



CLINICAL TIP

Mindfulness Training

Tanya Freedland, Susan Gaylord,
Jillian Wright-Martin, & Piper Meyer-Kalos, PhD, LP

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness has been defined as paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, without judgment.

Background

Mindfulness training is a practice carried forward from ancient times to the present day, to help the mind become calmer, as well as stronger and clearer. Mindfulness is not a practice designed to achieve any particular state of mind, although increased relaxation and focus may occur as a result. A regular practice of mindfulness will lead to greater awareness as well as increased acceptance of thoughts, feelings, and life experiences, while nurturing a compassionate sense of curiosity.

Mindfulness has been used effectively in a variety of populations, for various illnesses and conditions. Research shows that mindfulness is effective in improving a variety of mental and physical health outcomes; for example, improvements have been found with individuals who are suffering from depression, anxiety, chronic pain, fibromyalgia, heart disease, cancer, and obesity. There is evidence supporting improvements in quality of life for healthy people as well.

Isn't Mindfulness the same as Meditation?

No, there are many different kinds of meditation, most involve a person intentionally turn his or her attention inward. In mindfulness meditation, one usually places one's attention on either an external object, such as a candle, or an internal reference point, such as the breath, with the purpose of bringing one's attention to the present moment. Mindfulness may also be practiced informally, in everyday life. For example, one can practice mindfulness while washing the dishes or while taking a shower, by bringing one's attention to what one is doing, rather than thinking of something else.

When Should I Use Mindfulness Training in Clinical Practice?

Mindfulness training is especially helpful as a coping skill for stress and anxiety. It can be a wonderful way to begin and/or end a session. We also want to encourage clients to practice outside the session. It can be easier to use the skill during times of stress if they have practiced during more peaceful times.

The 7 Pillars of Mindfulness

The attitude we have when practicing mindfulness is important in determining how satisfying we find it. The pillars of mindfulness are helpful in developing this attitude.

1. Non-judgment

Being an impartial witness to your experience

2. Patience

Acceptance that things must unfold in their own time

3. Beginner's mind

Willingness to see everything as if for the first time

4. Trust

Learning to trust yourself and your feelings, despite prior mistakes

5. Non-striving

Focusing on being rather than doing

6. Acceptance

Seeing things as they actually are in the present

7. Letting be

Allowing an experience to be as it is without attaching value

Sample Session Skill: Sitting Meditation with Mindfulness of the Breath

1. Give an introduction to mindfulness:

Meditation is a way of training ourselves to align both mind and body. Through training in mindfulness, we can learn to be able to fully experience the present moment and accept the ups and downs of life.”

2. Using a slow and gentle tone of voice, give your client instructions for posture in sitting meditation:

“Begin by finding a stable seat. If you are sitting on a chair, let both feet be flat on the floor, and sit without leaning on the back of the chair. If you are sitting on a cushion on the floor, the legs should be loosely crossed, with knees lower than hips. Try to sit as tall as you can without becoming stiff, as if there were a string pulling the crown of your head toward the ceiling. Be sure to maintain the natural curve in your lower back. Your head should be resting comfortably, and not tilted either forward or back. Arms and shoulders are relaxed, with hands resting on your thighs. Your eyes can remain open, gazing softly downward about four to six feet in front, without fixating on anything. Your face and jaw are relaxed and your mouth may be slightly open, so that you are breathing out of both the nose and mouth.”

3. Model the posture for them using your own body to demonstrate positioning:

“do you notice how I relax my posture to let my shoulders move down away from my ears?”

4. Practice the meditation with them, using the following cues:

“Begin to notice your breath, be with your breath as it flows in and out of your body. There is no attempt to control the breathing; allow it to be as it is. If your mind wanders, just gently bring it back to being with the breath. If you have a thought or series of thoughts, note silently to yourself—thinking—and let them go, gently guiding your attention back to the breathing. Remember, there is nothing wrong with thoughts, they are just thoughts—the practice involves just noticing them and letting them go.”

5. Ask your client about the experience:

“What did you notice about your thoughts while trying this mindfulness practice?”

“In what ways does your body feel different from before?” “Do you have any questions about this practice or problems during the practice?”

6. If your client experiences difficulty, give some helpful feedback about common problems while learning to practice mindfulness. If it is helpful practice again: You may wish to remind them that

“it is normal for the human mind to have thoughts, and this practice is not designed to get rid of thoughts, just to notice them and let them go,” “frustration over persisting thoughts is normal, but if you experience frustration, just let that go, as well” “the moment when you notice your thought is the act of mindfulness.”

“you can allow your thoughts to arise and pass away, similar to clouds floating by” “it is okay to close your eyes, stand, or lie down if that is what works best for you.”

7. Encourage your client to practice mindfulness in his/her everyday life, for example, when washing dishes, taking a shower, or other daily activities.

Also encourage a daily short practice, such as five or ten minutes a day, to start. You might ask: “How might you fit this practice in your day?” “Would it be helpful for you to practice first thing in the morning, or before you go to sleep at night?” “Where in your home would you find a quiet place to practice mindfulness?” “Have you seen the free meditation timer apps for smartphones? Could you use one time your practice?”

SUGGESTED CITATION

Freedland, T., Gaylord, S., Wright-Martin, J., Meyer-Kalos, P. (2016). Mindfulness Training: The 7 pillars of mindfulness. Clinical Tip No. 3 (March, 2016): Center for Practice Transformation, University of Minnesota.



Mindfulness experts suggest practitioners teaching mindfulness skills must first be engaged in their own practice before teaching it to others. Try it out! Explore your own reactions to your experience. What did you learn? How can mindfulness practice contribute to your life and clinical practice?

Some Suggested Mindfulness Practices

There are other ways to practice mindfulness. Gather information about the ones below and give them a try!

- mindful walking
- body scan
- mindful driving
- mindful yoga
- mindful eating
- you can even practice
- mindful dish washing!

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