

# **Using Mindfulness and a Resiliency Based Pedagogy to protect Forensic Psychology students from Secondary Trauma in teaching**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper I will be reflecting on the development of a mindfulness and resilience based pedagogy in Forensic Psychology. I will describe how I approached this using the 'What' reflection model by Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper (2001) which asks three questions:

1. What?
2. So What?
3. Now What?

The paper concludes with recommendations for how Forensic Psychology could be taught in a way that reduces the risk of secondary trauma for Forensic Psychology students by using a Mindfulness and Resiliency Based Pedagogy.

## **Key words**

Forensic; Psychology; Pedagogy; Mindfulness; Resiliency.

## **What?**

I am a Senior Lecturer at the Manchester Metropolitan University teaching on the British Psychological Society (BPS) accredited BSc Forensic Psychology and MSc Forensic Psychology programmes as well as the Post Graduate Diploma in Forensic Psychology. I am also a Chartered Forensic Psychologist and HCPC registered Practitioner Psychologist [Forensic]. I was asked to design a new unit entitled Ethics in Forensic Psychology for Level 6 final year BSc Forensic Psychology students. As a unit leader I was mindful that ethical dilemmas in Forensic Psychology can provide an emotive and potentially traumatising arena as they normally attend to situations where something has gone 'wrong' and hence relate to issues where harm has been caused to another individual through offending or unethical behaviour in a forensic context. In addition, I was aware that statistically there was a high likelihood that the students I was teaching could both be direct or indirect victims of crime and/or have convictions for offending.

Thus, I found myself in the ethical dilemma of how to teach students about the complex ethical issues in Forensic Psychology but without causing them secondary trauma because of being exposed to material and debates in relation to these.

## **So what?**

In order to explore how to approach this dilemma I started with the scientist-practitioner or Boulder Model (Shapiro, 2002) and explored what literature existed in this area already.

Day & Tytler (2011) applied the principles of signature pedagogy to Post-Graduate Forensic Psychology teaching. A signature pedagogy has four dimensions (Sullivan et al., 2007):

1. Surface Structure (the content of the teaching)
2. Deep Structure (underlying theory)
3. Tacit Structure (values)

#### 4. Shadow Structure.

The surface structure for Forensic Psychology relates to the content that is required in an undergraduate programme and is determined by the British Psychological Society [BPS] for accreditation. However, Day and Tytler (2011) suggested that Forensic Psychology training should ensure that the academic component of the training is connected to actual practice (deep structure) and that students should be taught to act morally and ethically (tacit structure) given the nature of Forensic Psychology involves the legal context, risk and culpability. Furthermore Day and Tytler (2011) suggested that students should be taught Forensic Psychology through developing problem-solving skills and the opportunity to apply this knowledge in an authentic context. Barrows and Tamblyn (1980) note that Problem-Based Learning (PBL) is different from Problem-Solving Learning because the PBL attends to real-life problems (Azer, 2008). Thus, the best mechanism for PBL is when Forensic Psychology students are provided with real-world situations, and they are required to use their knowledge and skills to apply to the case (Day & Tytler, 2011). Furthermore, it is argued that PBL is a more effective mechanism for learning because it enables generalisation of knowledge across situations (Kiernan, Murrell & Relf, 2008). It is noted that this should include the use of lectures combined with case material and group discussion which encourages students to seek solutions and knowledge required to solve the problem (Kiernan, Murrell & Relf, 2008). It is argued that this pedagogy has the benefit of being realistic but also encourages active learning and a structure for resolving situations in which there may be uncertainty or ambiguity. Meta-Analytic studies have also supported the use of PBL (Van den Bossche & Gijbels, 2003) which concludes that PBL is superior because it provides meta-cognitive skills not just theoretical knowledge.

Hence, there appeared to be a positive rationale for adopting PBL in the teaching of Forensic Psychology. However, this did not appear to consider the potential impact that exposure to 'real-world' situations may have on student learning.

According to the BPS Division of Forensic Psychology 'Forensic Psychology is the application of psychology within the legal system to create safer communities and to assist people to find pathways away from criminal behaviour...and intervene in those engaging in harmful behaviours... all with the ultimate goal of contributing to the development of a safer society' (BPS, n.d.). Thus, implicit to the role of a Forensic Psychologist is the notion of discussing harmful behaviours and a society in which such behaviours may make individuals feel unsafe.

This provides an ethical dilemma in that the teaching of Forensic Psychology using PBL pedagogy would require exposing students to real-life situations in which harmful behaviour has occurred causing people to feel unsafe. Thus, whilst experienced forensic health care practitioners in the field may have become hardened to such exposure over time (Mulholland, 2015) experiencing depersonalisation to such information or compassion fatigue (Figley, 2013), I was concerned there was a danger that exposure to such stimulus could cause Vicarious Trauma (VT). VT is considered to comprise of a cluster of symptoms similar to PTSD resulting from the stress of being exposed to another person's trauma or suffering (Perron & Hiltz, 2006). This exposure can be either direct (being in contact with a person) or indirect (listening to or learning about a person's suffering) and one aspect of this is known as emotional contagion whereby when an individual is exposed to trauma in another human being they experience the emotions of this individual due to the innate process of empathy mirroring. Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) is similar to VT in that it may result in the same symptoms however this is more commonly associated with a single exposure to trauma and suffering in others (Branson, 2018).

Hence, students may be placed at risk of experiencing trauma responses due to exposure to real-life situations even when they have not directly experienced these. Furthermore, for those who have had similar shared experiences, exposure to such stimulus may trigger what is known as shared trauma or double exposure (Tosone et al., 2012).

I was also mindful that some students may have been direct victims of crime or indeed have convictions for offences. For example, in 2021 12.9 million offences occurred towards 2 out of 10 adults and 1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men have experienced some form of physical violence by an intimate partner (Office for National Statistics, 2021). Thus, it remained a reality that the students I was teaching could include people who had been either direct or indirect victims of crime. It is also estimated 1 in 3 men have a conviction (National Coalition against Domestic Violence, 2020). Hence, the ethical dilemma I faced was how to provide 'real-life' PBL in a way that would provide individual safety for all students to reflect on offending and minimise the potential for re-traumatisation or secondary traumatisation (Carello & Butler, 2014).

Whilst Trauma-Informed Pedagogy's exist (Imad, 2020) these predominantly discuss how to teach students with a history of trauma, rather than how to teach content that may be traumatising. However, they provided some useful guidance in terms of how teachers should provide connection and a sense of community by reminding them how to connect with the teacher outside of direct lesson contact and providing the option for students to assign themselves to groups. In addition, Trauma Informed Pedagogy also suggests the teacher should provide content of the information in advance, provide content descriptions for potentially triggering media, create a safe framework for discussions and value student input and feedback. However, as Carello and Butler (2014) highlight, teaching trauma is not the same as trauma-informed teaching. I was also conscious that the purpose of the teaching was also not to provide therapy (Carello & Butler, 2014) nor should the assignment encourage written emotional disclosures (WED) or award grades based on this. Instead, it is recommended that teachers should be mindful of how they teach. Furthermore, Newman (2011) suggests that traumatic content can be taught safely if the nature of the content is limited, the material is varied and information is provided to students on self-care. Mattar (2011) also states that this should be culturally informed.

In order to better understand ways in which student self-care could be considered, Parkin’s (2020) paper exploring developing resiliency in higher education was explored. This suggests that educators should start with the notion of providing a ‘culture of care’ which focusses on both staff and student well-being. The American Psychological Association defines resilience as “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress” (Building your Resilience, 2012). Parkin (2020) noted that factors such as uncertainty (not knowing what will happen in the future), volatility (unpredictable changes from one week to the next), absorption (listening to and having empathy for issues and anxieties experienced by others) and fear (apprehension about something bad happening) may contribute to lowering resilience. However, factors such as encouraging self-awareness, supportive networks, mindfulness, depersonalising events and positive framing could also increase resiliency. For example, Kriakous, Elliott and Owen (2019) found that higher mindfulness skills were associated with lower levels of poor coping in staff employed in forensic settings.

Parkin (2014) created a model of Personal Resiliency and Change outlining these factors placing them into 4 key areas: Emotions; Relations; Actions and Being.

Emotions	Relations	Actions	Being
• Self-Awareness	• Professional Support	• Vision and purpose	• Life Balance
• Optimism	• Social Support	• Confident decisions	• Maintain perspective
• Empathy	• Fairness and consistency	• Consistency	• Replenish Energy
• Robustness	• Help and be helped	• Building momentum	• Stay Healthy

• Partitioning			• In the moment
• Mindfulness			

*Table 1: A model of Personal Resilience and Change (Parkin, 2014)*

Thus, I began to consider how I could design the unit to hold these factors in mind. As a result, I developed an action plan for how this might be achieved when designing the unit (See Table 2 – Presented after the reference list).

The unit handbook provided the structure for the unit outlining what the content would include each week. This was also uploaded to Moodle 6 days before the lecture/workshop to allow students time to read the lecture slides. The outline of the workshop was provided but the content of the real-life scenario was not provided so as to prevent students being exposed to any such stimulus in an uncontained environment.

In Lecture 1 we discussed what we would choose to share and what we should choose to keep safe. This included not discussing anything that was still emotional painful or that was unresolved. We also introduced the concept of no-gossiping outside of the unit to others about what we discussed so people felt *safe*. Students were then introduced to ethical autobiographies (Bashe, Anderson, Handelsman & Klevansky, 2007). This is a method that encourages the person to reflect on their own values, ideas of right and wrong and the origins of these. It promotes *self-awareness* and they were also taught about 'meta-cognition' or thinking about thinking (Flavell, 1979). The students reflected on how factors such as their gender, religion, upbringing and culture had influenced their beliefs and how these had changed over time. The group discussion was balanced in that the students provided honest personal disclosures but did not overly disclose in an unsafe manner. I was pleased with this as I had received feedback from the unit they engaged in previously that they did not speak or engage. At the end of Workshop 1 they were asked to assign themselves to a group on Moodle of

their choice and if they did not mind which group we could do that for them (*provide connection and a sense of community*).

In the first workshop students were taught about the research in relation to *staying healthy* such as how to stay *present in the moment* using *mindfulness*. The purpose of this was ensure students would be supported to leave the teaching workshop feeling grounded and present and to have developed the skills to do this before any exposure to PBL. I have specialised training in mindfulness and there is no literature that has found any counter-indications from engaging in mindfulness (i.e. it does not cause harm).

I was conscious that students may find this difficult at first and be self-conscious and so I tried to select a mindfulness task that would not be too difficult for them. I selected a mindfulness observing task where students were guided to observe their body (such as how their feet felt on the floor, how their toe felt in their shoe, how their tongue felt in their mouth etc). I asked them to position themselves so their chairs were facing outwards so they were not looking at each other and I advised them they did not have to close their eyes they could just look at their lap if they wanted to. I was anxious as I had not delivered mindfulness with students before and so I was unsure how they would respond. I tried to stay mindful and monitor my own breathing to stay calm and composed and facilitate a feeling of safety and containment. At the end of the mindfulness observation I asked the students 'what did you notice?' and I was amazed by their responses. They were able to reflect on how sound had impacted on some of them being mindful, worrying about the future or the past and we discussed ways they could push these things to one side in their mind. We practised mindfulness at the end of every workshop.

Students were also given a structure for considering ethical issues using the 9 Step Model (Otto, Goldstein & Heilbrun, 2017) to support them to be able to *partition* the ethical issues into a series of steps, to enable them to feel more *confident in their decision making*. This also enabled them to set goals for



how they felt ethical issues could be prevented from occurring again providing them with a *vision* for actions for the future and *optimism* for the future.

In order to promote *consistency* I designed the block with the same structure each week. A 1 hour lecture introducing them to a different area of Forensic Psychology (e.g. Prisons, Hospitals, Community, Courts/Expert Witness etc). The lecture gave them a theoretical underpinning to the topic for the week and provided a *vision and purpose* for what the week would entail. After each lecture the students then had a 2 hour workshop which followed the same format each week. This consisted of exploring a case study which demonstrated the ethical issues discussed in the lecture. This was always selected using information which could be obtained online to ensure that any exposure to real life cases comprised of information which would not be classed as unsuitable for reading in a newspaper or watching on the television. Students were then asked to complete the 9 Step Model for each ethical dilemma they were faced with. The workshop followed a facilitative style whereby at each step of the model students gave feedback on their ideas enabling them to *help and be helped* in approaching the ethical issue. This enabled students to receive feedback and their input to be valued. They were also provided with a break in between the workshop to facilitate self-care and they were encouraged to stretch their legs, get a drink or use their phones if they wanted to in order to have a mental break from the content.

Throughout the weeks we were able to discuss complex ethical issues using online videos and recordings relating to real ethical issues in forensic psychology. After each case the students completed the 9 Step Model in groups and then added to their own ethical autobiography each week. This also included reflecting on how they could manage personal bias and reduce compassion fatigue.

In the last session we also explored how we felt the approach to support for the assignment could be given. To promote *fairness and consistency* I asked the students when they felt would be a fair time for questions to be answered on the Moodle platform. They felt this should be up until the final drop-in

session for questions so that students who did not leave their assignment to the last minute would not be disadvantaged. Thus, they were able to discuss the ethical dilemma of this situation and apply their learning to consider what they felt was *fair*. Students were also advised not to include their ethical autobiography and to just write a simple ethical reflection on what they had learned about their own risk of bias which did not contain anything that was emotive for them. This was to prevent students feeling obliged to write something personal to please me as the teacher and as an authority figure which could be dangerous for them (Carello & Butler, 2014).

At the end of the unit students completed a professional report using the 9 Step Model based on a real ethical dilemma for a prisoner who was granted parole. They were provided with 6 short extracts from newspaper articles to do this. The assignment also required them to complete an ethical reflection considering how their own position may have influenced their approach to the report. They were given two questions to choose from, one looking at the psychologist's decision making in relation to the prisoner's parole and the other looking at how a probation officer might manage the person in the community. They showed an excellent ability to grasp the ethical issues in the case and provided honest and *self-reflective* insights into their own position and how this may have influenced their approach to the assignment. The moderated average grade was 63.

## **Outcomes**

Feedback from students was sought in the mid and end of unit. They reported they 'enjoyed' the mindfulness and the use of real-life Forensic Psychology issues. Positive feedback was also given by students in the National Student Survey.

*'I enjoy the mindfulness part we do in our ethical practise in Forensic Psychology Unit, it might seem silly at first but it's really good, it's being considered and put directly into our workshops, I appreciate it being put in it should be put in all workshops/units'*

However, it was also noted that in the reflection aspect of the assignment some students disclosed how they had been both direct and indirect victims of crime as well as how some had relations who were convicted of offences. They disclosed this appropriately and with reflections on how this had shaped their view and how they had managed this in the assignment. This raised ethical issues about the choice of offence used in the assignment which had not been fully considered.

## **Now what?**

I felt the approaches used enabled the students to engage in PBL real-life case materials but in a way that was safe, contained and reduced the risk of secondary trauma. However, there were also things I could have improved such as having a choice of assignments in terms of the nature of the offence.

I also know that I should be mindful that I could be desensitized to emotive material after working for 20 years in forensic practice interviewing people who have committed offences and working with victims of trauma who have highly complex PTSD. Hence, I am used to hearing very detailed accounts of offending which other people may not be used to. Thus, I am aware I need to self-monitor for this and ensure that I develop an action plan to ensure students are protected from being exposed to material that may be harmful to them whilst at the same time facilitating their learning.

As a result of teaching on this unit I feel that more needs to be done to consider how the use of Mindfulness and Resiliency Based Pedagogy could be used to protect other Forensic Psychology students from Secondary Trauma in teaching. Hence, I have developed an action plan for myself and for other professionals in the field (See Table 2 – Presented after the reference list). This includes maintaining some of the things undertaken in this unit and also adding in additional things to protect students. I hope that this enables students in the future to feel safe in their learning.

## **Recommendations**

## Mindfulness and Resilience Based Pedagogy Guidance for Forensic Psychology:

1. Students should be taught: Self-care; Mindfulness; Partitioning; Meta-Cognitive Skills; Self-reflection; and Empathy. This should take place prior to any exposure to case material teaching.
2. Students and Teachers should engage in activities to promote self-awareness such as the completion of an ethics autobiography to support them to reflect on their own positioning, life experiences and potential for bias. This should include clear identification of strategies for how they will manage these.
3. Teachers should be trained in the risks of secondary trauma and how to use resiliency-based pedagogy to improve student learning. This should also include how to: create a culture of care in teaching; create certainty and predictability for student learning and how to provide positive reframing to reduce secondary trauma.
4. Practice Based Learning should be used to teach students.
5. A combination of Lectures, Case Materials and group discussion should be used in teaching. The content of these should be culturally informed, limited in exposure and varied.
6. Students should be provided with: opportunities for connection and a sense of community; a safe framework for discussions; content descriptions for potentially triggering media; contact details for support services if they experience any adverse effects.
7. Written Emotional Disclosures (WED's) should not be linked with awarded grades in the assignment.
8. Assignments should provide at least two options for students to choose from with different types of offences.
9. The BPS should be encouraged to provide guidance in their accreditation of Forensic Psychology courses on the potential for trauma with recommendations to promote a mindfulness and resiliency pedagogy in Forensic Psychology.

## Declaration

All materials included in the article represent the author's own work and anything cited or paraphrased within the text is included in the reference list. The work has not been previously published nor is it being considered for publication elsewhere. No potential conflicts of interest have influenced the author in reporting the findings completely and honestly.

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## Table 2 – Action Plan

What should I do?	How will I achieve this?
Include the use of lectures combined with case material and group discussion.	Each week provide a taught lecture followed by a workshop with case material and a group discussion.
Learning structure should be predictable whereby students know what they will be covering each week.	Follow the same format of a lecture followed by a workshop and group discussion. The content of each week's teaching will be included in the Unit Handbook which is accessible prior to commencing the unit.
Encourage students to seek solutions and knowledge required to solve the problem.	Students will be provided with the 9 Step Model of Ethics which guides them through a series of steps to enable them to solve the ethical problem.
Use PBL by providing real-life problems which involve uncertainty or ambiguity.	The case material will use real-life ethical issues in forensic psychology which are freely available online.
Provide connection and a sense of community by reminding them how to connect with the teacher outside of direct lesson contact and providing the option for students to assign themselves to groups.	Ask students to assign themselves to a group in Week 1. For those that do not do this, they will be assigned by the tutor in prior to Week 2 commencing.
Provide content of the information in advance.	Upload slides and workshop materials onto Moodle at least one week in advance.
Provide content descriptions for potentially triggering media.	Prior to all material being shown students will be advised of the nature of the content,



	length and that they may leave if they need to.
Create a safe framework for discussions.	Lecture 1 – engage in a contracting discussion with students setting the ground rules for a safe space.
Partitioning, Empathy and Optimism.	Students will be taught to use the 9 Steps Model to structure ethical debates.
Ensure the assignment does not encourage written emotional disclosures (WED) nor award grades based on this.	Design the assignment brief so it is clear learning outcomes which are not related to WED's.
Be delivered by a teacher who is Mindful.	I have had specific training in Mindfulness including a PG Cert in Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) and Intensive DBT training. Mindfulness is a core part of DBT and I have trained others in Mindfulness for over 10 years.
Be delivered by a teacher who provides support, values student input and feedback and models fairness and consistency.	Ensure in group discussions in the workshop that the 4 therapist skills are adopted to facilitate group discussions: Specific praise should be provided to every student contribution; Socratic questioning to facilitate discussions; Use the group to facilitate the learning points; Adopt a warm, validating, fair and optimistic manner.  Obtain mid unit and end of unit feedback.

<p>Ensure nature of the content is limited and the material is varied.</p>	<p>Each week a different topic will be selected so that this creates variation in the content. The content used for the PBL will be obtained from sources which do not require adult viewing ratings. For example, they will be chosen from newspaper clippings or television documentaries which do not have adult ratings.</p>
<p>Information is provided to students on self-care.</p>	<p>Students will be taught mindfulness and the benefits of this from week 1 before exposure to any potentially distressing stimulus. They will also be taught about resiliency and self-care throughout and practice mindfulness at the end of every workshop.</p>
<p>Material should be culturally informed.</p>	<p>Ensure that case studies across each week attend to a range of victims and perpetrators.</p> <p>Encourage open discussions about cultural influences on values in week 1.</p>
<p>Encourage students to engage in self-awareness.</p>	<p>Students will complete an Ethics Autobiography commencing in week 1 workshop and then build on this each week.</p>
<p>Students should engage in mindfulness to stay healthy and in the moment.</p>	<p>At the end of each week students will be taught mindfulness and engage in mindfulness activities instructed by the teacher.</p>
<p>Provide Life Balance.</p>	<p>Ensure the students are provided with a break in the workshop.</p>