

A Deeper Look at Utilizing Mindfulness Techniques in Your Private Practice Setting

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In January of 2013, one of us (STM) attended a workshop entitled, “Mindfulness Based Childbirthing and Parenting (MBCP),” supported by the University of California San Diego and founded by Nancy Bardacke, CNM. The workshop included six rigorous days of mindfulness training and practice, based upon the principles of Buddhist mindfulness meditation and Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), developed at University of Massachusetts Medical Center in 1979 by John Kabat-Zinn PhD and Saki Santorelli, EdD. The retreat tested boundaries related to one’s sense of self, role as psychologist, and deeper issues related to the development of the soul. Throughout the six-day journey, the workshop was an exploration of the role mindfulness might play as a self-care tool by psychologists, how mindfulness might be integrated as a tool in the clinical realm, and, if not used properly, how mindfulness might be detrimental to patients. This paper explores the personal and professional connection to the concept of mindfulness, the use of mindfulness by children, and mindful parenting.

Mindfulness Meditation – General Background

Mindfulness is described by Kabat-Zinn (2005) as “the awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (p.108). For much of the day, the mind is snarled and entangled with superfluous information or is rehearsing and rehashing information that leads to anxious and depressive patterns. Mindfulness moves the practitioner away from the “muddiness” of the past and future through intentional acts of self-regulation and focus. Internal and external experiences are reviewed with curiosity, acceptance, and openness. Mindfulness is the repeated action of coping or dealing with prolonged, possibly negative stimuli; whereas, relaxation training serves to provide symptom relief rather than bringing more awareness to an issue (Edenfield & Saeed, 2012). Mindfulness practices can be achieved through focused attention to the breath, a movement, or an action (such as exploration of a meal, also known as mindful eating). For a detailed review of techniques and applications, please see Germer, Siegel and Fulton’s comprehensive introduction for clinicians (2005; in press).

The research on mindfulness meditation suggests that it can benefit a variety of populations including those suffering from chronic medical conditions (Bohlmeijer, Prenger, Tall, & Cuijpers, 2010), children (Schoeberlein

& Koffler, 2005), pregnant mothers (Vieten & Astin, 2008), and patients diagnosed with depression and anxiety (Hofmann, Sawyer, Witt, & Oh, 2010). The research is mixed regarding the exact mechanisms of change behind mindfulness due to methodological limitations (Edenfield & Saeed, 2012). However, some studies point to neurophysiological changes suggesting that mindfulness exerts powerful changes in the brain. A recent article by Chiesa and Serretti (2010) using neuroimaging and electroencephalography (EEG) suggests that meditators improve self-regulation and sleep vis-à-vis activation of theta and alpha waves in the pre-frontal cortex (PFC) and anterior cingulate cortex (ACC). The beneficial outcomes described above may be explained by the eight fundamental attitudes cultivated during mindfulness practice as cited in Bardacke (2012):

1. **Beginner’s mind:** Approach each moment as though it is new, unique, and may never happen again. Beginner’s mind allows one to be open to what is in the moment rather than carrying rigid expectations. This framework cultivates new-found joy in old experiences and competes with internalized mental models of old unconscious patterns. Practitioners who may have experienced trauma learn to discern old fears or previous patterns of threatening experiences or triggers from situations in the current reality. What may seem frightening at first, may now be seen more keenly as safe and harmless.
2. **Non-judging:** Allows separation of thoughts and behaviors from the essence of the true self. This is very liberating for many people who feel shame, guilt, and despair and connect their emotional well-being to their sense of self-worth. Non-judgment allows space between the thoughts that take place during the silence of one’s practice and what may happen at a later time. This is very much similar to the psychological term of “decentering” whereby one can recognize thoughts like passing clouds but not attach to them.
- 3 and 4. **Patience and Non-Striving:** Understanding and accepting that life unravels and unfolds at a certain pace and no matter how hard or soft one tries to push, a specific timetable is at play. During a mindfulness practice, one learns to be patient with his or herself in the moment even when feelings may be difficult or painful.
5. **Trust as Self-Reliance:** This tenet is about building intuition in one’s body and mind. To listen to

the sensations in the body or to an inner voice, allowing both to guide the self to make a decision. Self-efficacy and agency are built in this space.

6. **Acknowledgement Moving Towards Acceptance:** Acknowledgement of a situation as it is, even if it is neither perfect nor meets expectations. Oftentimes people embark on uphill battles to change others, or to alter unpalatable situations. However by being fully aware and accepting of a situation or person, this conflict can be avoided. Rather, the person is able to “go with the flow,” feeling empowered in a situation instead of reactive.
7. **Letting Be:** In mindfulness, one may turn towards the difficult emotion to understand it rather than away, or overly-attaching to the problem. The concept of “letting be” is like taking a surf board and riding the wave no matter how good or bad the experience may be.
8. **Kindness:** Being considerate and patient with oneself when exploring difficult situations or when demands become overwhelming. During the practice of mindfulness meditation, being kind instead of punitive can create a beautiful way to spend time with oneself, ceasing for a period the tape recorder of negative self-statements that play periodically throughout the day.

The basic tenets of mindfulness can be reflected upon, remembered and applied during formal and informal practice. The tenets are what make mindfulness meditation different from relaxation, or transcendental meditation, or other spiritual and religious practices. Without coming back to the core essence of mindfulness, one may just be engaging in “exercises” rather than acts that cultivate the mind and soul.

Practicing Mindfulness as a Clinician

In order to teach mindfulness, practitioners must be proficient in mindfulness themselves and must have undergone appropriate training (Barnett & Shale, 2012; Kostanski & Hased, 2008). We believe the ebb and flow of emotions, thoughts, and even bodily sensations can only be understood with one's own consistent practice. Patients often ask questions regarding the “how's,” “what's” and “why's” of meditation and it is extremely important to be able to have “walked the walk” so that a trusting relationship can be built between therapist and client. More importantly, personal experiences with mindfulness instills trust in the process and motivation to continue forward. A few applications below might serve as an introduction for the development of one's own personal or professional mindfulness and self-care practices.

The research on self-care and mindfulness has primarily been conducted with masters-level clinicians. Unfortunately, there is a paucity of literature related to (a) professional development and the use of mind-

fulness, (b) the relationship between self-care and mindfulness, and (c) self-efficacy and outcomes with patients related to mindfulness in the in the doctoral level psychological community.

Mindfulness may enhance foundational skills for competence as a therapist, including increased attentional capacity (e.g., selective, dividing, sustained and attention switching) and tolerance of affect which is important for empathic capacity. Greason and Cashwell (2009) found that among counseling students (masters and doctoral level) mindfulness predicted attention, interpersonal reactivity, and self-efficacy. Another study found that between five and eleven brief periods of mindfulness, plus 15 minutes of post-meditation processing, impacted a number of therapist characteristics important for the therapeutic alliance in counselor education students (Buser, Buser, Peterson, & Seraydarian, 2012). There were no major differences between extended and control conditions, which may indicate that a brief introduction to meditation practice may be adequate to develop better abilities and further enhance outcomes with patients.

The research clearly supports the link between mindfulness and clinical outcomes for patients. As such, how can psychologists carve out time in their day to engage in meditative practices? Many clinicians argue that time is a major barrier to practice, as workdays are filled with back-to-back patients, crises, and paperwork. Nonetheless, becoming mindful between sessions or during a lunch break may serve as a source of rejuvenation to become ready for the next session or day ahead. Mindfulness allows for a separation from vicarious trauma, burnout, and compassion fatigue (Christopher & Maris, 2010). Below is a list of exercises psychologists may engage in for a brief period of time to become grounded, centered, and gain a sense of well-being.

Exercise 1 (Air on Skin). For approximately one to two minutes, pay attention to the interplay between the air and the hair on your skin. Questions to consider: Do you feel the hair moving back and forth on your arms? Does your skin feel cold or hot? When you pay attention to your body acutely, does it give you any cues regarding how you are feeling? The point of the exercise is to experience rather than judge the moment. This is an easy way to “get back in your body” after a difficult session with a patient.

Exercise 2 (Mindful Filing). Consider the way you do charting, note taking, or billing. Are you rushing around the office attempting to multi-task or do you focus singularly on the task at hand? After seeing a patient, you may move to a mindful space by starting to “note.” This term refers to allowing the inner voice to attend to one's movements or behaviors. For example, “I am pulling the file from the file cabinet. I am opening the file. I am placing my note in the progress notes section of the file.” By “noting,” the mind is intensely

focused on the task, the peripheral issues are at bay, and an act of mindfulness is accomplished while simultaneously taking care of patient business. This may help the psychologist to feel less overwhelmed with all the tasks that need to be accomplished during the day. Mindful filing may also decrease errors in billing and charting.

Exercise 3 (Mindful Breathing). Mindful breathing focuses on the breath as the most important sensation in the body – follow the breath at the nostrils, the belly, or the chest, making a choice to focus on the inhalations or exhalations. Notice with a focus on the breath what sensations change in each moment. Thoughts need not be forced out or judged; merely acknowledged. Mindful breathing may serve as a place of solitude or potentially a place of angst for some people, as the level of stillness can be anxiety-provoking. Therefore, ideally, it is recommended to begin one's practice of mindful breathing before or after work to allow time to explore what arises during the practice. Ten minutes of seated breathing meditation is a good starting point with a goal of 30 minutes—allowing the body and mind to adapt to the practice. Once one is comfortable with mindful breathing and finds it more soothing than provocative, it can be used as a source of solace to practitioners, even in a three to five minute block of time between patients.

Youth and Mindfulness

A frequently cited phrase, “beginner’s mind” represents the concept of an infant or young child touching, tasting, smelling, or learning about something for the first time. Just imagine a young child who is surprised by a new sound or a new taste and the pleasures and woes registering on the child’s face depending upon the sensation. Approaching situations with a “beginner’s mind” allows for preconceived notions to be placed aside, for disappointment from unmet expectations to be circumvented, and for the joy of new (and old) experiences to be experienced. Teaching mindfulness to children has the potential to enhance memory, promote self-management, increase feelings of self-control, and finally sets the foundation for children to cope with challenging situations.

Modifications of teaching mindfulness to children are minimal but should be considered. First, children require concrete and clear examples of techniques and sometimes require modeling of the technique as well. Within this framework, a rationale is also helpful for teenagers and can increase motivation (Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008). Metaphors have been shown to be helpful in concretizing some of the more abstract concepts, such as bringing the focus of attention to the breath when it wanders. For example, Kornfield (2003) developed a “puppy” metaphor to explain how the mind becomes distracted and needs to be “trained.” The metaphor’s pretense is that as puppies learn to sit and

follow commands, they often stray away; yet it would be unfair to punish the puppy because it is merely learning. The proper way to handle the puppy would be to bring it back to its original position and provide the command to “sit” again. While this may happen repeatedly, anger and judgment are not needed.

Second, providing a range of mindful strategies and techniques is helpful, so children and teens will not become bored in their daily practice. Examples include paying attention to different genres of music, doing mindful practices in places like the park or a museum, or using mindfulness for everyday activities like homework or one’s morning routine. Practical applications are critical to the promotion and maintenance of continued practice.

Third, children should start with short time frames of one to three minutes for seated meditations, in order to set them up for success. Finally, it is recommended that parents also engage in mindfulness as a way to understand the mindfulness process more fully, reinforce and model behavior, and be more present in the everyday functioning of their children (Lee-Corbin & Evans, 1996; Barankin, & Khanlou, 2007).

The following are three mindful exercises appropriate for children and adolescents:

Exercise 1. Following the advice of Hooker and Fodor (2008), who recommend starting with a mindfulness practice that does not focus on self as a way to ease into the process, mindful drawing requires the participant to draw an object of his/her liking. Notably, the ability to draw is not the focus of the activity. Instead the practice is about paying attention to the colors, lines, and general qualities of the picture. After some time has passed (10-15 minutes), the youth should draw the object again and compare the drawings and see what details are different. Reflection should be focused on what it is like to spend time paying attention and noticing things that one would typically not notice. Time processing can link this to awareness with friends, parents, school work and, most importantly, making a distinction between “automatic pilot” and “being in your body.”

Exercise 2. Awareness of Environment is the concept of having youth pay attention to how they interact with their environment; for some youth, they may realize they do not pay attention to the dance between their own thoughts and bodies and people and objects around them. Symbolism recommended by Hooker and Fodor (2008) to help aide this process include having youth pretend they are holding a camera lens and taking pictures and then describing what is seen in their imagined photographs. Similarly, children can be encouraged to take on the role of newspaper reporters and journal about nuanced experiences day to day outside of therapy. What is often found by this practice is teens become aware

of many novel things in their environment: pictures hanging on walls in the auditorium, anxiety provoking feelings when they walk by a certain teacher, scripts they play when interacting with family members.

Exercise 3. Mindful texting is the art of stopping automatic responses and impulses and instead encourages the teen to be more “in charge” of whether a text back will be a “response” or a “reaction.” Teens are asked to look at urges, impulses, and feelings that arise through the texting process. For example, does a certain person elicit an angry response; or does the teen feel an incessant urge to respond immediately to certain friends but not others. Teens are asked to “check in” when they text and notice how it can become an automated or compulsive process for them, and how this may be related to other things in their lives. The processing behind mindful texting (the thoughtful action of noticing thoughts, feelings, sensations, and behaviors that arise as a result of stimuli - in this case a text) is a critical component to help teens make sustained cognitive or behavioral change.

Parenting in a Mindful Way

Everyday Blessings (Kabat-Zinn & Kabat-Zinn, 1997) explores the beauties and challenges of parenting. The book coins the term “mindful parenting” which essentially challenges parents to focus on what is important in the day to day functioning of childrearing rather than becoming jumbled in trite issues such as messy rooms or less than timely homework completion. Mindful parenting encourages parents to recognize their own limitations, frustrations, and to become aware of the “interdependent” nature of the child-parent relationship. When parents are able to see the bi-directional impact of the relationship and how behaviors ebb and flow as part of a systemic process, parents are able to be attuned to take responsibility for their impact on their children rather than displacing blame onto them. This dynamic is hopefully viewed as a long-term engagement rather than an incident about which to become enraged. Duncan, Coatsworth, and Greenberg (2009) suggest that through mindful parenting, coercive and punitive cycles of parent-child interactions may be minimized and more satisfying and deeply attached relationships will prevail. Duncan et al. (2009) developed a model that dominates the mindful parenting literature and includes five tenets to guide the development of mindful parenting: (a) listening with full attention; (b) nonjudgmental acceptance of self and child; (c) emotional awareness of self and child; (d) self-regulation in the parenting relationship; and (e) compassion for self and child.

Listening with full attention is based on the concept that by paying attention closely to children, parents inherently communicate that their children are important and deserve being heard. So often, children complain that their parents are on their cell phones

or computers and “never listen.” When this lack of full attention is enacted, children’s sense of safety and security may be threatened, as their primary attachment figure does not present as an all-encompassing “protector” for them (Fonagy & Target, 1997). Likewise, by paying full attention, parents can become more apt at monitoring not only their children’s verbal behavior but their actions and patterns as they enter the teenage years. Teenagers have been found to share and disclose more about their lives when parents have reared them in a mindful way (Smetana, Metzger, Gettman, & Campione-Barr, 2006).

Nonjudgmental self-awareness encourages parents to first become aware of their own internal working models of what a child “should be” like. Reflection is then encouraged on the types of deep-seeded beliefs and parental expectations that are conveyed to the child. Finally, the third component of nonjudgmental self-awareness is the acceptance that parenting is a challenging task. Within that challenge, parents are asked to begin to accept the trials and tribulations of parenting without resignation; it is a longstanding acceptance of their children, meeting them “where they are” during the developmental process, while communicating clear boundaries and expectations. Emotional awareness of self and child helps to deter automatic cognitive processes that contribute to negative patterns of parenting. If a parent is able to remain mindful of what is transpiring within themselves and their child, they can make more attuned responses rather than reacting from an automatic orientation.

Hand-in-hand with being attuned to one’s child is the regulation of one’s own responses and reactions. Modeling a consistent response style is one way that parents may engage in affect regulation. When a parent remains calm, intense reactions or emotions are not transmitted to the child. Instead, a child learns how to handle stressful situations through self-regulation and a safe base for exploration is afforded because a child knows what types of responses to expect from a parent. The final tenet of mindful parenting is compassion towards self and child. By being compassionate towards a child, a parent may be able to respond more empathically. Likewise, parents who are less critical of their own parenting have been found to interact better with their children with healthier and more positive developmental outcomes (Coleman & Karraker, 2003).

The exercises to increase mindfulness for parents are similar to any adult mindful practice including body scan, mindful movement, and gathas (i.e., short poems or phrases to inspire mindfulness and joy) (see Chapter 7 for a list and explanation of common practices, Bardacke, 2012). However, we recommend that parents continue to reflect on their own mindfulness practice and their relationship with their children through the following self-analysis:

- Am I living in the present moment or am I always rushing from one extracurricular activity to the next? Am I able to enjoy each moment with my children or does the lack of time during the day cause undue stress on the family?
- Why am I reacting with such vigor to my child? What about this situation is cultivating such an intense response? Is this past or present reality?
- What are my expectations for parenting? How did my parents react to me and give me space to grow and master my environment? How does this impact my child(ren)?
- How do I encourage my child(ren) to be brave and assertive? To cultivate a strong ego? What may I do to further propel their sense of self forward?

Mindful parenting is not only engaging in certain practices, or analyzing interactional patterns, but also a way of being. There is a quality of keen awareness of the cycles of emotional regulation and dysregulation of family functioning. Mindful parents are like long bamboo sticks amidst a windy storm: strong, sturdy, and flexible. Mindful parents weather the storm and have adaptable children to show for it.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, mindfulness is about awakening to the beauty of living each day to the fullest extent. Mindfulness opens up a person's psyche to a deeper level of understanding of the ebbs and flows of the spirit and the natural environment that surrounds the human condition. Both psychologists and their patients should continually assess whether they are ready and capable to engage in mindfulness practices; acknowledging how the practice is either an aide or hindrance in the developmental process.

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