

Mindfulness in Psychotherapy

“Our deepest nature is to awaken and flower”

Some major causes of emotional distress

We live in a culture of distraction. Our minds are lured by an overload of stimulation. There are so many things vying for our attention: careers, families, media, music, advertising, cell phones, internet -- worries and concerns of all kinds.

We carry wounds from the past -- instances of trauma and abuse ranging from the relatively minor to the most serious and profound.

Genetic characteristics and predispositions also have an impact on our lives and the way we function.

And, we can find ourselves in life situations that cause us distress in many ways.

How is this distress manifest?

All these things can lead us to reduce our awareness as a way to protect and defend ourselves.

As we reduce our awareness, we often live our lives on automatic pilot, not really paying attention, absent-minded. We may read a page of a book and find that we have taken in nothing. We may drive home only to arrive and realize that we had intended to stop and pick something up along the way. The body is going about its business while the mind is distracted, caught by emotions,

thoughts, memories, and plans.

Living a distracted life on automatic pilot leaves us vulnerable to a downward spiral that leads to depression, anxiety, fear, irritation, physical symptoms, and problems in general. We find ourselves reacting automatically rather than responding thoughtfully or skillfully.

Our suffering increases as distractions and concerns lead us to stray from the present moment. So many things seem to conspire to pull us out of the present moment. But dwelling on the past can immerse us in regrets and depression, and worrying about the future can fill us with anxiety. Thoughtlessness and irritation can sabotage our most cherished relationships.

The good news - there is hope

Even in the face of so much distraction, irritation, and pain, there is hope. Human beings have a strong natural impulse toward health and healing. As Tara Brach says in her book *Radical Acceptance*, “Our deepest nature is to awaken and flower.”¹ But this impulse toward healing can be blocked or partially blocked by our distractions and our defenses.

Given this distress and the hope, what might some of our objectives be?

Reduced suffering (feel better, less depression, anxiety, irritation, etc.)

Enhanced tendency toward health and healing

More kindness toward self and others

Movement in the direction of our own greatest potential

Enhanced ability for thoughtful responding rather than automatic reacting

¹ Brach, Tara, *Radical Acceptance*, page 38

More compassion and empathy

Greater awareness of ourselves, others, and our surroundings

Better decision making

A skillful response to distress:

Mindfulness

Mindfulness, awareness, and acceptance are our allies in removing obstacles to our healing and growth. Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as paying attention on purpose, in the moment, and without judgment.² He tells us it can help us increase our thoughtful, skillful responses. It can help us feel better, make better decisions, and grow in the direction of our greatest potential. It can help us reduce suffering, depression, and anxiety. And it can help us have greater compassion and empathy.

Acceptance

The principle of acceptance encourages us to open up to the world of our experience. We are called upon to be aware of what is real in our lives. We let reality in in order to deal with it. Acceptance does not necessarily mean we condone any part of our experience, just that we acknowledge the truth that is in front of us. As we accept experience we have the option to deal with it in skillful ways.

What can we do to invite more mindfulness into our lives?

Mindfulness is not a pill that, once taken, does all the work for you. It requires our sincere effort. But since we have the natural impulse toward

² Kabat-Zinn, Jon, *Wherever, you go, there you are*, page 4

healing, our biggest job is to get out of our own way. We need to pay attention and accept our experience without judgment.

In a practical way, here are some things we can do to invite more mindfulness into our lives:

Meditation

We want to be able to disengage from mindless “automatic reacting.” We want to be able to engage in the mindful “skillfully responding,” calm mode.

The basic tool to do this is the intentional use of attention, acceptance, and awareness (meditation). By choosing what we are going to attend to and how we are going to attend to it, we invite mindfulness into our lives.

The following basic meditation instructions are from Kabat-Zinn’s book *Full Catastrophe Living*:³

1. Assume a comfortable posture lying on your back or sitting. If you are sitting, keep the spine straight and let your shoulders drop.
2. Close your eyes if it feels comfortable.
3. Bring your attention to your belly, feeling it rise or expand gently on the inbreath and fall or recede on the out breath (abdominal breathing).
4. Keep the focus on your breathing, “being with” each inbreath for its full duration and with each out breath for its full duration, as if you were riding the waves of your own breathing.
5. Every time you notice that your mind has wandered off the breath, notice what it was that took you away and then gently bring your attention back to your belly and the feeling of the breath coming in and out.
6. If your mind wanders away from the breath a thousand times, then your

³ Kabat-Zinn, Jon, *Full Catastrophe Living*, page 58

“job” is simply to bring it back to the breath every time, no matter what it becomes preoccupied with.

Moment-to-moment mindfulness during our daily lives.

Meditation is not just for moments sitting on a cushion or in a formal posture. In fact, we may get the most benefit from meditation during the times in our lives when we are troubled by the sadness, pains, and irritations of everyday life. When you are depressed or anxious or distressed in another way, go back to your meditation, back to your breathing. See if you can look deeply at your experience without judgment but with great interest.

Grounding

Being aware of our bodies in a focused way anchors us in the here and now. Activities such as the body scan, described below, can put us in touch with our bodies in a minute and present way. They ground us in this body at this moment.

Body scan

In the body scan you put careful attention on the parts of the body while in a relaxed posture in a quiet place. Often the scan begins with attention on the toes of one foot, and moves sequentially throughout the body.

Awareness of objects and experience

Awareness in itself can be healing. Take the time to slow down and notice where you are, who you are with, what you are doing. Sometimes holding and

really being aware of an object, a small stone perhaps, can be a grounding experience.

Breathing exercise: thoughts, feelings, and body sensations.⁴

Do this at least once a day, and any time you have troubled thoughts or feelings.

1. Take a break from what you are doing.
2. Bring feelings of kindness to yourself. (See “Kindness to self,” below).
3. Bring the focus of awareness to your inner experience and notice what is happening in your thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations.

Acknowledge and name your experience, such as “planning” or “worrying”.
4. Then gently redirect your full attention to your breathing, to each inbreath and each out breath as they follow one another. Your breath can function as an anchor to bring you into the present and help you tune into a state of awareness and stillness. (Opposite of automatic pilot).
5. Expand your awareness of your breathing so that it includes a sense of the body as a whole, your posture and facial expression.
6. Choose your next action. (preferably based on skillful responding).

⁴ Adapted from Segal, Williams, and Teasdale, *Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for depression*, page 184

Kindness to the self⁵

It is often difficult in times of stress and distress to bring thoughts of kindness to the self. The following may help us access kind, positive feelings:

Kindness to self

*“I am larger and better than I thought. I did not think
I held so much goodness.”* *Walt Whitman*

*“You can search throughout the entire universe for
someone who is more deserving of your love and affection
than you are yourself and that person is not to be found
anywhere.”* *Gautama Buddha*

1. Think about some act of giving you have done and appreciate yourself for having done it.
2. Think about a time you held back from hurting someone and rejoice in your own goodness.
3. Bring to mind something you have done or said that you feel was a kind or good action.
4. Bring to mind a time when you were generous or caring or contributed to someone's well-being.
5. Bring to mind a quality you like about yourself.
6. Bring to mind an ability or strength you recognize in yourself.

⁵ Inspired by Salzberg, Sharon, *Loving-kindness*

7. See yourself through the eyes of the grandmother (or other) who adored you.
8. Picture yourself as the child you once were, so vulnerable, so innocent, so tender, so deserving of love (you still are).

Recognize “mind moments”

If we are somewhat still, we can know the condition of our mind at any moment. If we look with mindfulness, we can be aware of what we are feeling at each point in time. Sometimes when we check in, we will find that we feel happy and optimistic. At other times we may find that we feel sad and hopeless. In fact, during a day, many thoughts, feelings, and sensations will come and go. These are mind moments.

It is a useful skill to be able to use our attention to be aware of mind moments, and it is also important to learn the perspective this awareness can teach us.

One of the things it can teach us is that we are more than our thoughts and feelings. Sometimes in the thrall of a dark emotion, it can seem as if the world will always feel dark and gloomy. But the emotion we are feeling is part of a mind moment. It will come and it will pass away again.

Often our thoughts and feelings bring us messages we need to heed. Welcome your mind moments, listen to them, and look deeply for any message they may be bringing, and then let them go on their way. They will be followed by others, and we can learn to deal with them with awareness and skill.

Experiences of nature, art, and beauty

Experiences of nature, art, and beauty can be healing in and of themselves.

Listening

Listening to others is a valuable mindfulness activity. Practice listening from the heart, just listening without judgment and without planning what you are going to say next. Listening from the heart can ground you in the present moment. It is a gift to the speaker and at the same time, a gift to yourself.

Accessing inner wisdom

We all have deep wisdom within us. What we need is a way to access that wisdom. Perhaps it just requires quietly looking within.

The Wise Person Within

Imagine that as you sit in quiet and stillness . . .

. . . a wise person comes up and sits with you.

“Let me help you,” the wise person says.

“You can rest now.”

“I’m here for you.”

“You’re safe with me.”

“I have plenty of time for you.”

“It’s OK to be vulnerable.”

“I see you and I hear you.”

“You’re a very good person.”

“I know it’s been hard.”

“I love you for who you are, not for what you do.”

And the wise person continues:

“There are many wonderful possibilities ahead in your life.”

“Think about the happiness that is coming in your life.”

“Think about touching and being touched with love and gentleness.”

*“Think about the many ways you can help others, your children, your friends,
people who are very special to you.”*

“Think about healing and rest.”

*You let a smile come to your face as you think about enjoying rest in a
place of love, safety, and comfort.*

And you find yourself wondering, who is this wise person?

(It’s you of course).

The magic quarter second

In this life we have a choice. Our actions can be in the service of our awakening, our flowering, or they can be in the service of our distractions, defenses, and thoughtlessness. We can respond with kindness or we can react with irritation and unkindness. But in the rush of emotion we may have only a split second to decide to respond skillfully rather than react thoughtlessly. It may be as little as a quarter of a second, but it offers us the opportunity to break out of old habits and act bravely in the best interests of ourselves and others.

Existential reminders.

When we speak to our loved ones are we aware of the fact that we may never see them again? If we were aware, would we speak more kindly?

Here's a thought experiment suggested by the Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh: Imagine you have taken a rocket ship to another planet. Your ship has malfunctioned and it will not take you home again, to your loved ones, your town, to your home. How strongly you would long to walk on the earth with those you love. Can you take joy now in walking with friends in your neighborhood?

Also inspired by Thich Nhat Hanh is the following, called:

“What’s not wrong?”

(or the joy of a “non-toothache”)

Everyone wants a peaceful and happy life, free of unhappiness, abuse, and suffering.

Most or many of the moments in our lives are like that - peaceful, pain-free, and pleasant.

But, often we don't notice because we have a tendency to focus on problems . . . on what's wrong.

But we can also focus on what's NOT wrong.

Thich Nhat Hanh tells us how a toothache can be a valuable teacher: when we have a toothache, we are sharply reminded of how wonderful it is when we don't have a toothache. It is possible right now, he tells us, to really enjoy our non-toothache (or what's not wrong).

Environment of loving kindness

In psychotherapy, few things are as important as a safe, welcoming, encouraging atmosphere. As described by Ron Kurtz in *Readings in Hakomi Therapy*⁶, the therapist meditates prior to sessions in order to encourage a state of “loving presence.” This is a calm, accepting, compassionate way of being that makes room for whatever the client brings to the session. Kurtz describes it this way:

Loving presence is easy to recognize. Imagine a happy and contented mother looking at the sweet face of her peaceful newborn baby. She is calm, loving, and attentive. Unhurried and undistracted, the two of them seem to be outside of time . . . simply being. Gently held within a field of love and life’s wisdom, they are as present with each other as any two could be.

When someone maintains loving presence with another, it has a powerful effect. Possibly without even noticing it, the other feels safer, cared for and even understood. When this happens in a therapeutic relationship, healing has already begun.

Loving presence is a state of being. It is pleasant, good for your health, rewarding in and of it’s self. It’s a state in which you feel openhearted and well-intentioned. In it’s purist form, it is spiritually nourishing and sensitive

⁶ Kurtz, *Readings in Hakomi Therapy*, page 6

to subtleties. It is the best state to be in when you are offering emotional support. One look around will tell you that this kind of support is needed everywhere. A healthy emotional life requires a safe place to express feelings and someone loving to bear witness. It requires the release of old hurts and an opening to new paths to happiness. Loving presence is emotional support and it is an important part of relating to others. It can make a big difference in our lives. In psychotherapy, it is essential.

The five principles of Hakomi therapy

Mindfulness - described above

Organicity - the natural tendency toward health and healing

Nonviolence - doing no harm

Mind/body holism - body and mind are part of one entity

Unity - shared humanity and equality of therapist and client

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