

Mindfulness and meditation

By Meghan Barker

If you were to take a walk through a bookstore or to Google self-help books, you would likely find resources on mindfulness and meditation. You would also find a growing number of apps dedicated to the practices of mindfulness, meditation and deep breathing. Documentary series are also exploring the history and benefits of mindfulness and meditation in depth, given that these practices are becoming more popular in Western culture.

Despite being centuries old, mindfulness meditation is still growing as an evidence-based technique, and it is being utilized more frequently in counseling, medical treatment and stress reduction programs. The techniques aim to identify tension or stress, increase coping skills, change thought patterns, increase awareness and improve overall well-being.

Meditation can be used specifically to improve focus and memory, change and reinforce thought patterns, and calm the nervous system. Mindfulness targets and activates the relaxation system and improves the balance between neurotransmitters and chemicals in the brain. It is a versatile technique that can be incorporated into other evidence-based approaches, and it can help increase positive counseling outcomes.

Overall, research is showing positive outcomes in cases in which mindfulness and meditation are used to treat various mental health conditions, including borderline personality disorder, suicidal ideation, self-harming behaviors, depression, anxiety, panic attacks, substance use, chronic pain, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, burnout and stress. Outside of the realm of mental health, these practices



have also been shown to benefit physical health, academic adjustment, social connections, problem-solving and cognitive skills, and emotional regulation and awareness.

Elements of mindfulness

Quite a few counseling approaches have integrated mindfulness, including dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), cognitive behavior therapy, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) and mindfulness-based stress reduction.

In DBT, mindfulness is a core skills training module that includes training in nonjudgmental observation, compassionate self-acceptance and tolerance of emotional distress. Compassion promotes empathy toward ourselves and others by accepting that suffering does exist but that caring can provide healing. The client recognizes that discomfort is normal and can be experienced without judgment or change. For more information and resources on DBT and the elements of

mindfulness, see *Dialectical Behavior Therapy: A Contemporary Guide for Practitioners* by Lane D. Pederson.

Our alarm system

Our bodies are wonderfully designed to survive, but these systems are not always balanced or reflective of what is actually happening in the moment. Mindfulness increases our awareness during the times that we are surviving and thriving, not just when we are in danger.

The alarm system, which represents the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system, prepares a person to respond to threats in their environment. The brain and body work in tandem to secrete epinephrine (adrenaline) and cortisol to activate preparations to respond quickly to the threat before them. The activation of the parasympathetic nervous system results in the reduction of stress hormones and a return to a restful state.

During periods of high stress, the alarm systems are overactivated, and

our ability to respond positively and effectively decreases. This affects the balance between motivation, reward, well-being, and a feeling of security and safety. Without intervention, a person remaining in this overactivated state might experience potentially worsening symptoms, negative thoughts and negative responses to emotions and life events.

Relaxation

Mindfulness and meditation practices teach us how to identify those body signals in the alarm system, improve coping skills in response to those signals, and break or redirect distressing thought patterns that can decrease our ability to respond in a helpful manner. This is accomplished through increasing awareness in the present, nonjudgmentally accepting the present moment and learning to shift to the positive.

Mindfulness elements encourage individuals to accept rather than ignore what is happening in the moment. This promotes internal body awareness known as *interoception* by learning how to identify tension and release it through relaxation skills. It can take time and practice to master developing an awareness of tension in the body and responding to reduce that tension. This is most effective when people are open to the experience, put effort into the process and practice regularly.

Specific relaxation techniques such as breathing meditation can be useful for reducing stress. Breathing meditation focuses solely on the breath as the person exhales and inhales, quickly activating the calming parasympathetic nervous system. Guided meditations use deep breathing, imagery, tension identification, muscle relaxation and positive thinking.

A related intervention is progressive muscle relaxation training, in which specific muscles are targeted and relaxed through the actions of focusing on a muscle, tensing it and then relaxing. The person then focuses on the next muscle, progressively shifting focus throughout the whole body. This relaxation skill becomes helpful outside

of session as individuals learn how to identify when and where they feel stress so that they can target and then release the tension.

Several different forms of meditation and deep breathing practice may be potentially useful for relaxation. Walking meditation involves intentional walking movement while engaging in deep breathing and an awareness of one's surroundings. Walking meditation also uses grounding techniques and provides the benefits of exercise.

Grounding techniques direct a person to attend to sensory stimuli around them, such as sights or sounds in their environment. When paired with deep breathing, grounding techniques are helpful in engaging the senses, reducing distress, and stopping and redirecting negative thinking.

Gratitude meditation can also be paired with deep breathing. Gratitude meditation focuses on challenging how we think and feel about ourselves and empowers us to express what we are grateful for. This meditation is helpful specifically for challenging and changing hurtful or false beliefs by saying or thinking something positive.

Application

Using mindfulness practices in counseling often requires the provision of psychoeducation about mindfulness, meditation, mental health, and the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems of activation and recovery. It is also important to meet clients where they are by recognizing and acknowledging their attempts at practice or implementation of relaxation and deep breathing skills.

Several research studies have found that certain clients have more of a proclivity than others toward mindfulness practice. Not all clients will find mindfulness meditation easy to apply in their daily lives. If clients are able to understand and use mindfulness meditation, however, these new skills may have a positive impact on enhancing self-awareness and tolerance for coping with negative emotions, people and life events. This all leads to

improvement in self-regulation, which directly affects daily living, interpersonal relationships and responses to events that are outside of the client's control. Furthermore, clients who master mindfulness meditation skills develop a greater sense of self-efficacy that they can take control and change the way they respond to stressors.

There is a large body of evidence suggesting that self-regulation is directly applicable to treating burnout and stress, and in today's society, we need skills for self-regulation more than ever. Having information and social media at our fingertips creates new challenges in learning how to self-regulate, but mindfulness and meditation practices offer hope in the presence of these challenges.

This has another direct impact on children growing, learning and developing in a fast-paced world of social media. There is growing evidence that using mindfulness and meditation with children is beneficial for the development of self-regulation skills, relationships with family and peers, and the ability to focus. ACT treatments have used mindfulness elements in individual and family therapy to improve clients' understanding, acceptance of circumstances and ability to cope with those circumstances. Another benefit of mindfulness and meditation is that they can be personalized to fit an individual's lifestyle, making them easier to learn and implement both in session and outside of sessions.

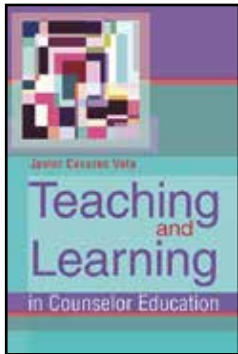
Mindfulness meditation can be powerful for counselors too. I have personally experienced the benefits of mindfulness meditation for handling stressors and anxiety and for coping with life events. Mindfulness meditation has had a direct impact on my physical and mental health and provided me with insight into my life and the lives of others.

It sometimes can be easy to dismiss the use of counseling techniques and strategies in our own lives, but we have an ethical responsibility to care for ourselves so that we can provide the best care for our clients. We are

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just as susceptible as our clients are to mental health problems, emotional vulnerability and negative life events, making it equally important that we take extra steps to be mindful.

Implications for counselors

Every counselor should have knowledge and understanding of different theories and evidence-based practices for a more rounded approach to treatment and theoretical orientation. This allows for flexibility in our treatment of clients who may have different beliefs than we do or who have co-occurring disorders that may not fit neatly into one particular theory or treatment.

Mindfulness and meditation practices provide more tools to increase conscious awareness of thoughts and feelings, to strengthen coping skills and to reduce extreme negative reactions over time. Using mindfulness and incorporating different elements and techniques into your theoretical orientation requires continued education and implementation into counseling and daily life. Provision of mindfulness meditation training to clients can be improved through engaging in supervision with professionals who utilize mindfulness and networking with others counselors in your area.

The use of mindfulness can empower clients and counselors by increasing their awareness of the present and providing confidence to cope with the present as it unfolds. ♦

Meghan Barker graduated with her degree in clinical mental health counseling from Bradley University this past spring. She is currently working as an intervention professional for children with disabilities and is working toward licensure as a professional counselor. Contact her at mbarker@mail.bradley.edu.