

Traversing the time of COVID-19 lockdown with mindful leisure

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Abstract

During the anxiety of COVID-19, there has been an increasing recognition of the importance of incorporating mindfulness into daily life in response to the human needs of wellbeing. Based on the theoretical underpinnings of the Eastern (meditative) mindfulness approach (Chen et al., 2014, 2017) this paper discusses how to engage in leisure and tourism activities more mindfully, such that people relieve their anxiety and restore their mental ease. This paper identifies sensory awareness and relaxed attention as the fundamental pathways for evoking mindful mental processing embodied in meditative mindful experience episodes in lifestyle leisure and tourism mindfulness retreats. This is the first paper to introduce meditative mindful experiences in action through informal mindfulness activities in leisure and tourism contexts and to understand their therapeutic-like benefits.

Keywords

Engagement
Meditative mindful experience
Mindfulness activity
Mindfulness retreat
Sensory awareness

Living with the uncertainty of the coronavirus anxiety

The global COVID-19 pandemic has caused a fall in demand for leisure activities such as travel and tourism. It is concerning that non-essential out-of-home activities may contribute to the rapid spread of the coronavirus disease, given the impact on global public health. Governments worldwide have imposed lockdowns and COVID-related restrictions to suppress the spread of COVID-19. Activities related to leisure, travel, and tourism have been particularly affected because of constrained social contacts and immobility resulting from self-isolating and withdrawal of social services. Accordingly, the lockdowns have led to critical uncertainties in leisure participation, tourism consumption and supply options. Engaging in leisure and tourism activities can help human wellbeing (Gilbert & Abdullah, 2004) as amidst inhibited travel opportunities, some people may inevitably feel trapped, bored, and anxious (Brodeur et al., 2021). Furthermore, the pandemic may precipitate new emotional symptoms in people without any history of mental problems (Antonova et al., 2021). Conceivably, the ongoing impacts on leisure constraints and tourism inactivity can cause a second-wave threat to the wellbeing of the general population living with uncertain fear.

Relief from the anxiety: Eastern mindfulness can be the bridge

While people are struggling to see when the pandemic and lockdowns might end, there may also have been some silver linings that reflect opportunities to adjust leisure and travel engagements for a more balanced and enjoyable life. Noticeably, the mindfulness approach has been proposed as a well-suited way for self-care, mitigating negative emotions, and enhancing mental health while responding to the new reality of the COVID-19 impacts (Antonova et al., 2021; Stankov et al., 2020). Here, mindfulness (Pali: *sati*) refers to “an awareness of being aware” (Hirst, 2003) and can be traced to the ancient Eastern Buddhism spiritual traditions that have existed for the past 2,500 years (Thích, 1976). The Eastern

mindfulness practice is often a means of cultivating positive mental health through meditation (Kang & Whittingham, 2010; Thích, 1976). In recent times, mindfulness meditation as a healthcare intervention has been introduced for patients coping with mental problems and stress management in clinical work and mind-body medicine (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). In this discourse, the function of practising mindfulness plays a crucial role in helping people to alleviate suffering from mental problems (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Kang & Whittingham, 2010). More broadly, it has been adopted for facilitating positive life-changing experiences associated with formal and informal mindfulness practices or programs (Birtwell et al., 2019; Carruthers & Hood, 2011; Gim, 2009).

Interestingly, the Eastern approach of (meditative) mindfulness, a psychological construct related to a mental state associated with the internal process of the mind, has emerged in tourism research for understanding how visitors can engage in experiences more mindfully (Chen et al., 2014, 2017; Pearce, 2016). Promisingly, the meditative mindful experience can be derived from leisure travel episodes, and their antecedents and therapeutic benefits have been empirically identified (Chen et al., 2017). This implies a need to cultivate further knowledge of how to develop mindfulness in action through leisure travel to benefit one’s mental ease, especially during the anxiety and boredom of COVID-19.

Recently, the concept of mindfulness for revisioning tourism in a post-pandemic era has been noted (Stankov et al., 2020). The importance of mindfulness-driven products and services that may offer a solution for future leisure tourism revitalization has been advocated. Given this, what could we do to make time for mindfulness within tourism or travel contexts? Studies on the pathways of facilitating meditative mindfulness in experiences through leisure and travel that can help people gain a sense of wellbeing remain limited.

Based on the theoretical underpinnings of meditative mindful experience (Chen et al., 2017), the aim of this paper is therefore to highlight how to mindfully engage in leisure and tourism activities. To shed light on this issue, the main foundational techniques for facilitating meditative mindful

experience to support individuals' demands on leisure and tourism pursuits will be discussed by reviewing two papers (Chen et al., 2014, 2017) that were published by the author.

How meditative mindfulness can help?

As mentioned, mindfulness can be facilitated through formal and informal mindfulness activities. Typically, formal mindfulness practices are based on traditional meditative teaching and mindful breathing (Bishop et al., 2004). Alternatively, informal mindfulness activities involve incorporating mindfulness into existing patterns through engaging in mindful moments and bringing mindful awareness to daily activities (Birtwell et al., 2019). Some examples below illustrate and distinguish the pathways of facilitating meditative mindfulness.

Formal mindfulness practices for spiritual fulfilment

In Buddhist discourses, mindfulness can be cultivated through the practice of meditation for exploring spiritual fulfilment and enlightenment (Kang & Whittingham, 2010). The common ways of practising formal mindfulness include meditation and breathing exercises which can be guided silently for newcomers. Meditation can be practised in many ways, such as sitting meditation, walking meditation, body scan and total relaxation meditation, among others.

A core skill of practising mindful meditation involves focusing on an object intently as a way of staying in the present moment. It allows the practitioners to pay attention to the sensations of breath and body as well as sounds, thoughts, and emotions, in a non-judgmental way, thereby helping the mind to be less reactive cognitively to external stimuli. Studies suggest that formal mindfulness practices or medical interventions contribute to a mental state of mindful acceptance, and hence respond positively to emotional distress and maladaptive behaviour to prevent a proliferation of negative thoughts (Bishop et al., 2004).

Informal mindfulness activities for modern life

Alternatively, the meditative-like state and therapeutic-like benefits are believed to be achievable from informal mindfulness activities within leisure (Carruthers & Hood, 2011) and tourism contexts (Chen et al., 2017). The pathway of facilitating the (meditative) mindful experience for calming anxiety into daily activities does not have to be complicated; just simply "paying attention to a present moment experience, without elaboration on it" suffices (Chen et al., 2017, p. 9). The mindful state can be activated by taking time during each leisure involvement to focus on the present, being intentional about whatever you are doing and how you are feeling.

Experiencing a state of being mindful allows one's mind to dwell in the present moment and be less caught up in what happened earlier or what may come next. Consequently, this mental process helps individuals to be carried away from negative emotional responses. Indeed, these simple skills are useful for dealing with one's emotions and thoughts (Chen et al., 2014, 2017).

Getting started with mindful leisure

As noted, facilitating a mindful experience through an informal mindfulness activity seems not to be so complicated. However, it is interesting to understand how it works regarding mindfully anchoring mental processing. Let's take a closer look at the psychological constructs of meditative mindful experiences and their corresponding concepts. Chen et al. (2017) conducted semi-structured interviews with forty-three visitors involving seventy-seven episodes of tourist meditative mindful experiences and characterized three constructs of informal mindful experience by "paying attention to the experience, living in the present, and non-elaborative awareness" (p.5). Most notably, their finding identified "sensory awareness" and "relaxed attention" (p.5) as associated with the first construct of "paying attention to the experience" (see Table 1). This confirms that the commencement of mindful mental processing can be easily activated by two crucial engagements?'sensory awareness' and 'relaxed attention.'

Most fundamentally, 'sensory awareness' and 'relaxed attention' can be considered as practical skills to make an informal mindfulness activity work. Firstly, focusing on 'sensory awareness' refers to paying attention to bodily sensations wherever they arise in the entire body, within the visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, or tactile senses. This mental process of paying attention to the sense perceptions, like a gatekeeper, can help individuals to gently bring wandered minds back to the present moment experience, as well as to avoid being distracted from immediate thoughts arising. Secondly, 'relaxed attention' emphasizes being immersed in sensory awareness with intuition, instead of goal-directed cognition. Precisely, relaxed attention is regarded as a 'receptive attention' (Chen, et al., 2014) constituting a more open and non-judgemental observation rather than an objective distinction or rational judgement of current experience that enables one to anchor the mindful mental process (Chen et al., 2017). Consequently, it can prevent a relapse of intense negative emotions and lead to a state of being at ease (Chen et al., 2017).

Opportunities for facilitating (meditative) mindful experiences through lifestyle leisure activities are plentiful. For

Table 1. Themes and concepts of meditative mindful experiences

Themes (Awareness)	Concepts
1. Paying attention to the experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sensory awareness • Relaxed attention
2. Living in the present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being in the moment • Not worrying about the past or future • A sense of timelessness
3. Non-elaborative awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bare perception • Non-conceptual insight

Source: Chen et al. (2017, p.5)

example, one mindful way to create a coffee break for lifestyle leisure is to enjoy the leisurely time of making the coffee and then simply paying attention to the drinking. During the coffee break, turning attention towards the sensory awareness associated with the present moment experiences, such as noticing the colours of the coffee, the aromas, the texture of the cup, the warmth on the fingers, the temperature of the water, and the taste of the coffee allows one's mind to stay settled. At the same time, relaxed attention also helps individuals with the simple knowing, or being curious about the activity of coffee time, without distraction from other stimuli such as a digital device. This mindful involvement enables an individual to stabilize the present moment experience and not become lost. Therefore, it leads to senses of physical and mental ease, with gratitude for the whole experience (Chen et al., 2017). Mindfully engaging in such a simple lifestyle leisure activity creates great opportunities for achieving wellbeing.

Other examples might be stopping to smell the fresh air, watching a sunrise or sunset, or practising gentle yoga to ground yourself in the present moment and find inner calm. Moreover, the application of informal mindfulness activities can be extended by creating individual leisure interests in a simple living space, such as art-based mindfulness activities or mindful gardening, among others.

Emerging mindfulness-based tourism products and services

It is foreseeable that the impacts of COVID-19 would drive a more mindful consumption for post-pandemic tourism

(Stankov et al., 2020), in particular, in the needs of wellbeing and healthcare. In turn, tourism marketers should take action to respond to this new demand to improve visitors' quality of life by proactively designing service plans to target their clients. Fortunately, informal mindfulness activities in a range of travel episodes may become a suitable option for fostering mindful consumption. For example, walking in a national park evokes strong sensory awareness, or star gazing produces a sense of calmness. Such experiences connect to the traveller's inner mental space (Chen et al., 2017).

Over the period of COVID-19, mindfulness-based retreat products as an implementation of wellbeing or healing services, run by a micro-tourism business for meeting customer-centric demand, seem to have successfully emerged. Figure 1 shows an example of this type of product often seen operated in a remote and nature-based destination, mainly associated with a small group of visitors and facilitated by a professional coach. Basically, itineraries of mindful retreats are planned for creative combinations of embodied formal and informal mindfulness activities on multiple days. For instance, guided meditation and bodily movement for balancing body and mind (see Figure 2), practising gratitude in mindful eating, enjoying slow bushwalks, and relaxing in an outdoor beautiful landscape (see Figure 3) were used as wellbeing-enhancing lifestyle programs. The author attended mindfulness-based retreats in Taiwan as fieldwork for case studies in 2021. In the fieldwork, the retreat visitors reported that they had learned ways of living with ease and now felt less stressed out.



Figure 1. Example of Rainbow Mountain Retreat in a nature-based destination
Source: Provided by Rainbow Mountain Retreat, Hsinchu, Taiwan (2021)



Figure 2. Guided bodily movement
Source: Provided by Rainbow Mountain Retreat, Hsinchu, Taiwan (2021)



Figure 3. Relaxing in an outdoor landscape
Source: Provided by Rainbow Mountain Retreat, Hsinchu, Taiwan (2021)

Conclusions and implications

An essential contribution of this research is the introduction of meditative mindful experiences in action through informal mindfulness activities in leisure and tourism contexts. Through a review of two papers on this topic, 'sensory awareness' and 'relaxed attention' were discussed as the fundamental pathways to evoke a mental process of meditative mindful experience. It also recognised the worthwhile experiential benefits of mental ease that can be achieved by mindfully making time for leisure and tourism concerns. Potential opportunities for designing informal mindfulness engagements such as mindfulness retreat products for post-pandemic tourism were highlighted. Future research could explore more mindful offerings to respond to the demand for wider mindful consumption in lifestyle leisure and wellbeing tourism to traverse the new reality of the post-pandemic era.

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