

# *How coaching supervisors experience and use mindfulness within their practice: an IPA study*

Article

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# Mindfulness in coaching for coaches and developing managers: A critical review of definitions, challenges and practise

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## Abstract

This qualitative study aimed to explore the use of mindfulness in the practice of coaching supervision and the perceived contribution mindfulness makes to the nature and quality of supervision. Major constructs and dynamics of mindfulness in supervision and insights into the perceived benefits of mindfulness practice are considered. Fifteen in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with experienced coaching supervisors and analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Four major themes emerged with respect to the present and presence, attention and noticing, awareness, non-judgmental, and eight related subthemes. The challenges and applications for supervisors are explored, including mindfulness training to develop effective mindfulness coaching supervision. A coach supervisor interactive mindfulness framework is proposed to facilitate an understanding of the dynamics and content of the supervisor-supervisee relationship.

**Keywords:** *Coaching Supervision; Mindfulness; Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*

## 1. Introduction

During the past two decades there has been an increase in published research focusing on mindfulness across a variety of settings, from clinical to education, but also extending to benefits at work (see for example Good et al., 2015). These studies have been wide-ranging from randomized controlled trials, to neuroscience and qualitative studies (Frank and Marken, 2022; Vonderlin et al., 2020; Tang et al., 2015; Spence et al., 2008).

Passmore (2019b, p. 171) noted that few studies in coaching have considered “mindfulness with comparable intervention” or attempted to measure the “benefits” or impact on coaching practice or outcomes. In reviewing parallel disciplines, however, the evidence suggests mindfulness has positive effects in a number of areas, from well-being (Chan and Woolcott, 2007) and performance (Jha et al., 2010) to cognitive processing (Zieden et al., 2010) and present moment awareness (Turner, 2008). Such impacts are likely to be beneficial not only for coaches but also for coaching supervisors. This study aimed to explore supervisor perspectives as to their experiences of using mindfulness as part of their practice and its impact on their work.

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## **2. Literature Review**

This study will consider two aspects. Firstly, the field of mindfulness, with a specific focus towards coaching, and coaching supervision. Secondly, the field of coaching supervision. Initially, it may help to establish the definitions of each.

### **2.1 Defining mindfulness**

There are many definitions of mindfulness in the literature (Greif et al., 2022; Van Den Assam and Passmore, 2022), some of which were particularly useful in guiding the front-end work and conceptualization for this research (Nilsson and Kazemi, 2016). According to Longshore (2015, p.15), Kabat-Zinn (1994), Brown and Ryan (2003) and Langer (2000), “mindfulness in its most basic conceptualization is awareness of experience with acceptance”. This conceptualization of mindfulness is expanded by each author as follows:

- a) Mindfulness is “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4);
  - b) It is “open or receptive attention to, and awareness of, ongoing events and experience” (Brown and Ryan, 2004, p. 242);
  - c) It is “a flexible state of mind in which we are actively engaged in the present, noticing new things and [being] sensitive to context” (Langer, 2000, p. 242).
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When exploring the debate within coaching, Marianetti and Passmore (2010) consider mindfulness to be “a state of mind that cultivated regularly promotes an inclusive and authentic experience of the present moment”. Another definition sees mindfulness as “[a] motivated state of decentred awareness brought about by receptive attending to present moment awareness” (Cavanagh and Spence (2013, p.117).

## **2.2 Defining coaching and supervision**

Coaching has been explored and defined by the literature from a number of perspectives. Since it draws on various areas of knowledge and disciplines, there are many definitions of coaching (Bachkirova et al., 2017, 2018; Passmore et al., 2013). Depending on the subject or nature of research, some definitions are more appropriate than others. Since this research is about the ongoing professional development of the supervisees, the definition offered by Silbee (2012) more than many others reflects the focus and purpose of the research.

“... [We will] define [coaching] quite broadly as that part of a relationship in which one person is primarily dedicated to serving the long-term development of effectiveness and self-generation in the other” (Silbee, 2010, p. 4).

Clutterbuck has suggested supervision is “the practice of reflecting on your client work” (Clutterbuck et al., 2016, p. 5). Hawkins and Shohet (2012, p. 60) offer a more elaborate definition as follows:

“Supervision is a joint endeavour in which a practitioner with the help of a supervisor, attends to their clients, themselves as part of their client practitioner relationships and the wider systemic context, and by so doing improves the quality of their work,

transforms their client relationships, continuously develops themselves, their practice and the wider profession”.

Professional bodies have also been keen to offer their perspective. The Association for Coaching (2019, p. 1) defined supervision “as a formal and protected time for facilitating a coach’s in-depth reflection on ... practice with a coaching supervisor”. The definitions of supervision are still debated and reflect the dynamic nature of coaching supervision. Some of these have questioned the perception of a hierarchical aspect of supervision implied by the term, and its application in case management and clinical settings. They have advocated that it may be more helpful to view the process as super-vision, emphasising the overview inquiry nature of the process over the normative aspects of the process (Passmore and McGoldrick, 2009).

## **2.3 Effects of mindfulness**

Mindfulness has a positive impact on attention, cognition, emotions, behaviour and working memory across various discipline. It also has a broad impact on health and wellbeing and workplace outcomes in terms of performance and relationships (Good et al., 2016, pp.115, 118, 122-132; Passmore, 2019a; Passmore and Marianetti, 2007). Mindfulness can improve attention in terms of “stability” (Smallwood and Schooler, 2015), “control” (Ocasio, 2011) and “efficiency” (Neubauer and Fink, 2009), reduce mind wandering and the effect of distracting information (Hasenkamp et al., 2012; Brewer et al., 2011; Tang et al., 2007; Cahn et al., 2013). In so doing, mindfulness “appears to influence emotions via attention” and the “reactivity to emotional stimuli” (Good et al., 2016, p.120). As well it can also reduce the negative affect of these (Arch and Craske,

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2010) and subdue the reaction to positive stimuli (Brown et al., 2013; Desbordes et al., 2012; Taylor, et al., 2011).

Furthermore, mindfulness can increase cognitive capacity and flexibility (Good et al., 2016; Walsh, 1995) and working memory (Roeser et al., 2013). Mindfulness and attention have been shown to be related to cognitive performance (Smallwood and Schooler, 2015) while mindfulness meditation has been associated with creativity, divergent and convergent thinking (Colzato et al., 2012). Mindfulness training has a positive effect on cognitive tasks “that required sustained attention and executive processing efficiency” (Zeidan et al., 2010, pp. 597, 602, 603) as it has on improving students’ retention of material presented in class (Ramsburg and Youmans, 2014).

In terms of research in organizations, Passmore and Marianetti (2007, p. 133) report “physiological benefits, contentment, job satisfaction and communication significantly increased or improved with mindfulness training whereas tension, anxiety, nervousness and physical symptoms of stress significantly decreased”. Furthermore, Passmore (2019a, p.108) reports “individuals who were more mindful at work provided higher performance, ... a positive relationship between higher manager ratings and higher individual mindfulness, ... and self-compassion was positively associated with mastery goals and negatively associated with performance goals”.

## **2.4 Contributions and challenges of coaching supervision**

“Even though the scope of coaching supervision research is still rather limited ... recognition of supervision’s importance and its increasing uptake have been consistently identified across the coaching field ...” (Bachkirova et al., 2020, p.16). At this point in

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time, the focus of the main functions of coaching supervision is about “developing the competence and capability of the coach, provid[ing] a supportive space for the coach to process the experiences ... with clients, and encourage[ing] professional practice related to quality, standards and ethics” (Bachkirova et al., 2020, p.7). These contributions range from the operational such as “working through a client challenge” (McAnnaly et al, 2019, p.12), to organisational development and impact (Hawkins and Schwenk, 2011). Contributions related to the developmental function include “the development of insights and new perspectives” (Grant, 2012, p.21) and the “continual growth and development of practice” (Jepson, 2016, p.137), both of which help to ensure “good quality coaching particularly in dealing with difficult cases” (Grant, 2012, p.21).

Bachkirova et al. (2020, p.15) consider that “coaching supervision had a significant buffer effect on coaches' job satisfaction when they experienced a high amount of work-related mental strain”. Furthermore, they see “the value of supervision is in the reflective space” it offers (e.g. Armstrong and Geddes, 2009) to present and explore cases (e.g. Butwell, 2006) with an opportunity to be challenged and to validate one’s practice (e.g. Lawrence and White, 2014)” and “in promoting continuous learning (e.g. McGivern, 2009) and development of reflexivity (e.g. Hodge, 2016)”. The challenges related to coaching supervision are with respect to choosing “appropriate approaches and processes during supervision ..., how to skilfully work with dilemmas ..., how to work with low levels of trust” (Bachkirova et al., 2020, p.17), and the self-deception of coaches (Bachkirova, 2015).

The review of the literature revealed that mindfulness has a direct impact and effect on the intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of the individual. In addition, the role of supervision has been clearly acknowledged to be about developing the competence and

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capability of the coach. However, the definitions for both mindfulness and supervision themselves are still being debated (Van Den Assam and Passmore, 2022). The “theoretical work in coaching supervision is piecemeal” and in spite of “the diversity of practice and contexts, no specific theoretical model for effective coaching supervision exists” (Bachkirova et al., 2020, pp. 9, 10).

Considering these gaps, the focus of this study is to identify and describe from the practising coaching supervisors’ perspective what are the meaningful dynamics and themes in mindful coaching supervision. In so doing, this study seeks to contribute to the furtherance of the development of effective mindful coaching supervision and the coaching supervisors who use it. The study is an initial step aimed to gain a better understanding of this area of practice, and answer the research question *How do coaching supervisors experience and use mindfulness within their practice?*

The term coaching supervision in this study is used to describe the role or function of the coaching supervisors who participated in the research. All coaching supervisors interviewed were both coaches and supervisors who supervised other coaches and who also practiced mindfulness in their supervision of these coaches.

### **3. Method**

This research took a phenomenological and social constructivist approach to the study of coaching supervisors and their use of mindfulness. Phenomenology considers “what our experiences of the world are like” and “how to examine and comprehend lived experience”

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(Smith et al., 2009, pp. 11, 21). Furthermore, phenomenology “sees behaviour as determined by the phenomena of experience rather than by external, objective and physically described reality” (Remenyi et al., 1998, p. 34). Social constructionist theory considers “the process by which phenomena in the social world are formed and sustained by social structures and interactions rather than being constants that conform to natural laws” (Somekh and Lewin, 2011, p. 329). A social constructivist approach allows for the meaning of the supervisors’ experience to emerge, and be interpreted and integrated into a number of major themes and concepts (Crotty, 1998).

An inductive approach and a qualitative methodology with a ground-up view were employed to explore what mindfulness meant to the coaching supervisors in their supervision practice (Creswell, 2007). The inductive approach was considered congruent with the interpretive approach for the analysis of data discussed below. The themes which emerged were “strongly linked to the data themselves” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 83).

Since IPA is appropriate to facilitate our understanding of the supervisors’ lived and shared experiences of mindfulness in coaching supervision, it was selected for the analysis of the data. It provided “intensive qualitative analysis of detailed personal accounts” and helped to explore, describe and interpret “the means by which supervisors made sense of their experiences” (Smith, 2011, pp.10; Denicolo et al., 2016; Mousakas, 1994). IPA was consistent with the purpose of this qualitative research and “the epistemological position of [the] research question” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 46). The emphasis of the interpretive approach was “grounded in the language of the people [coaching supervisors] studied and as much as possible on their own words and

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concepts” (Huberman and Miles, 2002, p. 49). In keeping with the philosophical orientation of interpretivism and the inductive approach to this research (Spinks, 2018, p. 8), many coaching supervisors’ contributions included in this paper are quoted verbatim or have been paraphrased.

### **3.1 Participants**

Coaching supervisors who practiced mindfulness in their supervision were identified and recruited through purposeful sampling. The sample obtained was based on referrals from coaching colleagues; practicing coaches; university coaching faculties, their staff and researchers; and professional coaching organizations, i.e., International Coaching Federation, the Association for Coaching, Global Supervisors’ Network and the Association of Coaching Supervisors. The sample comprised 15 coaching supervisors, all of whom were both experienced coaches and coaching supervisors. All had training or qualifications in coaching, and the large majority (13) had had training or possessed qualifications in supervision. The mean length of their coaching experience was 18.4 years, with a mean of 10.8 years of supervision. Their age range was 45 to 77 years with a mean of 58.9 years. The gender ratio was 80 percent female to 20 percent male. The participants interviewed were primarily from the UK and continental Europe.

### **3.2 Procedure**

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Data were collected through face-to-face and on-line interviews between November 19, 2019 and April 21, 2020. A semi-structured Interview Schedule was developed with questions informed by the literature reviews of mindfulness and supervision. To ensure the participants' contributions were their own, no definitions, information or suggestions related to mindfulness or supervision were provided in the questions or at any time during the interviews. The interviews provided the participants with optimum breadth and flexibility to “express their concerns and make their claims on their own terms” and for “insights into [their] lived experiences” to emerge. (Rose et al., 2015, p. 237; Smith et al., 2009, p. 42). Consequently, a well-developed and deeper sense of meaning in terms of the supervisors' use of mindfulness was found.

Prior to the interview, each participant was briefed and provided with an Information Sheet describing the research. Each was requested to sign a consent form, which stated they could withdraw from the research at any time. All interviews were audiotaped and professionally transcribed verbatim. A few days after the interviews were completed the data were transferred from voice files to written transcripts, checked for completeness and analysed side by side and in detail. The data were securely stored and anonymized. Ethical approval for the research was granted through the University.

### **3.3 Data analysis**

The data analysis process for IPA involves three basic activities - “multiple reading [of the transcripts] and making sense”, “transforming notes into emergent themes”, and “seeking relationships and clustering themes” (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014, pp. 12-13), which entail the following specific steps.

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The *first* requires an immersion into the “original data”, which for this study meant listening to the voice recordings and reading and re-reading the written transcripts of the 15 interviews (Smith et al., 2009, p.82).

The *second step* considers the “semantic content and language use on a very exploratory level”, keeping “an open mind and noting everything of interest within the transcript” (ibid., p.83). This step comprised three distinct exploratory processes, one which was “analysing the transcript to describe content”, another “how the content and meaning were presented” and the third considered the “conceptual” and “interpretive” levels of the data. (ibid., p.83-88).

The *third step* was one of “developing emergent themes” by considering “discrete chunks of transcript”, which involves a “synergistic process of description and interpretation”, turning these into “concise and pithy” statements and themes, which “reflect the participant’s original words [and lived experience] and the thoughts of the analyst’s interpretation” (ibid., p.91-92).

The *fourth step* involves finding “connections across emerging themes” by identifying patterns and differences or contrasts between themes, from which a “superordinate theme” emerges. This process includes identifying “contextual or narrative elements”, the “specific function of [emergent themes] in the transcript” and the frequency with which these appear and are supported (ibid., p.92-99).

These four steps are not mutually exclusive. The step which followed these considered the next coaching supervisor’s transcript, which meant revisiting, reconfiguring or

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relabelling themes in previously analysed cases. The authors followed these steps in reviewing and analysing the data collected for this research.

## 4. Results

The purpose of the research was to invite coaching supervisors (the participants) to respond to what mindfulness in supervision meant to them in their own words. In spite of not having been provided with any definitions, information or suggestions related to mindfulness or supervision by the researchers, participants' responses did reflect aspects of definitions of mindfulness proposed by Kabat-Zinn (1994), Brown and Ryan (2003) and Langer (2000) noted above. These aspects reflected the participants' philosophy and understanding of mindfulness in coaching supervision and provided the basis of the themes which emerged from the interview data as shown in Table. 1.

**Table. 1: Major and sub themes from IPA analysis**

Major themes	Sub themes
1. Present and presence	"At its heart, mindfulness is being present" Presence as enabler of mindfulness and the present
2. Attention and noticing	The purpose of attention and noticing How they complement each other
3. Awareness	Purpose of awareness Benefit and challenges of awareness
4. Non-judgmental	Enhancing the present and presence, attention and noticing, and awareness Enabling quality supervision

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## 4.1 Displaying presence in the present

*“At its heart, mindfulness is being present”*. It is helpful before considering participants’ experience to explore the concepts of present and presence. Firstly, when participants spoke about being in the present moment, this felt experience was contrasted by them with past or imagined futures. Second, the dwelling in the present moment was manifested in the presence they believed their clients felt during coaching supervision sessions.

The present was one of the concepts which was often used by participants in describing their philosophy of mindfulness and its role in their coaching supervision practice. Participants often viewed the present as being part of, or influenced by, mindfulness. Being in the present allowed them to be aware and open to what happened in their supervision sessions and to observe their own reactions to what occurred therein.

“When I’m in the session, if I am feeling challenged or triggered in any way, then for me ... the compassionate elements of mindfulness help to steady and ground me, so keeping me present and connected rather than disappearing into my head”

Participants considered mindfulness to enhance the capability and capacity of supervisees to actually be fully present in the here and now. Specifically, coaching supervisors considered the function of the present in practising mindfulness to make connections between the present and other concepts related to mindfulness, including being more aware. One supervisor summed up her position on the present as follows:



“My philosophy of mindfulness is about being fully present in the moment to all that’s happening and to all that you are sensing in your body, and using the self as an instrument for coaching or supervision”.

*Presence as enabler of mindfulness and the present.* Participants’ considered presence to be another key concept of mindfulness in the coaching supervision relationship. They saw presence as an enabler of mindfulness and the present. For example, two supervisors noted:

“Mindfulness is about presence; about being here and now; noticing where my attention is, how that may show up with my clients; and what may be happening for them”

“Presence is the capability and capacity of supervisees to be fully present and aware of silence as well as the actual structure of the session”.

Another participant described how presence contributes to supervision practice:

“Presence plays a role in the way I start up and use mindfulness with myself to be fully present for the supervisee. It helps me take care of myself and being in the right state when I’m coming into supervision. Presence develops my capacity for embodiment and creating a safe space for supervisees in developing rapport with supervisees. It reduces stress and calms down supervisees to help me be present and de-stressed. Presence increases the psychological safety experienced by the supervisees. Finally, I look for the presence of ability, capability, values that are being looked at, you know, and authenticity is a huge one, which I think would be the biggest one”.

## **4.2 Attention and noticing**

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*The purpose of attention.* Participants' noted that attention in supervision requires significant personal and professional skill, which were described as follows:

"The supervisor and supervisee both need to focus their attention. They are paying attention to the whole body-mind-feeling state of being. Supervisees are paying attention to the breath or the mantra of how the supervisor introduces the session. The supervisor and supervisee are paying attention to what is happening around them".

*The purpose of noticing.* Mindfulness was reported by participants to have sharpened their capacity to notice. It also helped their supervisees to notice themselves and bring their attention to what is occurring in the present. Important for their practise was that participants noticed their impact on supervisees. Helping supervisees to slow down and to notice where their attention is was considered to be useful for both the coaching supervisors and the relationship, in terms of informing supervisees how they show up for their own clients. One coaching supervisor described this as follows:

"Part of helping supervisees to notice is about understanding what's going on for the supervisees themselves and how they can be more present with their own clients".

*How they complement each other.* Participants considered attention and noticing to be inter-related concepts within the practice of mindfulness supervision. It is the interaction or their complementarity which helps to clarify their distinct contribution to practice, as illustrated by one supervisor's poignant summary:

"I practice as mindfully as I have capacity at any given time and my awareness and noticing is where my attention and my client's attention is. And how we come back to the present, because that is all there is, is how my awareness and noticing shows up in my work".

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### **4.3 Awareness**

*Purpose of awareness.* Participants' identified and acknowledged awareness to be one of the most important concepts in their philosophy and practise of mindfulness. One participant described the role of awareness in mindful coaching supervision as follows:

"When mindfulness is implicitly or explicitly brought to supervision, it's an awareness practice which will increase awareness of what's going on in the supervisee in the present moment in the mind-body system. This practice is purposeful around heightening and increasing awareness as supervisees think about supervisory issues, and particularly about emphasizing non-judgmental awareness".

*Benefits and challenges of awareness.* The benefit of awareness for coaching supervisors and supervisees was that they both were "aware of those moments, in an encounter when something deeply personal just touches the dialogue and they can sense it". However, at times coaching supervisors noted there was concern for supervisees using awareness in dealing with the issues and choices supervisees had while practising in the moment. Furthermore, some coaching supervisors were more able to relate to using mindfulness than others. Consequently, it appeared that supervisees raising their awareness in the moment with their own clients could be challenging for these supervisees themselves, as well as their own coaching supervisors and the supervision session.

### **4.4 Being non-judgmental**

*Enhancing mindfulness and enabling quality supervision.* Coaching supervisors considered being non-judgemental, including accepting and compassionate, to be part of the supervisory relationship, in how the relationship was conducted and the quality of it ensured. Non-judgemental also appeared to be the source or means for enhancing the

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other three concepts of mindfulness in the use of coaching supervision, i.e. present and presence, attention and noticing, and awareness.

Participants considered the non-judgmental concept as an integral part of their philosophy and their practise of mindfulness and supervision. The concept was considered by them to enable events to unfold in supervision and to allow whatever to arise without expectation. Supervisees were able to be in contact with the “felt sense” of supervisory issues and to connect with what was emerging in their present moment awareness, a key concept in mindfulness. For example,

“So my philosophy I suppose is about self-care, quality relationships, meaningful work and inner harmony, and inner harmony is about self-kindness and without judgment. I guess the non-judgemental aspect is being more self-compassionate and less judgmental about oneself”.

In summary, the above results identified a number of themes based on the several key concepts and their place in the practice of mindful coaching supervision. These concepts were presence, the present and the relationship between them; attention and noticing and the relationship between them; the purpose, benefits and challenges of self-awareness; and, being non-judgmental. The coaching supervisors’ contribution of these concepts were highlighted in and illustrated by various explanations and quotations related to their application and use in practice.

## 5. Discussion

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## **5.1 Interconnectedness of major themes**

The major contributions which emerged from the research identified and described the participants' perspectives of the meaningful dynamics and themes in mindful coaching supervision and their interconnectedness. These support the phenomenological approach to the research which was “not reductionist but holistic” (Remenyi et al., 1998, pp. 4, 36). The themes were usually not presented as stand-alone constructs or concepts of mindfulness by the coaching supervisors but often in terms of the context or relationship these had to each other. This interconnectedness characterised the complexity of the use of mindfulness in coaching supervision and the nature of the relationship between coaching supervisors and supervisees as described by the participants.

## **5.2 Contributions from the participants and the literature**

Coaching supervisors' contributions with respect to the positive effects of mindfulness are also reflective and generally supported by the literature reported in section 2.3 above. In particular, these concern the content of definitions of mindfulness provided by Kabat-Zinn (1994), Brown and Ryan (2004) and Langer (2000); and supervision provided by Hawkins and Shohet (2012) which stresses the joint endeavour of the supervisor-supervisee relationship in which the practitioner works with the supervisor. Additional literature with respect to well-being (Chan and Woollcott, 2007), performance (Jha et al., 2010), cognitive processing (Zieden et al., 2010), present moment awareness (Turner, 2009), and mindfulness promotion of inclusiveness and authentic experience of the present moment (Marianetti and Passmore, 2010), offer further support to the participants' contributions. However, no evidence emerged from the participants of this study that

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coaching supervision was hierarchical conceptually or in practise. Rather quite the opposite was found, in that the supervisor-supervisee relationship was considered to be based on mutual respect and the supervisee's needs and goals.

### **5.3 Implications for the coaching supervisor-supervisee relationship**

The results of this study related to the interconnectedness of the supervisor-supervisee relationship provided the basis for explaining what transpired during supervision.

There is an exchange between the coaching supervisor and the supervisee, which includes the four themes of mindfulness in supervision. These themes, which may initially emanate from the coaching supervisor, would also appear to be part of a reciprocal dynamic in and of the supervisory relationship itself. Since the four themes are not mutually exclusive, there may also be reciprocity between and across all four themes. However, since only coaching supervisors were included in this research, it is only their perspectives on the exchange which can be offered at this time.

### **5.4 Importance of providing an enabling context**

Participants often spoke of creating or providing space for supervisees which was mutually beneficial for both coaching supervisors and supervisees. The meaning of creating this space essentially referred to the recognition or acknowledgment by coaching supervisors of their supervisees' presence during supervision, particularly at the beginning and in assessing clients (Möller and Kotte, 2022). In creating space for supervisees, participants often began their supervision sessions by focusing their attention and attuning their own feelings and embodied sensations as well as those of their supervisees. This included an awareness of the environment around them.

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The purpose of the space allowed supervisees to feel safe to openly discuss any issues, professional or personal, and to reflect on approaches or solutions thereto. Coaching supervisors could explore their identities as practitioners and to see themselves more holistically including their own development. According to one participant:

“The space informed the way I respond to issues, which is generally to pause, let them come in and try to hold them in the space between us, to come at it with enquiry and noticing”.

## **5.5 Challenges for coaching supervisors**

There was a range of perspectives amongst the coaching supervisors regarding their interpretation and use of mindfulness in practice. Some claimed to have a natural affinity for mindfulness whereas others suggested their relationship or capacity for mindfulness varied. For example, one participant considered “mindfulness in coaching as being explicitly or implicitly brought into supervision because coaching supervisors have a depth of mindfulness which influenced the way they show up as supervisors”.

Not all supervisees were considered to appreciate mindfulness or its impact or effect. Coaching supervisors were at times reluctant to use the label of mindfulness or specifically refer to it in practice for fear of apprehension or it being misunderstood by supervisees. In response, they would integrate concepts or elements of mindfulness in their supervision practice, which would not stand out as being related to mindfulness. Others did not frame their coaching supervision practice around mindfulness but rather considered it to be about learning and change.

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The challenge for coaching supervisors handling difficult supervision situations was commented on by them. When kindness was present supervisees were more able to be open to reflect on their experience, even where it was difficult, unwanted, or it involved change. These challenging situations allowed the coaching supervisors and supervisees to connect without judgment, with compassion and acceptance. These situations helped supervisees to transcend the notion that supervision was only about quality assurance of client interactions.

These challenges may be seen to have important considerations for the mindfulness training of coaching supervisors. Questions such as whether mindfulness could be included in their training, or should be added to their competencies as part of the development of mindful coaching supervisors, takes on an important meaning for the development of coaching supervision.

## **5.6 Limitations of the research**

The study was a qualitative study, the results of which may not be generalizable to all coaching supervisors. Only coaching supervisors' accounts of their use of mindfulness in supervision and their interpretation of supervisees' experience with mindfulness were included in this research. Furthermore, since the study only included experienced coaching supervisors, less experienced supervisors may have had different views.

## **5.7 Further research**

Much useful qualitative research remains to be done to enhance the understanding of mindful coaching supervision. However, engaging realist perspectives and quantitative methods in observing the impact of the research would also offer new questions and

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insights to follow on from this study. For example, neuroscience studies of coaching supervisors or quantitative studies evaluating mindful supervisors and non-practicing mindful supervisors, would be useful for future investigation. Measuring the impact of coaching supervisors using mindfulness with those using other methods is another area of interest. These examples offer additional dimensions for understanding both the practice and enhancement of the theory of mindful coaching supervision and the development of mindful coaches.

## **6. Conclusion**

The research was designed to explore the felt experience of coaching supervisors and their relationship with mindfulness. The literature provides compelling evidence of the power of mindfulness as a generic intervention, and recent work has summarised the contribution coaching supervision can make to coaching. In this study the evidence suggests that experienced coaching supervisors also value mindfulness. They see it as helping them in managing their present moment focus, and how their supervisees experience their supervisors' presence during sessions. Instrumental in this regard were attention, noticing, awareness and being non-judgmental.

The coaching supervisors' lived experience of mindfulness in supervision should become an essential ingredient for supervisor training. Greater attention to coaching competencies, and other guidance to highlight the value mindful practice, can advance the contribution of supervision as a supportive learning space for coaches. In this way, the study seeks to make a contribution to the furtherance of the development of effective mindful coaching supervision and the coaches who use it and are part of it.

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