggests that it is the wider concept of a positive perceptual shift encompassing critical metacognition, which provides a path to meaning rather than acceptance.

This positivity was evident in the language participants chose to express the perceived difference in their lives and although it was not articulated as positive affect, it certainly appeared to have a positive effect on the participants. Garland et al. (2015) found mindfulness training does indeed increase both momentary positive cognition and trait positive affect; research by King et al. (2006) found that positive affect was both a strong and consistent predictor for meaning in life, and

that positive affect may predispose individuals to feel more meaning in life and realise meaning-relevance of situations. It is suggested that MP influences meaning through a 'Positive Perceptual Shift' resulting in an increase in positive experiences contributing to the reward and meaning individuals receive from engagement in activities. The current study however can only suggest correlation, rather than a definitive causal link. Rather than a positive perceptual frame per se, it may be that MP cultivates less negative and more realistic schemas through which to interpret experiences as a result of the development of critical metacognition.

Participants also suggested a mechanism where reappraisal allowed for appreciation and savouring through this honest engagement with experiences, supporting the savouring hypothesis component of MMT. Individuals referenced how MP enabled full engagement and presence with more experiences, with participants stating MP improved abilities to notice and appreciate. The current study indicated a complex process surrounding mindfulness and awareness. Participants acknowledged that awareness contributed to congruence represented by the 'Authenticity' theme (see Figure 3.1), they also indicated that awareness deepened through MP, leading to more presence and engagement in everyday activities. Meaning was found through presence as individuals experienced full engagement with their activities, surroundings, and peers. These findings support 'Awareness' as a path to meaning in its own right while acknowledging the influential role it has on additional paths to meaning.

Like awareness, 'Non-judgment' also appeared to influence the development of 'Authenticity' (see Figure 3.1), the permission to acknowledge all parts of the self, lose facades, and act in a genuine manner. This supported findings from Chen and Murphy (2019) who found that authenticity was a mediator of MP and positive psychological well-being. Their research indicated that individuals higher in dispositional mindfulness, were higher in feelings of authenticity and that these feelings of authenticity contributed to positive psychological wellbeing. In the current study participants eluded to a process more than mere acceptance of the self, many referencing realisations that a change was required to align with internal values. The critical thinking non-judgment cultivated, with the resulting reference

to change appeared in line with the concept of self-affirmation theory. Self-affirmation Theory (SAT) posits that dissonance is experienced when we perceive information which threatens an image of the self as moral and good, that steps are then taken to invoke change which will reduce feelings of dissonance while restoring feelings of self-integrity (Aronson, Cohen, & Nail, 1999). These findings also support the work of Allan, Bott and Suh (2016) that MP influenced authenticity and authenticity added to meaning in life.

Awareness led to discernment and metacognitive regulation, allowing for recognition of dissonance rather than total unconditional acceptance of the self. At times this led to change where required, to cultivate congruency and authenticity within the self. That participants of the current study felt growth in the areas of awareness and authenticity after MP also lends support to the findings of both Warren et al. (2017) and Christie et al. (2017). Participants discussed how MP led to value-behaviour-concordance (VBC) as discussed by Warren et al. (2017), directly attributing VBC to the awareness MP cultivated, making values and feelings of dissonance clearer to the self. Numerous participants spoke of layers being discarded, indicating a clearer more accessible route to their true values lending support to the concept of easier access to thoughts and emotions. However, the suggestion of salience of values as suggested by Warren et al. (2017) is not clear from the findings of the current study and is indicated as an area for further research. Christie et al. (2017) suggested that MP allowed for greater recognition of opportunities to engage in meaningful behaviour, the removal of perceptual layers that the participants in the current study spoke of combined with the enhancement of VBC appeared supportive of this concept. Participants were able to perceive with greater clarity to engage in more meaningful and satisfying activities. The current study found that individuals were able to derive more meaning from engaging in behaviours and activities which added to self-congruency through this process of MP invoking flexibility and change.

The cultivation of fluidity and flexibility within the self through MP resulted in instances of positive change but also raised questions, such as how fluid can an individual become? Could excessive fluidity result in the loss of a self? While it is

not ideal to have a rigid perception of the self, is it possible to lose perception of the self as an entity entirely? And what effect would that have on an individual? These questions were briefly referenced by some of the participants in their discussions of non-identification, with some participants discussing the difficulty of letting go of long held patterns of identifying with thoughts and emotions, which raised questions around self-definition. The discussions supported some of the findings of Cebolla et al. (2017) including unwanted effects of mindfulness such as 'depersonalisation' and 'derealisation', and Lomas et al. (2017) specifically 'difficulties', 'troubling experiences of the self', and 'reality being challenged'. There was no specific reference to the additional unwanted effects uncovered by Cebolla et al. such as anxiety, emotional lability, dizziness, or loss of consciousness. However, participants did discuss the difficulty of maintaining focus, non-judgment, and personal expectations, which is where Cebolla's research suggested anxiety originated. Though participants in the current study did not reference anxiety as such, it highlighted a common element of struggle in MP and demonstrated the differing encounters and results people can experience.

Participants in the current study had found ways to resolve their particular difficulties, whether through MP aspects such as persistence, acceptance, and confrontation of challenges, or through research and guidance, outside of the secular mindfulness framework. Guidance or supervision was presented by several participants, a point which should be considered when constructing delivery models of MP. Due to the varying degrees of negative effects from MP, it seems appropriate that long term continued support and guidance should be offered post programme delivery. As participants delved deeper into MP, they delved deeper into themselves, discarding old ways of knowing and relating to themselves, at times giving rise to significant issues and questions surrounding the self. This suggests that long term intervention follow-up in the form of formal guidance or supervision -particularly in the clinical field-, may be necessary for some individuals for them to successfully navigate the MP path.

The participant who learned MP through a Buddhist framework, experienced an understanding and ease around non-identification, referencing the

Buddhist concept of the 'Big Mind'. This understanding of connection, based on a belonging to one whole being quelled worries of a loss of individual identity, as this was replaced by an identity of belonging. Interestingly this sense of belonging and connection was enhanced in all participants, regardless of the lack of specific Buddhist teaching relating to this topic. The concept evolved organically among several participants through a realisation that nothing was separate. It could then be argued that specific teaching around this concept is not necessary, yet participants without this teaching referenced difficulty in contrast to the individual who found Buddhist teaching in this domain helpful. This provided some insight into the issues of decontextualization of MP from the Buddhist framework, as such it could be argued that secular MP is lacking in necessary understandings around this topic. This subject though raised, fell outside of the scope of the current research and is recommended as an area for future research. The concept of the 'Big Mind' raises interest, it is multifaceted, and specific components may contribute to different mechanisms of identity and purpose.

Connection aside, it could also be argued that losing part of an entrenched identity through non-identification with thoughts may be balanced by the enhancement of congruency within the self, identifying with '*how*' it feels right to be, rather than '*who*' the self should be. Overall the negative effects presented by participants in the current study were presented as transitory and manageable and had not prevented further engagement with MP. We cannot generalise these findings to all populations however, as negative experiences will vary from person to person, some individuals may not have the resources -whether internal or external- available to process these difficulties in a positive manner. It must also be acknowledged that individuals who had experienced severe negative effects of MP would be unlikely to continue practising or volunteer to participate in research of this manner. However, this does show us that negative effects are present, even among proponents of MP and that with the appropriate knowledge and resources individuals can work through difficulties, often with positive benefits of growth, new understandings and resilience.

Participants in their reference to a shift in perception, also acknowledged that through 'Awareness' they were able to realise and appreciate what was truly important to them. This often focussed on fostering connections with people or contributing to the social and physical environment in a positive manner, as represented by the theme 'Connection with others' and the subsequent subtheme 'Cycle of Positive Contribution' (see Figure 3.1). Self-awareness was also linked to positive connections with others as individuals became more aware of the effect they had on others and endeavoured to cultivate genuine connections. This interaction is indicated through the reciprocal relationship between the theme 'Authenticity' and 'Connection with Others' (see Figure 3.1). The strong subthemes of 'Belonging' and 'Co-creation of Meaning' which came through in the current study supported Lambert et al. (2013), that belonging was a strong predictor for meaningfulness. The cultivation of in-group mentality and meaning directly linked to others - particularly family – also supported findings by Lambert et al. (2010). Family was placed first as a source of meaning in Lambert et al. (2010) and was indicated as a high source of meaning in the current study. Emotive terms such as 'most meaningful' helped impart the impact of these relationships on current participants' meaningfulness.

Aspects of the findings of the current study also appeared in line with Siegel (2009), with participants stating that they became more aware of themselves, which influenced the way they interacted with others. They spoke of learning how to sit with their own emotions and thoughts, learning patience, flexibility, awareness, exploration and the shifting of perspectives – all aspects that Siegel (2009) touched on in discussing how MP cultivated self-attunement. Participants spoke of how the development of a more congruent and genuine self, allowed space for growth and genuineness in relationships. This also supported findings by Chisman and Brooks (2018) with participants directly referencing that MP enabled them to 'just be'. These finding indicated that MP had assisted participants in learning how to be their authentic selves, how to interact with themselves and to transfer these skills through to interpersonal interactions. These concepts reinforce

the reciprocal relationship represented between 'Authenticity' and 'Connection with Others' (see Figure 3.1).

These elements of fostering connection, positive interactions and positive influence on society and their environment were indicative of the development of benevolence and altruism through MP. This was presented via the subtheme 'Cycle of Positive Contribution' appearing under the broader theme of 'Connection with Others' (see Figure 3.1). Like MP, altruism has been linked to perceptual difference, specifically where altruistic individuals see other people not as strangers, but as fellow human beings, encouraging empathic behaviour towards others (Monroe, 1996). Monroe (2006) also discussed how altruistic individuals placed emphasis on connection and affinity with all other individuals, individuals in the current study also discussed the development of stronger connectivity with others through MP. Soosai-Nathan's (2015) research into altruism and wellbeing, found that high levels of perceived altruism were positively linked to higher feelings of meaning in life. These findings are similar to the findings of this study, in that awareness and focus on connection and positive contribution led to feelings of increased meaning in life however, research suggests the relationship is circular.

Stavrova and Luhmann (2016) in their research on the connection between social connectedness and meaning in life, found that higher levels of meaning in life related to more altruistic behaviours, such as membership in voluntary organisations. Their research suggested a bidirectional relationship between social connectedness and meaning in life. Higher levels of meaning in life correlated with higher likelihood to contribute to society, and was also found to make individuals appear more attractive, positively influencing social connectedness. Participants in the current study indicated that MP increased meaning in life through several pathways, including the enhancement of feelings of social connectedness. Through this increase in meaning in life, feelings of social connectedness - as represented through the 'Connection with Others' theme - and subsequent altruistic behaviours- as represented through the 'Cycle of Positive Contribution' theme (see Figure 3.1) both increased. Research by Xi et al. (2017) found that stronger belief in a common bond among people correlated with higher altruistic behaviour and

existential well-being. Altruistic behaviours aimed at a community level provided the most positive impact on existential well-being, participants in the current study indicated that both connection and altruistic behaviours added to meaning in life, supporting the bidirectional and circular nature of these constructs. All individuals in the current study had an inherent interest in the wellbeing of others, therefore it must be acknowledged that MP may have simply enhanced existing high and inherent altruistic characteristics within the current study's population. However, the findings of Stavrova and Luhmann (2016) indicated that increases in altruistic behaviours could be a generalised result of increases in meaning in life, regardless of initial levels of altruism.

Further research in this area could clarify whether this is indeed the case. Across a sample of 313 adults Cameron and Frederickson (2015) investigated two main facets of MP, attention and acceptance, to uncover their relationship with altruistic helping behaviour. They found that attention and acceptance were both independently linked to higher levels of helping behaviour, compared with individuals reporting lower levels of attention and acceptance. These findings demonstrate the multi-causal nature of both altruism and meaning in life, that there are multiple influences and pathways for these constructs. It is suggested that one mechanism for MP enhancing meaning in life is via attention and acceptance, nurturing connection which fosters altruism, this cultivates the 'Cycle of Positive Contribution'. This in turn adds to meaning in life through the engagement in activities which are both congruent with a genuine self and rewarding.

Namaste: "the sacred in me recognises the sacred in you" (Oxhandler, 2017), is a phrase which this author feels represents the spirituality developed by the participants of this study through MP. Participants gained understanding of the connectivity between all things, that all beings are of value, of the same, and how to accept and relate to themselves and others non-judgmentally. The literature spoke of spirituality in terms of self-transcendence. The ability to see past the self and comprehend the unity of all things. This theme is in agreement with spirituality as presented by participants in the current study, informed by 'Awareness' and 'Non-judgment' (see Figure 3.1), 'Connection and Spirituality' were intertwined

concepts presenting as a significant path to meaning in life. Participants presented a development of an understanding of connectedness, belonging and energy, which advanced through the awareness cultivated by MP. Support for the discussion by Garland et al. (2015) on self-transcendence as a result of reappraisals, could be indicated in the results of the current study. The 'awakenings' Garland spoke of mirror the dialogue of participants in the current study, presenting a realisation of the connectivity between all things, nonseparation, self-transcendence and a desire to contribute. Self-transcendence and unity as the pinnacle of MP was presented by Cloninger (2011), created by the development of maximum awareness through MP. The discussions presented in the current study support this development, as participants spoke of acceptance of the self, transferring these skills to interpersonal interactions, then developing feelings of belonging and connectivity through MP. The development of spirituality as a mechanism to meaning through MP, came through these realisations. Participants gained meaning through understanding this connectivity, their place in this interrelated network of existence and their ability to create positivity within this network.

The fact that the current research found support for aspects of several of the discussed theories, indicated that there are numerous paths from MP to enhanced meaning in life. While activation and improvement in one of these areas in itself may contribute to enhanced meaning, MP appeared to pull all of these facets together, providing development in all of these areas. It is suggested that MP contributed to meaning making processes through the following mechanisms:

- Acceptance of Others and the Self- Present in the themes 'Non-judgment', 'Authenticity' and 'Connection with Others' (see Figure 3.1). Development of critical metacognition through non-judgment and acceptance, allowing for greater understanding and engagement with all experiences.
- Cultivating a 'Positive Perceptual Shift' (see Figure 3.1) - A new way of connecting to every aspect of an individual's realm, leading to an ability to draw increased meaning out of experiences through an increase in positive experiences and associated greater reward.

- Realisation of Own Values – Stemming from greater ‘Awareness’ and part of overall ‘Enhanced Connection’, increased congruence and the development of a genuine self is represented through the ‘Authenticity’ theme (see Figure 3.1). Authenticity and greater awareness of others lead to increased altruism as evidenced in the ‘Cycle of Positive Contribution’ theme, a result of the reciprocal relationship authenticity has with ‘Connection with Others’. The development of authenticity and altruism leading to engagement in more meaningful and satisfying activities.
- Realisation of Connectivity - Cultivating an awareness of a connectivity between all things and the desire to contribute positively to this interconnected system as evidenced through the ‘Awareness’, ‘Connection and Spirituality’, and ‘Cycle of Positive Contribution’ themes (see Figure 3.1).

The impact of true presence allowed for appreciation and connection with current objects and moments, their value, and how they could enhance meaning. Individuals realised that participation in the present moment would cultivate the future, that every action had an impact. The majority of participants felt that both physical and interpersonal connections had been enhanced by MP. Many participants felt connections were more genuine, aided by clearer perceptions, presence and the permission to be genuine in themselves. Participants spoke of a mechanism where MP increased self-awareness, self-acceptance and provided a space for the development of genuine being. Genuine being then enhanced interpersonal interactions as the skills developed through MP in accepting the self were applied to others.

#### 4.1. Indications for Future Research

Future research indicated by the current study could investigate the development and influence of these mechanisms in other populations, particularly individuals not involved in ‘other-oriented’ sectors of employment. The current study indicated that increases in congruence, connectedness and meaning in life influenced greater altruistic behaviours. Would MP produce the same increases in meaning in life and altruistic tendencies in individuals with low inherent altruistic tendencies? The current study did not specifically ascertain whether participants

were of Māori descent, however three of the participants had overseas origins. Therefore, despite an open invitation, the current sample was not representative of Māori or Pacific culture. Future focus of research in this area should be conducted with Māori and/or Pacific participants to uncover mechanisms of MP and meaning within their collectivistic cultural framework, to ensure relevance of findings to the greater New Zealand and Pacific population.

A comparison could also be made between Buddhist understandings and influences on secular MP and the understandings of religious frameworks and their interpretations of the self and connectivity with others. With the majority of participants developing a realisation of connectedness between all things, some participants in the current study had sought out knowledge derived from Buddhism and Eastern philosophy to inform the developing understandings of themselves and their place in the world. Christianity has a focus on altruistic behaviours yet maintains an individualistic orientation that does not recognise an interrelated frame of existence to the same degree as Buddhist and Eastern cultures. How much would this difference in an understanding of connection differ the mechanism of influence of MP on meaning in life and altruistic behaviours in Christian individuals. Some insight into the issues of decontextualization of MP from the Buddhist framework was raised in the current study, therefore it could be argued that secular MP is lacking in necessary understandings around this topic. Further research into these effects and in particular the identity struggles resulting from non-identification with thoughts appears warranted. Questions to investigate include whether resolution of these struggles is via replacing a self-identity with a collective identity, or whether there are other mechanisms such as greater congruence within the self which resolve these issues.

#### 4.2. Strengths and Limitations of the Current Study

The current research was designed to allow participants' experiences of MP to be uncovered. Qualitative data is descriptive (Atieno, 2009), it is rich in information and is not limited by pre-set parameters, allowing for any and all points to come through. As reality is perceived, qualitative data attempts to uncover the

reality of the individual, rather than placing the reality of others onto the individual. As it was an individual's experience and perception which was being sought, qualitative data was appropriate. An individual's full experience with their own full description cannot be accessed via a simple survey or rating scale. There was a search for differences as much as similarities, yet similarities across the data were predominant. Interesting points that the current research raised were that individuals did not reference physical effects and experiences of MP. This was interesting because this has been a strong focus of the scientific community yet did not appear to be perceived and presented by the participants of the current study as particularly important. Rather the perceived effects on the mind, the perceived self, the way they related to their environment and others was presented during discussions.

Overall participants placed importance on their interaction with others, how MP had helped them develop as an individual and connect authentically with their environment. The journey of resolving issues of non-identification was another interesting discovery, with acknowledgement that MP does give rise to difficulties, some which secular delivery of MP do not address. The degree to which connectivity pervaded participant's experiences was also compelling, a true demonstration of the inherent social nature of humanity. Connection was presented as essential to meaning, a sharp contrast to traditionally individualistic Western ideals of meaning such as acquisition and achievement.

Qualitative research is inductive, it requires interpretation and the final presentation of data is not presented in a standardised form. The data itself is not a solid, tangible number or amount, the results are indications at best. Indications of relationships rather than fact. However, this does not detract from their value, as indications provide direction for future investigation. The entire concept of an interview is that it is self-report and subjective. It is possible that individual perceptions on the positive effects of MP influenced the type of individuals who wished to express their experience. However, this does not diminish the significance of their information, the current study represents the experiences of individuals who have had mostly positive experiences with MP and have felt that

MP has contributed positively to their meaning in life. Although it is not a complete catalogue of MP experiences, it is a window into the positive and meaningful experiences that individuals can access through MP.

It is acknowledged that findings cannot readily be generalised to the wider population, as these results have not been tested for statistical significance or to rule out chance (Atieno, 2009). The final sample of six was small and only representative of non-clinical adult individuals with a pre-existing interest in well-being, as indicated by their employment backgrounds. Therefore, it is not representative of a large proportion of individuals, for example, despite an open invitation only one third of participants were Male. Aside from indicating that participants were adult, no further age information was requested, it is possible that meaning making processes themselves change over the lifespan and this study is unable to inform for a specific age group. Lastly, the data as interpreted by a single researcher is therefore subject to interpretation through the lens of the researcher's prior knowledge and experiences.

As the researcher my own subjectivity during interpretation must be called in to account, the majority of research that I have studied had posited positive effects of MP. To counter this bias, it was necessary to question participants directly regarding negative experiences to ensure that a balanced view of the practice could be formed. It could be argued that priming effects of the literature influenced the salience of themes for the researcher during interpretation, however identifying themes was a rigorous process. Poring through the transcripts, every point of interest made by participants was noted, meaning every experience was provided the same opportunity to be considered as a theme. Deciding on final themes came down to repetition within each transcript and support across numerous transcripts. This ensured that the themes presented here had evidential support to be considered potentially common experiences. My own experience with MP has been largely positive, however as my experience with MP is less than that of the participants it was important that I placed higher value on their experiences and narratives; firstly, as they were more experienced with MP, secondly because it was their experience that I was attempting to capture. That support was found for many

facets of previous research could indicate interpreter bias, however the repetition of un-primed themes presented by participants was compelling.

Ensuring validity for qualitative studies does not follow the same format as for quantitative data, due to the varied and non-prescriptive acquisition of data. To address issues of validity, the criteria for assessing qualitative data presented by Yardley (2000, as cited in Smith & Shinebourne, 2012) were considered in assessing validity of this study. Yardley proposed 'sensitivity to context' as the first criteria of validity, demonstrated via respect for the interactional nature of data collection throughout interviews. During this research respect for the individual voice and perspective was considered paramount. At the outset of each interview participants were reminded that it was their own perspective which was being sought, and that there were no right or wrong answers. The interviewer ensured there were no priming discussions or literature provided to participants which could influence their responses. In attempts to prevent interviewer influence the researcher maintained a neutral and accepting stance to encourage participants to feel comfortable voicing their perspectives. Participants were provided with a copy of their transcript including an invitation to edit the transcript if they felt necessary, with all participants signing off the transcripts with no modifications. To ensure findings were grounded in the data, multiple quotes were presented in support of each theme and subtheme, ensuring the voices of the participants were reporting the findings. All findings have been linked back to literature not only to lend support to findings but also demonstrating sensitivity to current research context.

'Commitment and rigour' were presented as the second of Yardley's validity criteria, involving commitment to participants and rigour of investigation. Commitment to participants was demonstrated in selecting suitable participants, ensuring each participant was a regular long-term user of mindfulness, the minimum length of practice was 1.5 years. This ensured each participant had regular contact and history with the experience being discussed. Participants were given time to discuss at length without being cut off, with each perspective being accepted and valued to encourage free disclosure. Rigour of analysis was an ongoing process, each visit to the results section involved checking and rechecking

through participant quotes and interpretations to ensure accuracy and to allow for fresh insights. The third validity criteria presented by Yardley was 'transparency and coherence'. Detail and structure have been used in writing up all sections to provide a coherent and clear presentation, always acknowledging the interpretive nature of this research. It is due to this interpretive nature that the themes presented in this research are considered suggestive rather than absolute and may be indicative of further avenues of future research.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

The current study indicated that through the awareness and non-judgment that MP developed, individuals experienced overall greater connection which enhanced meaning in life through several avenues. This enhanced connection was pervasive, affecting relationships with others, cultivation of an authentic self, development of a positive perceptual shift, as well as informing and enhancing spirituality. The study highlighted the importance of connection, and the development of the self as a pathway to meaning.

Awareness presented as a significant path to meaning in its own right and via the influence it had on all other paths. The greater awareness that MP cultivated allowed individuals to be more open to experiences and their meanings as they learned to see and accept alternative perspectives and understandings. Individuals were able to come out of the preconceived realities they had constructed within their own minds and develop a more comprehensive and realistic understanding of their environment. This enabled greater engagement with experiences and more occasions to attend to opportunities to create meaningful experiences. The non-judgment MP cultivated removed automatic negatives, cultivating more authentic and meaningful experiences. This non-judgment was pervasive and affected all other pathways to meaning as individuals learned to remove judgment from themselves, other individuals and experiences. The removal of judgment allowed individuals to stay with uncomfortable experiences and reactions without feeling a need to change them. As with awareness, this opened individuals up to new perceptions. As MP enhanced awareness and developed non-judgment, critical metacognition was cultivated, presenting as an important mechanism though not a path to meaning as such. It allowed individuals the opportunity to see and experience aspects of their environment in new and alternative ways; however, the meaning itself was found in how the individual experienced the connection and the value they placed in it.

Meaning was found though an enhanced connection with others, which was attributed to skills developed through MP. A sense of belonging, creating meaning with others, contributing positively to the lives of others, and behaving in a genuine

manner in relationships, were all perceived by participants to contribute to meaning in life. MP was also attributed to aiding in the discovery of an authentic self, where behaving in an authentic manner contributed to greater meaning in life. Through MP individuals developed a stronger connection to themselves, realising their own values and developing congruence within the self by behaving in an authentic manner while adhering to their core values. MP was perceived by participants to improve their overall being, indicative of a positive perceptual shift. This shift created more opportunity for positive engagement with all experiences, providing increased opportunity for greater personal reward which contributed to meaning in life. MP was also seen to provide a realisation of the greater connectivity between all things, contributing to the development of spirituality. Participants were able to draw meaning from this sense of belonging and contributing to a larger connected network of being. This sense of connection to a greater whole, not only informed spirituality within participants but also reciprocally enhanced connection with others. As individuals became more aware of their connectivity with all things, they appreciated the connections with other individuals more, which in turn enhanced feelings of spirituality through positive and meaningful interactions with other individuals. Connections with others was also reciprocally related to the development of authenticity within the self. As individuals learned how to access and accept their authentic selves, this motivated them to apply these skills to interpersonal interactions. As interpersonal interactions improved, individuals felt their authentic selves were validated.

Findings of the study are non-generalisable due to the interpretive nature of the research and the small sample. However, the study provided meaningful insight into how individuals felt MP informed their meaning making processes. The study also provided unique insights into issues of decontextualization of MP from the Buddhist framework, indicating that issues surrounding non-identification and self-definition may not be sufficiently resolved through the secular delivery of MP. A number of participants also referenced a dissatisfaction with aspects of Western culture, MP was attributed to providing a realisation of alternative, more congruent ways of being. A strong path from MP to MIL through connection was presented by

participants, suggesting that MP awakens and energises an inherent drive for connection within individuals.

Indications for future research include investigation of pathways to meaning through MP in Māori and Pacific cultures. Investigation into the effects of meaning in life and the development of altruism in individuals with low inherent altruism also appears warranted, as participants in the current study appeared largely 'other oriented'. Investigation into the issue of decontextualisation of MP from the Buddhist framework, and whether resolution of these issues can be found through the development of a collective identity or congruence within the self is also indicated.

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## Appendix A: Participant Screening Questionnaire

### Meaning and Mindfulness Thesis Participant Questionnaire

*Thank you for registering your interest to participate in this research project, your time and interest is greatly appreciated. To ensure participant safety, reliability of results and to determine logistics of the project, could you please respond to the following questions. All information will remain confidential and will not be passed on to other persons or organisations. The questions are designed to ensure the safety of participants and to ensure that the information gathered could be related to the construct of mindfulness rather than a treatment modality, medication, or substance.*

Name:

Please indicate whether you are over 18 years old: **Y / N**

Please indicate whether you are male or female (where possible an equal representation of genders will be sought): **M / F**

Does the following definition of mindfulness accurately describe your engagement with mindfulness: *Mental focusing in the present moment, with a non-judgmental attitude toward thoughts.* **Y / N**

Do you consider yourself to be non-religious? Defined as: not relating to or believing in an acknowledged religion, ultimate reality, divine being or deity. **Y / N**

Please indicate how long have you been engaging in the practice of mindfulness:

*The following questions are purely to determine whether experiences you may have could be influenced by external sources. This information will remain private and confidential and will NOT be forwarded to any person or organisation.*

Have you in the last 6 months or are you currently involved in any form of mental health treatment program? **Y / N**

Are you currently taking any form of medication intended to alleviate mental distress? **Y / N**

Are you a regular user of illicit/hallucinogenic/mind-altering substances? **Y / N**

*The following questions will be used to determine whether the interview can take place in person or using technology.*

Please indicate your district/suburb:

Do you have access to good quality broadband, suitable for conducting a video call: **Y / N**

Please list application/s you are familiar with to conduct video calls:

Thank you for your time, please return this form via email to [mindfulthesis@gmail.com](mailto:mindfulthesis@gmail.com) and I will be in touch soon.

## Appendix B: Participant Advertisements

### Noticeboard Advertisement:

#### *Mindfulness & Meaning Research*

Do you practice Mindfulness?

Does practising Mindfulness add meaning to your life?

Would you like to share your experience for a research project?

I am currently seeking individuals to interview for a research project seeking to find out how non-religious individuals find meaning in mindfulness. If you are interested in finding out more please email: [mindfulthesis@gmail.com](mailto:mindfulthesis@gmail.com) for more information, I would love to hear from you.

### **Email request – Yoga - to be included in newsletter/ mailing list/noticeboard:**

Good morning,

I am contacting your centre to ask if you would mind passing on an invitation to members of your studio. I am currently seeking individuals to interview to complete a Master's research project to fulfil my postgraduate studies. The topic of research is 'How secular individuals find meaning in mindfulness'. Specifically, I am seeking non-religious individuals who practice mindfulness, who have found that it adds meaning to their life. The study I am conducting will seek to obtain the perspectives of these individuals, in an attempt to capture the individuals unique experience. I wondered if any members of your studio may be interested in participating, as mindfulness and yoga can often be practised together.

I would greatly appreciate it if you would be willing to pass on this information in some way to your members, and would love to talk to you further about it if possible.

Kind Regards,

Jo Longmore

## Email Request - Other - to be included in newsletter/ mailing list/noticeboard:

Good morning,

I am contacting your organisation to ask if you would mind passing on an invitation to your clients. I am currently seeking individuals to interview to complete a Master's research project to fulfil my postgraduate studies. The topic of research is 'How secular individuals find meaning in mindfulness'. Specifically, I am seeking non-religious individuals who practice mindfulness, who have found that it adds meaning to their life. The study I am conducting will seek to obtain the perspectives of these individuals, in an attempt to capture the individuals unique experience. I wondered if any of your clients may be interested in participating.

I would greatly appreciate it if you would be willing to pass on this information in some way to your clients, and would love to talk to you further about it if possible.

Kind Regards,

Jo Longmore

## Facebook Advertisement:



***Mindfulness & Meaning Research***

Do you practice Mindfulness?

Does practising Mindfulness add meaning to your life?

Would you like to share your experience for a research project?

I am currently seeking individuals to interview for a research project seeking to find out how non-religious individuals find meaning in mindfulness. If you are interested in finding out more please email: [mindfulthesis@gmail.com](mailto:mindfulthesis@gmail.com) for more information, I would love to hear from you.

## Appendix C: Mindfulness Thesis Information Sheet

### ***Finding Meaning in Mindfulness: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis***

#### **INFORMATION SHEET**

##### **Introduction**

The aim of this research is to investigate the relationship between mindfulness and meaning in life in secular (non-religious) individuals. The focus is to capture the individuals' unique perspective through the question: How do secular individuals find meaning in mindfulness? This is a qualitative study which will aim to answer this question through interviews which will be analysed using interpretive phenomenological analysis. The project is being undertaken by Josephine Longmore to complete a Massey University Master of Science- Psychology Degree.

##### **Project Description**

This project will involve interviewing participants to explore their experiences. Interviews will be conducted in person at the Massey University School of Psychology in Albany, Auckland, the Papamoa Community Centre, Tauranga, or via Video Call. Interviews are expected to last approximately one hour, and participants will be compensated with a \$20 MTA voucher. Interviews will be transcribed and participants will be given the opportunity to review and amend the transcripts of their interview to ensure accuracy. All transcripts will then be analysed using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA attempts to uncover themes within each interview while looking for similarities and differences across all participant interviews. The aim of IPA is to capture the experience of the individual. I would like to invite you to take part in this project and share your experience and contribute to a greater understanding of mindfulness.

##### **Participants**

Participants will be recruited via advertised invitation forwarded to numerous Yoga and Mindfulness organizations throughout New Zealand, and via Facebook. They will be selected based on their active involvement in mindfulness, their non-religious beliefs (secular), and their belief that mindfulness has added to their meaning making processes/added meaning to their lives in some way. Individuals will not be invited to participate if they are currently involved in some form of psychological or psychiatric treatment program, currently medicated for mental distress, or are regular users of illicit substances. These exclusions are to ensure that the experience the individual describes can be linked back to mindfulness, rather than an intervention or substance. Twelve participants will be interviewed, this number was chosen as IPA is a very in-depth analysis process, and this number is suitable for the time frame of a master's thesis. Participants will be compensated for their time and travel with a \$20 MTA voucher. This project is deemed low risk as it does not involve a clinical population or children, and does not involve any form of intervention.

## **Project Procedures**

Each participant will partake in a semi-structured interview for approximately one hour to obtain their perception of how mindfulness has influenced their meaning making processes. All interviews will be audio recorded to be later transcribed. If at any stage the participant feels uncomfortable during discussions they may ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview. Interviews will be conducted in person where possible, or via video link.

## **Data Management**

Interviews will be audio recorded, then transcribed. All transcripts and audio material will be securely stored under password protection. Transcripts will be coded and have any identifiable material removed and stored separately so that transcripts cannot be directly linked back to individual participants. Only the primary researcher will have access to all of these files. Participants will be given a copy of their own transcribed interview, interviews will not be shared with other participants at any point. All audio files and transcripts will be destroyed by the primary researcher after three years in accordance with Massey data storage guidelines. Direct quotes may be presented in the final thesis; however, these will be coded and non-identifiable, not using the participants name to preserve confidentiality. Once the research has been completed a summary of findings will be emailed to all participants.

## **Participant's Rights**

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- withdraw from the study [Up until 31 October 2018];
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.

If you have any questions regarding the research at any stage you are invited to contact the primary researcher Josephine Longmore (07) 5741772 email: [mindfulthesis@gmail.com](mailto:mindfulthesis@gmail.com), or Dr. Heather Kempton (09) 414 0800 ext. 43103 email: [h.kempton@massey.ac.nz](mailto:h.kempton@massey.ac.nz)

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher named above is responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact A/Prof Tracy Riley, Acting Director, Research Ethics, telephone 06 356 9099 x 84408, email [humanethics@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@massey.ac.nz).

## Appendix D: Participant Consent Form

### ***Finding Meaning in Mindfulness: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis***

#### **PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree/do not agree to the interview being sound recorded.

I wish/do not wish to have my recordings returned to me.

I wish/do not wish to have data placed in an official archive.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

**Signature:**

**Date:**

**Full Name - printed**

## Appendix E: Interview Schedule

Thank participants for their time.

Tell participants at the beginning of the interview that you are interested in them and their experiences and that there are no right/wrong answers.

Definition:

*Mental focusing in the present moment, with a non-judgmental attitude toward thoughts.*

How did you first come into contact with or hear about mindfulness?

Who first told you about mindfulness?

E.g.: Self-help book/therapist/counsellor/Newspaper or article/Friend or family/TV/App

What type of instruction have you had?

Where have you learned your mindfulness skills?

E.g.: Self-taught/Yoga instructor/Formal course/Therapist directed

What type of practice do you engage in?

Can you describe for me the type of practice you engage in?

E.g.: Focused attention (Breathing/Body scan/Yoga/Other)

Mindfulness in action, reminders during the day etc...

How often do you practice? And for how long have you practiced?

E.g.: Regular daily/weekly, sporadic

What was your motivation for learning mindfulness?

What was happening in your life when you decided to begin practising mindfulness?

E.g.: To physically relax, to develop mental calmness, to alleviate symptoms of mental distress, to become more in touch with yourself both mentally and physically

What was your attitude towards mindfulness before you began practicing?

What did you know about mindfulness before you began practising?

What was your opinion of others who practised mindfulness?

E.g.: Did you see mindfulness as a tool, a path to enlightenment, were you unsure about what it could offer you

[Question to access their attitudes/expectations re: mindfulness before they started and see whether this may be related to the level of meaning they derive from practicing mindfulness (re: Solhaug)]

For this study mindfulness is defined as:

*Mental focusing in the present moment, with a non-judgmental attitude toward thoughts.*

How does this description fit with your concept of mindfulness?

Can you describe the contrasts and /or similarities between the definition and reality?

This interview is to find out how practicing mindfulness may have affected the way you find/make meaning in life. A number of studies have found that secular (non-religious) individuals feel more spiritual after regular mindfulness practice, have you experienced something like this?

In this study I use the following definition of meaning

*“the extent to which people comprehend, make sense of, or see significance in their lives, accompanied by the degree to which they perceive themselves to have a purpose, mission, or overarching aim in life” (Steger, 2009)*

How do you find practicing mindfulness affects your concept of meaning?

Can you describe how mindfulness affects:

Your feeling of purpose in life (Bloch)

Your connection to objects outside of yourself (people/places/things (Maxwell, Van Vliet, Siegel)

Your self-awareness

Your view of your values and actions (Allan, Bott & Suh, 2016)

Can you describe the sense of meaning that you have developed?

How do you perceive your meaning in life?

Could you explain to me what is important or significant in your life?

Can you describe for me what you see as your purpose in life?

How would you explain the link between your mindfulness practice and the development or enhancement of meaning in your life?

How has/could you explain for me how engaging in mindfulness influenced or helped you

- Comprehend, make sense of, or see significance in your life?
- Understand or develop your purpose, mission, or overarching aim in life

How has this perception of meaning affected your daily life?

Enquire about negative experiences...

Remember:

Descriptive - could you tell me what....

Narrative - could you tell me how....

Contrast - what are the main differences...

Evaluative - How do you feel....

Prompts - can you tell me a bit more about that?

Probes - What do you mean by....

Appendix F: Transcript Release Authority

***Finding Meaning in Mindfulness: An Interpretive Phenomenological  
Analysis***

**AUTHORITY FOR THE RELEASE OF TRANSCRIPTS**

I confirm that I have had the opportunity to read and amend the transcript of the interview(s) conducted with me.

I agree that the edited transcript and extracts from this may be used in reports and publications arising from the research.

**Signature:**

**Date:**

**Full Name - printed**

## Appendix G: Codewords

This collection of codewords indicate the train of thought surrounding each major concept which appeared throughout the transcripts.

### Positive Benefits – Of Mindfulness Practice

Identified suggestions that the individual believed MP had benefitted them in some way, for example direct examples such as calmer, more organised, clarity of thoughts, and how this affected their day to day life. There are numerous physical benefits supported by research but what had participants perceived in their day to day living that had improved due to their regular MP. Also identified contrasts to life before MP.

### Non-judgment

Identified participants engaging in a non-judgmental attitude toward thoughts. Including notions of acceptance, permission and trust in the self, the opposite of criticism toward the self, thoughts and actions. Identified perceived effects of being non-judgmental towards own thoughts, whether these become automated, whether these generalised to interactions with others. Identified where a non-judgmental attitude changed overall perception.

### Non-identification (with Thoughts)

Identified participant realisation that thoughts were separate from the self, for example that thoughts were a story not necessarily a truth. An ability to observe them as they came and let them go without becoming attached to them and applying emotion to them. Identifying reference to letting thoughts come and go, detachment, not following thoughts or becoming invested in them.

### Awareness

Identified the effects of MP on awareness, of the self, others, and surroundings. How they perceived this improved awareness affected their daily lives, their relationships, and their actions. Highlighted terms such as 'clarity', 'clear', 'insight', and 'realisation'.

### Presence

Present = Fully focused or involved in what one is doing or experiencing

Awareness = As in consciously aware, of internal and external stimuli

One can be aware but not necessarily present, presence implies involvement, participation in the experience. Identified references to engagement, the opposite of autopilot, coming out of their heads and into the moment. One cannot be present without being aware, and increased presence also increases awareness. Highlighted terms such as 'Present', 'Engaged' and, 'in the moment'.

### Making the most of life

The term 'Making the Most of Life' identified participant reference to a single use life, doing the most/best individuals can with the one life that they lived. Highlighted the ways in which individuals discussed getting/being the most they can out of their life.

For example, attempts to fit in many activities, or engage in situations more fully so their life was truly experienced and did not pass them by in a flurry of wasted opportunities. Highlighted terms such as 'making the most', 'waste/d opportunities', and 'one life'.

#### Connectedness

##### - within the Self

Identified indication of a stronger connection within the self as a result of MP. Highlighted terms such as 'brain - body connection', 'connecting with breath, and' 'sensory'.

##### - with Others

Identified the strength of connection people felt towards other individuals. Highlighted reference to 'family', 'other people', and improved/enhanced presence in relationships/interpersonal interactions.

##### - with Nature

Identified evidence of a deeper connection to the physical earth developed through increased awareness resulting from MP. Reference of a drive to experience nature, to protect nature, a feeling that the individual was part of nature. Identified evidence of an increased desire to be in nature and/or discussion of the importance of caring for nature. Highlighted indications that the individual felt that they were connected to their natural surroundings, terms such as 'part of', 'the same', and 'come from'.

##### - with Objects

Identified where participants discussed their perceived connections to objects in their surroundings. Highlighted terms such as 'immediate' crisper', and 'sharper' hinted to a perceptual change regarding interactions with surroundings. Actually - similar to terms used in discussion of awareness.

#### Authenticity

Identified discussion regarding abilities to confidently act in a more genuine manner, removal of facades, and layers applied to the presentation of the self, but also an inner acceptance of that version of the self. An uncovering of a genuine version perhaps tied to the realisation of inner values that MP provides. Highlighted terms such as 'authentic', 'authentic being', 'genuineness', 'just be,' 'removing layers' and 'freedom to be'. These terms all spoke of a strong inner connection to a more genuine version of the self, coupled with the confidence to display this more genuine version of themselves to the world. It spoke of trust in the self, and trust in others to accept that self. Trust that that self was worthy and valid and had a rightful place in this world.

#### Dissatisfaction with Western Culture

Identified discussion relating to dissatisfaction with ideals, expectations and behaviours of Western culture. Highlighted indications of incongruency between participant values and society, disillusionment, pressure, or discontent with western

societal values and expectations. Also encompassing any reference to perceived improvements from engagement in MP, for example realisation of incongruence leading to changes which participants felt impacted their lives in a positive manner. Highlighted terms such as 'rushed', 'stressed', and 'frazzled'.

#### Evolution of Spirituality

Identified discussion of how participants conceptualised spirituality within their own frameworks. Used to identify parts of the text where individuals attempted to explain what spirituality meant to them and how MP may have influenced this meaning. Included any reference to terms relating to 'spirit', 'spiritual', 'religious'. Identifying what participants equated to spirituality, whether MP enhanced their spirituality. Whether an increased feeling of spirituality resulted in greater meaning, or positive affect, and in what manner.

## Appendix H: Coding Notes

### Structure

(Main Heading) The Path to Meaning Through MP

Themes:

Non-Judgment

Awareness/Connection to Others

Perceptual Shift/Positive Mindset

Presence

Genuine Being

Participant Experiences of the Fundamental Aspects of MP

(Theme) Non-judgment

Incl - Non-identification with Thoughts

(Theme) Awareness

(Theme) Connectivity as a Path to Meaning

(Theme) Presence as a Precursor to Connectivity

(Sub Theme) Presence and the path to Meaning - Making the most of life

(Theme) - Connection within the Self

(Theme) - Connection with Others

(Sub Theme) Meaning is Co-created:

(Sub Theme) Sense of Belonging

(Sub Theme) Cycle of Positive Contribution:

(Sub Theme) Genuineness in Relationships:

(Theme) Connection with Nature

(Theme) Connection with Objects:

(Theme) - Authenticity as a Path to Meaning

(Theme) Lack of Meaning in Western Culture

(Sub Theme) Busyness of WC

(Sub Theme) WC not aligned with individuals' values

(Sub Theme) WC did not deliver spiritual understanding

## **The path to Meaning Through MP**

### **Positive Benefits of Practice**

What does MP create that participants find effects their lives in a positive manner?

Looking for anything that suggests that the individual believes MP has benefitted them in some way, for example feeling calmer. There are numerous physical benefits proven in research but what do the participants perceive in their day to day living that has improved due to regular MP.

Look for:

References to life before MP (perhaps negative) and any improvements the individuals perceive

Direct examples such as calmer, more organised, clarity of thoughts and how this affects their day to day life.

Negative adjective use when describing life prior to regular MP such as 'disorganised, crazy, messy', 'stressed'.

(Non-judgment) Calm appears to be an overarching state often? achieved through regular MP. Calm implies a feeling of peace, and an absence of strong emotions, it is a positive state as opposed to its antonym – a sense of unrest, which has negative connotations. Ease as opposed to struggle, acceptance that difficulties will be encountered at times, letting go of need to control them and instead sit with them and process them, feeling more connected and accepting. Also, opposite of a reactive state, individuals learn to sit with discomforts rather than immediately reacting to them and attempting to effect change. Allows for space for non-identification with thoughts. MP promotes sitting with difficulty, this process leads to positivity through knowledge, experience, and understanding. Facing the negative inside us gives us strength to face negative situations.

(Awareness/Connection to Others) Cognitive clarity, aids coping, better equipped to make positive conscious choices, increases awareness and clarifies meaning e.g. P1 meaning to be positive & P6 not struggling with the 'little things', leaving more energy to focus on things which provided more meaning and satisfaction. Clarity leads to adaptability & improved empathy which improves relations with others. Actions toward others are improved. Fosters altruism, a desire to promote positivity among others 'nicer' 'generous' 'kind' more 'patience'. Due to awareness MP develops. - Connection to Others. P5 also notes that it leads to awareness control, not fully beneficial to be in a mindful state all the time, e.g.: sometimes in order to be creative we need to daydream. Need for balance, acceptance and non-judgmental attitude toward the self when not being MF is essential, as sometimes there is a need to be thinking outside of the present.

(Perceptual Shift/Positive Mindset) Positive adjective use when describing aspects of life while engaging in MP such as 'relaxed calm, organised'. The term 'Better' is often used, by participants. Also reference to 'clean slate' feeling, letting go of ruminations and worry and being able to engage fully with the present because their mind is not engaged in

rumination. Terms such as ‘helps with everything’ ‘everything is enhanced’ imply the far-reaching benefits perceived by participants. If ‘everything’ is better, this points to a change in perception, a shift within the individual as MP could not affect anything outside of the person, rather it influences the ways individuals process their experiences in a more positive manner. Appreciation – Greater acceptance and happiness with what they have.

(Connection – Presence) More connected to what is happening – Presence, Connection to the moment. Perceptual shift, experiencing rather than simply doing. Relates to the presence theme, that engagement with the present gives activities more meaning. What is meaningful is engaging in activities which are congruent with values and beliefs. Results in feelings of satisfaction and the positive emotions this can elicit.

(Congruency & Freedom - Genuine Being) Ability to let go of questions and expectations related to meaning, no need to conform to any societal expectation on how to be as constructed by others. Realisation that we create our own meaning and reference to the ‘struggle’ ‘contest’ of feeling purposeful within a WC framework of significance and importance by way of achievement and acquisition. Meaning is not contingent on others, it is what we perceive as purposeful and valuable. Ability to disengage from this belief that our value rests in others, accept the self, each person’s purpose can be different yet still valid. Comes back to the congruency theme. Meaning could be found through the mechanisms of self-awareness, honesty and acceptance with the self, allowing us to realise our own paths and be satisfied with our choices. Becoming more inquisitive and explorative by nature. Being able to question own thoughts, feelings, seeing other’s points of view and being more open to accept different viewpoints. This searching and exploration leads to knowledge about the self and others. This is how we find conflicts in our values and actions. Continual process of learning and self-improvement.

## **Participant Experiences of the fundamental Aspects of Mindfulness**

### ***Theme - Non-judgment***

Employing a non-judgmental attitude toward thoughts. Includes notions of acceptance, permission and trust in the self. Opposite of criticism toward the self, thoughts and actions.

Look for:

Effects of being non-judgmental toward own thoughts, whether these become automated, whether these generalise to interactions with others.

How a non-judgmental attitude changes overall perception.

This fundamental aspect appeared again and again throughout the transcripts, applying non-judgment to intrapersonal cognitions and actions, and generalisation of this to interpersonal relationships.

Noticed effects included increased compassion, empathy, kindness, acceptance, flexibility of thought and actions, increased ability to sit with discomfort, increased understanding of self and others, resolution through understanding, strength and control through letting go of attempts to control. Realistic thinking, trust in self and process, ability to be honest with the self, developing curiosity through the removal of judgment,

discernment of thoughts, develop an ability to notice and avoid rumination, replaced with acceptance of issue and space to process. Understanding develops.

Increased awareness, as perception is able to be more honest, removing layers and filters, acceptance leads to honesty which increases awareness as individuals aren't hiding aspects, covering them up, changing their meanings, they allow themselves to get a more complete picture. Honesty leads to more realistic perceptions. Acceptance of all facets of self, good and bad.

Non-judgment led to feelings of more genuine interactions with others, people felt they were able to act in a more genuine manner as they were more accepting of themselves. Also felt this allowed space for individuals they were interacting with to behave in a genuine manner as they were allowing them to be genuine (validation) and not attempting to change them.

Freedom, to be and to allow others to be. Free from need to react, or need to control, or need to avoid

Therefore....non-judgment leads to increased awareness resulting in acceptance, genuine interactions, freedom, realistic appraisal, increased compassion and empathy.

### ***Subtheme - Non-identification With Thoughts***

Realisation that thoughts are separate from the self, they are a story not necessarily a truth. An ability to observe them as they come and let them go without becoming attached to them and applying emotion to them.

Look for:

Reference to letting thoughts come and come, detachment, not following thoughts or becoming invested in them.

What does this experience feel like to the individual?

MP provides an ability to decentre from thoughts, not chase them, just let them be.

Raises questions of If I'm not my thoughts then what am I?

Provides an awareness of the impact of thoughts on emotions and thinking patterns, removes power of thoughts over the person. Gives back control as individuals aren't swept up in their thoughts so easily. Also, objectivity and curiosity developed allowing individuals to question their thoughts and the origins of these thoughts, this exploration led to knowledge and understanding as feelings and emotions were found, uncovered and faced. Facing up to these emotions and feelings and origins of thought taught individuals strength and acceptance, sitting with discomfort. Letting go of stories, letting go of layers and perceptions, allowing for more genuine authentic being.

Led to growth in the individuals. Realisation that thoughts are not truths, that they are fluid, can be transient in nature, can change over time and situations, can be rewritten, and that they can hold power over the individual if they allow it. Clinging to perceived view of what we are/should be rather than allowing ourselves to truly be results in pain.

Learning to observe thoughts as separate from the self can diminish suffering, as individuals can learn not to identify with negative thoughts and emotions, they can be seen as separate from them and do not define them as an individual – again regaining control of the self. With practice this process can become more automated and easier to apply to future events.

Seeing thoughts as separate from the self, allowing them to come and go is vital as getting caught up in thoughts, worrying about the past or the future prevents us from engaging with and experiencing the present.

Therefore....non-identification increases presence, genuine being, fosters control, objectivity, curiosity knowledge and understanding.

### ***Theme - Awareness***

The effects of MP on awareness, of the self, others, surroundings. How this improved awareness affects their daily lives, their relationships, their actions.

Look for:

Reference to effects on self-awareness

Terms such as 'clarity' 'clear' 'insight' 'realisation'

Appears often to be presented hand in hand with presence, though they are not the same thing. Presence is immersing the self in the moment, whereas awareness is the ability to clearly see what is there. Awareness is developed first as individuals become aware of their thoughts through non-judgmental observation during MP. Awareness brings a clarity of perception and thoughts, as individuals drop their judgments which allows them to accept what is presented as it is, acceptance leads to individuals attempting less to change what they perceive, leading to individuals seeing a more realistic view. Awareness is a perceptual clarity, perception with less clouding by filters/layers. Improved awareness is circular with non-judgment as become more aware of judgmental thoughts.

Individuals want to be aware, there is a desire to perceive experiences in their entirety. A desire not to miss out on their present experiences. Ability to perceive whole experiences as they happen are interpreted as positive experiences, individuals compare the opposite – missing out or not fully experiencing – as a negative experience which can lead to unhappiness. Individuals demonstrated a belief that awareness led to clarity, better decision making, adaptability, improved focus. This clarity appeared to help individuals uncover their significance and meaning in life

Awareness allows presence, the act of being aware demands that the individual be present in the moment they are experiencing.

Self-awareness, an ability to be aware of thoughts and the effects they have on our emotional state and further thought processes allows for more realistic appraisals. This adds to acceptance when individuals can be aware of things they can influence or not and learn to let go things that they are unable to effect change on. Aids in reducing rumination, or becoming lost in thought, this is the mechanism which enhances presence, being aware enough to catch the self drifting into thought, either past or future, away from the present.

Awareness also enables individuals to become fully aware of their own values and any discrepancies between those values, their actions or actions within the wider society.

Also, more aware of the influence one has on others, resulting in a desire to act in a manner which contributes positively to interpersonal interactions. Creates opportunity to foster positive relationships, allows for growth, self-determination and change. Awareness creates understanding of the processes and their effects within the self, within others and with others. Creates flexibility and empathy when working with others. Being aware of others comes from feeling more connected to the self and others, but also being more aware could make you feel more connected? And accepting of others perspectives and beliefs.

Long-term practitioners used terms such as 'open awareness', a state of monitoring the self, all feelings, thoughts emotions observed as they flow. Focus is less refined onto a specific aspect such as breath. They also speak more to applying the skills in a continuous every day manner rather than confining it to a formal practice.

***Sub Theme: Presence as a precursor to Connection:***

Awareness aids presence, if we are aware of our surroundings then we are able to engage fully with our surroundings. Opposite of autopilot, coming out of our heads and into the moment. One can't be present without being aware, and increased presence also increases awareness.

Present = Fully focussed or involved in what one is doing or experiencing

Awareness = As in consciously aware, of internal and external stimuli

One can be aware but not necessarily present, presence implies involvement, participation in the experience.

Look for:

'Present'

'Engaged'

Impact of presence allows for appreciation and connection to real tangible current objects and moments, their value, and how they can enhance meaning. Truly experiencing, noticing, and being, leads to increased happiness as engagement and present focus minimises rumination. Being out of the head and fully aware so able to really appreciate, also without layers more able to see things as they are. Slowing down and not rushing through life allows savouring and appreciation, ability to slow down thoughts and make choice which are in line with values.

Increased clarity allows individuals to realise and focus on what they can affect change on while accepting and letting go of the things they are unable to change. Ability to realise that full participation in moments in the present will cultivate the future, that every action has an impact.

Realising that time is important, the length of life is both finite and unknown. What you do with your time matters, it matters in the moment and over time, in both how it makes you feel and how it affects others. Spending time on things that are important to the individual – such as positive contribution and people – adds meaning and life satisfaction. Life is a process and we must attend to each

moment within that process as it is the accumulation of those moments that add up to living. That purpose comes from applying care, presence, and effort to each moment consistently. MF has overlapped into everyday life by showing participants that life and change are gradual processes, and that the process of change is life, and that each part of that process should be appreciated and experienced.

Presence aids communication as it allows individuals awareness and engagement with their intrapersonal processes, recognising inner factors and influences they are bringing to situations, while also being more open to and flexible toward external factors which may influence interpersonal interactions.

Presence is unconditional, it does not require anything of the other person, yet gives so much, enriching relationships through genuine connection and validating individuals, their experiences and perceptions.

Presence enhance the flow of life. Rather than being stuck in the past or future individuals are able to genuinely connect with experiences as they unfold. Aids in minimisation of past experiences influencing current situations by removing preconceptions. More energy to focus on the present when not stuck in patterns of rumination and anxiety about past and future events and the negative emotions they can elicit. Provides a sense of freedom and strength as individuals are not anchored by their thoughts, rather they are anchored in the ever-evolving present.

Being present becomes a goal, it is self-perpetuating as the positive effects of presence create a desire to broadly and more consistently apply this. Simply being has meaning, existence in itself, flowing with change and taking each moment as it is. Life is living in the moment and making the most of each moment.

***Subtheme: Presence and the path to Meaning - Making the most of life***

The theme 'Making the Most of Life' reference to a single use life, doing the most/best we can with this one life that we live. The ways in which individuals discuss getting/being the most they can out of their life. May be attempts to fit in many activities, or experience things more fully so their life is truly experienced and does not 'pass them by' in a flurry of wasted opportunities.

Look for:

'Making the most'

'one life'

This theme is explicitly stated in half of the participants. Lends to belief that there is no afterlife. This lack of specific belief in an afterlife does not detract but rather adds to the meaning individuals make. Not wanting to waste opportunities.

Acknowledging that life passes by quickly (P1) and that opportunities, experiences and connections with others can be missed if we are not engaging with our surroundings. The clarity MP provides allows individuals a higher level of engagement and aids in decision making so that choices which serve a path to meaning and happiness can be actively pursued. Such as positive contribution and nurturing relationships. Positive contribution is not contingent on the expectation

that it will lead to redemption or a rewarding afterlife. Rather it is immediately gratifying as one is able to see and experience the benefits of their contribution as they are fully aware and engaged in their surroundings.

Although not all participants explicitly state this, there is reference in their talk of....

Presence fuels connection...through clarity and engagement.

Therefore....Engaging in mindfulness helps comprehend what is significant in their life by providing clarity. A clear mental space to see and work through events and feelings and by creating a more positive frame to interpret and approach all things both intra and inter personal. Less negative focus. Perhaps a clearer more realistic appraisal as the negative filter has been removed. Improves interpersonal relations, allows room for growth, genuine being through mechanisms of acceptance, compassion and understanding which grow from awareness and enhanced feelings of connectivity.

### **Super Theme - Connectivity as a Path to Meaning**

Greater awareness results in more presence which enhances connectivity.

Non-judgment cultivates attitudes of acceptance, compassion, kindness which enhance intra and interpersonal relations

Improved relations create meaning through genuine being and genuine interactions, feelings of connectivity elicit desires to contribute positively which in itself is meaningful/provides meaning...

#### ***Theme - Connection within the Self***

Anything indicating a stronger connection within the self as a result of MP, should include self-awareness – a subset of awareness.

Look for:

Terms such as 'brain - body connection' 'connecting with breath' 'sensory'

Reference to improved brain-body connections, this seems more like a connection to the physical self, but that should still probably fall under self-awareness as referenced above in awareness, maybe pull relevant parts of this section down here, this is being aware of the physical self.

Implied that MP provides a feeling like resetting the brain. Resetting is like rebooting, coming up clear again after practice, removing the fog of continuous thoughts and emotions and the lingering effects these have on us. Like waking up fresh/clean slate, reference to 'clear bench' and how this is a positive experience and that this positivity lingers though to following experiences after MP. MP positively influencing connections both inside and outside of the self.

MP provides more awareness of the self as a whole being, both the physical self and mental events. The physical self as a sensory hook into the present moment. A tool to bring an individual out of their heads and into the present moment so that they can experience these moments fully. A tool to avoid being caught up with and overwhelmed by

mental experiences and stay grounded in the present moment through their bodily sensations.

Greater connection to the self can also provide more understanding about how the self functions/reacts so it provides knowledge. Connecting with the self, model's connection to others, so the skills and behaviours one applies to the self such as awareness

Therefore....MP creates stronger connections to the physical self, creating a whole-body awareness. This strengthened connection to the physical self can be a hook to the present moment adding to present being and avoiding negative mental states such as rumination. The skills of creating a stronger connection within the self are generalised to connections with everything in an individual's realm, including people and surroundings. MP can also have the effect of resetting the mind removing the fog of continuous thoughts and emotions and the lingering effects these have on us which also facilitates presence and stronger connections.

### ***Theme - Connection with Others***

Look for:

Reference to 'family', 'other people', improved/enhanced presence in relationships/interpersonal interactions.

Participants used terms such as 'part of the same', 'we're all in the same boat', 'contribute', 'community', 'helping others', 'support each other', 'I just can't be on my own'. That having a strong sense of connection provides meaning, that spending time with others/investing in others/contributing to the well-being of others is meaningful. Important to have a positive impact on others as we are all connected (belonging), fostered by feelings of empathy developed through MP. Meaning is found in the depth of these connections and their positive contribution to the well-being of all.

Meaning is Co-created: Participants referenced their families, often their children, stating they did not want to miss those moments with their children as they grow. Realisation of the influence and impact they have on the lives of others and how they wanted to impact people in a positive manner. Creates opportunities to foster more positive interactions with others and work with people rather than attempting to effect change on them. That our influence on others and the way we affect them through our actions is what will last once our physical self is gone, reference to our finite existence and the importance of leaving a positive imprint/memory - a way for us to go on after we die. That meaning is co-created with others, that connection with others results in growth within the self and fosters growth in others. Reference to our connection and influence on others – particularly investing in the relationships and development of our children – creating meaning together is 'the most' important aspect of our lives.

Sense of Belonging: The awareness of the connection to others creates curiosity, empathy, realisation we are all facing the same struggles, deeper understanding of others developed through awareness of self and others with the removal of judgment, realisation that essentially all people are working toward the same goals, acceptance. Reduces division and fosters togetherness, creating inclusivity and the ability to acknowledge and accept the minor differences in others and remembering we are all working toward the same overarching goals of safety, happiness and validation. Despite being separate individuals,

we still carry some basic commonalities. Presence – being fully present enhances connections and relationships with others.

Genuine connections and genuine relations contrasted with the meaningless nature of physical things. Contrast to life prior to MP where meaning was evaluated on a predominantly achievement/acquisition basis. Living things come to have more meaning and meaning is more feeling based. New perspectives that previous struggles are not so important, like a reality check to what is actually important, a change in perspective and values to a more contribution and connection-based existence. Belonging provides purpose, a drive to contribute positively to the collective. Leads to questioning incongruence within the self and the discovery of socially oriented values. Can result in a loss of individual significance, where significance is based on contribution to the whole and purpose is to serve in a positive manner. These collectivistic thoughts are fed by the awareness cultivated through MP. Connections without layers, filters and doctored narratives, contributes to desire for authenticity, within the self and in connections with others.

Cycle of Positive Contribution: Being a good person & doing good, 'good' often reiterated in this fashion, and that the act of being good makes one feel 'good', positive meaningful interactions result in positive emotions within the self. Positive emotional cycle, connected to awareness, values and feelings of connectivity and contribution. Positive contribution feeds congruence and satisfaction. Contribution is a dominant foundation of meaning making.

Reference to not wanting to waste this one life that we have, our finite existence spending our time on pursuits which really matter and add value to our existence and value to the existence of others. Repetition through the participants about what really matters – living things, not inanimate objects.

Genuineness in Relationships: Resulting from acceptance and understanding and a desire for authentic connections with others. Allowing others to be themselves, without us forcing our interpretations on them. Provides a space for individuals to present their true selves without judgment which contributes to their development, growth and authenticity. Reiteration of authenticity theme described below in more detail.

Therefore....

### ***Theme - Connection with Nature***

Evidence of a deeper connection to the physical earth developed through increased awareness resulting from MP. A drive to experience nature, to protect nature, a feeling that the individual is part of nature.

Look for:

Evidence of an increased desire to be in nature

Discussion of the importance of caring for nature

Indications that the individual feels that they are connected to their natural surroundings, terms such as 'part of' 'the same' 'come from'.

Individuals speak of a desire to be in nature – the beach – and of the awe and beauty of nature, a realisation of the force and power of nature.

That MP enhances this connection by making the individual more present and aware of their surroundings so that they may truly experience their environment. ‘Visceral’ a felt connection, more than a cognitive thought or belief, a deeper connection that elicits an emotive response from the individual. A response to care for and a desire to experience.

Realisation that we are from nature, we are one and the same and that nature needs to be cared for as it is a part of us. Questioning the values of our society who do not appreciate and care for our surroundings and the lunacy of not taking care of something that we are an integral part of, therefore not taking care of ourselves. This realisation and recognition are attributed to the awareness developed through MP. That connecting with and caring for the environment are valid pursuits which provide meaning, reference to our finite existence and a desire for that existence to have a positive impact on all things in our environment including the physical earth. That spending our time on positive pursuits which are congruent with our values and have meaning lead to satisfaction and congruence.

Therefore....through increased awareness developed as a result of MP individuals experience a deeper connection to the physical earth and a realisation that we are part of the earth, we are no more than and no less than all things which are of the earth, our bond is both reciprocal and enduring.

#### ***Theme - Connection with Objects:***

Participants used terms such as ‘immediate’ ‘crisper’ ‘sharper’

Connection to objects is enhanced as they are perceived as more immediate, and in more detail. This connection is enhanced through the mechanisms of awareness and presence. This noticing brings an increased desire to engage with the individual's surroundings. This process removes previous connotations and perceptions that may have previously been applied by the individual, allowing them to connect in a more genuine way to their surroundings.

#### **Theme - Authenticity as a Path to Meaning**

Relates to an ability to confidently act in a more genuine manner, removal of facades, and layers applied to the presentation of the self, but also an inner acceptance of that version of the self. An uncovering of a genuine version, perhaps tied to the realisation of inner values that MP provides.

Look for:

Terms such as ‘authentic’, ‘authentic being’, ‘genuineness’, ‘just be’ ‘removing layers’ ‘freedom to be’. These terms all speak of a strong inner connection to a more genuine version of the self, coupled with the confidence to display this more genuine version of themselves to the world. It speaks of trust in the self, and trust in others to accept that self. Trust that that self is worthy and valid and has a rightful place in this world.

Being more present focussed removes future/past worries that may be influencing the 'self' e.g.: 'be me now', instead of reacting to these perceived worries there is space and energy for individuals to engage with and react authentically to situations as they unfold.

Participants spoke of a desire to behave in an authentic manner -at times referred to as their purpose- to present themselves as authentic real beings. There was a lot of reference to removing layers, layers that built up over many years before individuals practised mindfulness. Removal of layers provided clarity

Acceptance of the self paves the way to authenticity. A process of uncovering the true self occurs during MP, through non-judgment (lack of internal negative feedback) and acceptance toward own thoughts, this creates space for the realisation of beliefs and actions which feel more congruent (positive internal feedback), this validates this new way of being, external positive feedback (or lack of negative feedback) from those around them also reinforces and validates this new way of being resulting in the development of what feels like a genuine presentation of the self. Importance here on the congruence aspect, it creates a sense of harmony within the self. Harmony feels right.

Awareness provides space to behave in a manner congruent with internal beliefs, no autopilot. Acting in a manner more congruent with values and beliefs provides a sense of happiness and meaning. Strength is obtained from facing up to the inconsistencies within the self, facing them and applying change which results in positive emotions and experiences. Non-judgment importance here as facing these inconsistencies with non-judgment is essential to create a space for growth and avoid negativity/rumination. Applying compassion and forgiveness to the self for these past inconsistencies.

Less effort expended on pretending to act in a manner dictated by someone else...Creates a freedom of being which allows for exploration within the self. MP removes the need to act differently in different situations, allows effort to be expended in different areas of our lives.

Also reference to accepting the darker side of ourselves, trusting that this is a necessary part of being. Sitting with one's discomfort and darkness becomes accepted as natural, a process which leads to knowledge and trust that we are allowed to feel this side, both sides are necessary to be considered genuine. Quite a realistic portrayal no one all good/bad, happy/sad.

Individuals must face honest feelings within themselves, learn to face experiences honestly, through this they learn to understand themselves better through observing their internal processes, who they can truly be, what they can truly stand for. Strength learned through these experiences provides strength to face the world with their genuine selves. Being present and aware of the moment also allows individuals to be aware of themselves and able to feel within themselves when they are acting in an incongruent manner.

Authentic being transfers to others through our presence. Relationships carry more meaning when they are authentic, applying the skills of cultivating authenticity to other individuals creates space for them to behave in an authentic manner, which they respond positively to. Removing control of the situation, removing control of others, removing control of ourselves, free to be. Acceptance of others could be perceived as approval, positive reinforcement for others to behave in a genuine manner around them.

## Theme Lack of Meaning in Western Culture

### *Dissatisfaction (with Western Ideals)...../Seeking Calm*

Participant voices quickly eluded to a dissatisfaction with ideals, expectations and behaviours of Western culture.

Look for:

Indications of incongruency between values and society

Changes in values after engaging in MP

Negative reference to way of life prior to MP or motivators to engage in MP which could indicate dissatisfaction w/Western life (such as...)

*Busyness of WC:* For example, participants used these negative adjectives 'rushed', 'stressed', 'chaotic', 'frazzled' a theme appears to be emerging for individuals feeling under pressure, chaotic, there appears to be a search for a calming influence and a dissatisfaction with living their lives in this rushed manner unable to enjoy life fully. Evidence of role pressure, with reference to work/family/study and needing time out. Contrast to life while engaging in MP terms such as 'organised', 'relaxed', that life is 'better' when engaging in MP. Better because of time out from the rush of Western life.

*WC not aligned with individuals' values:* There is also reference from participants to the realisation that the values they have been bought up with in this society, do not match the values they hold inside themselves, such as reference to treating the earth and other people with disrespect, materialism and drives to achieve and acquire. A realisation appeared to come from MP, clarity around their own values and how society's values are not in-line with their own, leading to a desire for change both within themselves and in wider society. "I didn't feel met at all"

*WC did not deliver spiritual understanding:* Reference to 'searching for something', that WC does not provide. That eastern cultures had an understanding that was lacking in WC and MP was a path to explore aspects of this understanding. Without a religious framework, individuals felt a lack of spiritual understanding

That engaging in MP resulted in a realised dissatisfaction with WC ideals through the act of applying focus to the self, observing and noticing incongruence. Values more aligned with compassion, understanding and positive contribution fostered through non-judgment and acceptance and motivated through feelings of connection enhanced by MP.

Therefore, the WC focus on busyness, acquisition, achievement and materialism left a void in the participants where they lacked spiritual enrichment. Focussing on MP aspects such as awareness, non-judgment created both presence and a realignment of values within individuals which contributed to congruent genuine being and a provided a space for spiritual understanding to development.

## Theme - Evolution of Spirituality Through Mindfulness Practice

Demonstration of how individuals conceptualised spirituality within their own frameworks. Used to identify parts of the text where individuals are attempting to explain what spirituality may mean to them and how MP may have influenced this meaning. Includes any reference to terms relating to spirit, spiritual, religious.

Look for:

What they equate to spirituality?

Whether MP enhanced their spirituality?

Has an increased feeling of spirituality resulted in greater meaning, or positive affect? In what way?

(Connection) Numerous participants referenced connections with others when discussing spirituality, connections with others, something greater than the self. How connecting with the self ultimately leads to enhanced connection with others. Participants realisation that we are all 'of the same' equality among beings, human and other as we are also all from the same. Noticing the connections between all things, that everything has a place and a purpose. (From P1 connection to Objects)

(Awareness) Enhanced awareness and connection from MP enables people to see/be aware of/ connect with something outside of the self, something that provides meaning 'consciousness to the universe' 'something deeper and bigger at play'. Awareness enables them to see what is waiting for them that has been provided, also allows them to be true to themselves and create alignment both within themselves and with the world outside themselves, aligning their 'spirit' with the world. That finding this purpose provides meaning. A number of participants spoke of enhanced receptiveness to a felt form of energy due to MP. This 'light' or 'energy' experienced as a physical sensation was perceived as residing within all things. The awareness of this 'energy' enhanced the sense of connectivity among things. (Taken from connection to energy section)

(Presence) That being fully present in all moments and in interactions with others is equated to being spiritual. This appears to be a form of connection in that being fully present would result in an increased sense of connection with whatever the individual is attempting to engage with.

Also, patience, acceptance, compassion, empathy increased through MP and were referred to as spiritual qualities. MP created an explorative frame of mind which increased consideration of the spiritual self.

Therefore....feelings of increased spirituality were likely caused by increased awareness and connection. Full presence appeared to be perceived as a spiritual experience, through genuine being and connection with all that we engage with. Existence itself was perceived as spiritual, being part of something that is larger than the self is spiritual. Connection to things other than the self is a spiritual experience, it surpasses the physical shell of every being and every object, as ultimately it is realised that we are of the same, we are comprised of the same energy and we are all equal. By truly noticing and genuinely connecting to things outside of ourselves we give our lives meaning by genuinely experiencing, genuinely being, and contributing to the existence of all in a positive manner.

Link all other aspects in here to meaning...

## **Other Info**

### ***Cutting out External Stimuli***

P1 eludes to removing herself from external stimuli in an effort to connect more fully with herself. This could be a possible theme which may warrant further investigation into whether removing the self from external stimuli enhances a connection to the self (both mentally and physically).

Look for:

Is the removal of self referenced by others?

Is it necessary to achieve a strong connection to the self?

Only referenced by P1 so not a strong theme throughout all participants, is this because this was referenced in a different manner by the other participants, possibly something to check for....

### ***MF Across Tasks***

Mindfulness need not be confined to a structured formal practice. It is a practice that can be applied across numerous daily activities, possibly to point where it becomes an automatic state?

Look for:

What are the type of tasks MF is predominantly used across? E.g. physical, mental, relational/interactional, for stress relief

If automatic how long has the individual been practising?

Physical e.g.: MF Yoga, running

Relational, many references to being MF in the company of others and how this improves perceptions of interactions for the individual.

Numerous participant reference to applying MF in 'all that they do', some even say what is the point of formal practice if the skill is not applied in everyday setting across contexts. Being present in all provides more connection, enjoyment, satisfaction.

How being MF across numerous contexts provides more enjoyment through higher engagement, with food, people, their surroundings/environment etc...

P5, P7 skills are so ingrained that MF is less of a practice and is more of a persistent way of being which permeates their everyday living. This has come after 20+ years of practice.

Therefore....MF is a skill which can and should be applied across numerous contexts to enhance presence, connection, enjoyment and satisfaction.