

MINDFULNESS, PSYCHOTHERAPY, AND ADDICTION RECOVERY

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There has been an enormous and rapid growth in the use of mindfulness and acceptance based therapies over the last 10 – 15 years. Numerous systems have been developed integrating mindfulness and other therapeutic approaches, including Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, Dialectical Behavior Therapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy and Mindfulness- Based Relapse Prevention. This brief article will attempt to define mindfulness and its benefits for emotional well being and addiction recovery as well as highlight similarities to empirically supported Positive Psychology theory and 12 Step principles.

“Mindfulness” is a beneficial cognitive and emotional attribute that can be cultivated and developed by all human beings. Mindfulness is defined most succinctly as present moment awareness with acceptance. A more detailed definition would be intentional, openhearted attention to here-and-now experience in a non-judgmental way. Attention is paid to both internal and external experience, attending to our five senses and our thoughts without getting caught up in them. “Just noticing” or “bare attention” means not placing our interpretation or conceptualization on what arises and gently letting go of the thought or feeling, returning focus to the object of our activity or meditation.

The attitude with which one attends is also very important. There are “Mindfulness Qualities” to which a practitioner intentionally brings conscious attention. These include non-judging, non-striving, acceptance, patience, trust, openness, curiosity, letting go, non-reactivity, and non-attachment. In addition, there are affective or “heart” qualities including gentleness, generosity, empathy, gratitude, loving kindness, and compassion, starting with self-compassion (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Shapiro and Carlson, 2009).

It is easy to see that such developments would be beneficial to our patients. This has been repeatedly demonstrated empirically in numerous studies of mindfulness-based treatment programs. Meta-analysis showed medical symptoms (including chronic pain, hypertension, diabetes, headaches, fibromyalgia, and psoriasis) diminishing by 35% and psychological symptoms (including depression and anxiety) diminishing by 40%, stable over four years.

Increased mindfulness is also beneficial for therapists, not only personally, but in their effectiveness as therapists. One can see that increased awareness and empathic, discerning listening would be conducive to providing the therapeutic conditions emphasized by Carl Rogers: warmth, accurate empathy, unconditional positive regard, and therapist congruence. Mindfulness would also increase the therapist’s ability to maintain what Freud termed “evenly hovering attention.” Since the quality of the therapeutic relationship plays a very large role in treatment outcome, independent of technique, therapist mindfulness is one type of mindfulness-oriented psychotherapy. The use of theory and research on mindfulness in therapy is called mindfulness-informed psychotherapy. Finally, teaching patients mindfulness skills directly as part of the treatment is termed mindfulness-based psychotherapy (Germer et al, 2005). At Summit Psychological Services, therapists who wish to learn about mindfulness as well as begin a practice themselves go through the

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Individual psychotherapists can refer their patients to the MBSR program as part of a group, as an individual, or as a couple. This is an optional adjunct to individual psychotherapy and eliminates the need for the therapist to teach their patients how to meditate and otherwise cultivate mindfulness. Our Mindfulness Coach was trained in MBSR at the Stress Reduction Institute and has many years of personal training from distinguished teachers around the world.

Mindfulness can also be a powerful tool in addiction treatment, both to prevent relapse and to structure and facilitate the ongoing, continual growth and development that constitutes true Recovery. Mindfulness produces a changed relationship to thoughts and feelings: an increased awareness, but as a calm and centered observer of the stream rather than one who is swept away by it. From this place of equanimity, one can see alternatives to the interpretations, emotions, and impulses that we are aware of and choose skillful action rather than operating impulsively on “autopilot.” The message is: you are not your thoughts or feelings; you are the observer (Freud’s “observing ego”), awake, aware, and discerning.

Mindfulness and Buddhist psychology are compatible with 12-step approaches (see Griffin, 2004, 2010) and supported by Positive Psychology research. All three strive to reduce suffering and increase happiness and life satisfaction. Positive Psychology research demonstrates the key roles of gratitude, forgiveness, mindfulness, savoring, and optimism in promoting happiness (Seligman, 2002). Gratification and fulfillment are increased by engaged, absorbed use of one’s strengths in challenging pursuits: “Flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). Meaning and Purpose are enhanced when the pursuits are in the service of something greater than oneself – as in 12th Step work.

Buddhist psychology emphasizes that while suffering is a part of the human condition (physical pain, anxiety, depression) and is largely caused by attachment to pleasure and avoidance of pain, there is a way out of it through the “Eight-Fold Path.” The most important element of the eight is “Right Mindfulness.” Addiction, etymologically based on the Latin word for enslavement, is desire run wild: compulsively seeking pleasure and avoiding discomfort. Increased mindfulness correlates with tolerance for craving without acting on it as well as tolerance for discomfort, reducing experiential avoidance and permitting exposure and desensitization.

12 Step philosophy emphasizes staying in the present, connection to something greater than ourselves in isolation, introspection, forgiveness from others and toward ourselves, and letting go of resentments. Maintenance involves continuing meditation and self-awareness as well as compassionate assistance to those who are struggling.

Many of the readers of this article are privileged to have as our work the direct or indirect provision of helping and healing services to those who are suffering. May we all be strengthened as we help others to diminish restlessness, irritability, and discontent and find increased happiness, joy, and freedom.