

# Treating the Relapse Process Using Mindfulness

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**Presenter: Christopher Shea**

**There are ways that mindfulness may also depart from Buddhism: I'm not sure if it is a tenet that we can control our thoughts in the present moment or that our beliefs or emotions can be "controlled" in the present moment. We may become aware of our thoughts, beliefs in the present moment and that awareness may change them or result in letting go. Please comment.**

A: Yes, mindfulness, as practiced in the West, is separate from Buddhism, although is rooted in Buddhism. The concept of controlling our thoughts and emotions comes from CBT, specifically, Beck. To be brief in my answer, I think we are talking the same answer but using semantics. The point I am making is that our thoughts and emotions do not control us. We are empowered in knowing that if I do not like a thought or emotion, I have the power to change it. For example; if someone were to make fun of me or mock me, I have choices for my response. I can become hurt and sad, lash out in anger, brush off the comment, walk away, etc. Since I have viable options, I therefore have control over my emotions and behaviors.

**I have taken a group on mindfulness walks and they were very receptive to the fact that the only thing they focused on was the moment. At the end I ask did anyone think about their problems during the walk? and the answer is always NO. Please comment.**

A: Perfect! The goal of a mindful walk is to focus on the present moment non-judgmentally. Assuming that most problems originate in either the past or the future, while living in the present moment the problem will go away since it is not a present moment problem, rather, it's a past or future problem.

**Benson wrote a book entitled, The Relaxation Response, and it contains lots of research as to the benefits of meditation. Are you familiar with this book? Any comments pro/con?**

A: I am unfortunately not familiar with that particular book, but I am familiar (and have read) much of the academic research which posits and demonstrates the mental and physical health benefits for 10 to 20 minutes a day of meditation.

**How does mindfulness compare to DBT?**

A: They are similar in many ways, and compatible if used together. Both focus the client on the present moment, teaching a new way of thinking and perceiving life.

**I know for a lot of people, myself included, that being still and quiet can cause anxiety. How can you help someone through that initial anxiety?**

A: Practice and some exposure therapy work to break the anxiety.

**Do clients need to be in a sober state to utilize mindfulness in a session?**

A: In my experience, yes. Actually, in my 20 some years I have practiced and taught that one should ever do counseling with a person under the influence of a mind altering substance. Provide medical care, and when the person stabilizes, then do the mental health care.

**What are some examples of using mindfulness in a group setting?**

A: The technique I have used the most is to go around the room having each person share what they are feeling at that moment. When that's done, then have time for reflection (since that entails judgement we have strayed from mindfulness). I also typically started my group session with a 5 minute meditation.

**How would mindfulness look with Medication Assisted Treatment?**

A: No different from mindfulness without MAT.

**Do you know of any studies using Tai Chi with people with addiction disorders?**

A: Unfortunately, I do not know of any studies.

**Do you think that guided visualization is a good place to start to begin teaching how mindfulness can work?**

A: Yes, along with education.

**I have pregnant women who struggle with the "one day or one moment at a time" when they feel ultimately they have a deadline with due dates approaching. Any recommendations?**

A: I don't see any congruence. Just because they have a due date needn't stop them from living in the moment. For example, I have times when I see my clients; when they arrive and when they leave. I still live in the moment as I await their arrival. Actually, focusing on their child due date adds to their anxiety since they are "living" in the future, where we have no control.

**Chris, do you practice or teach meditation techniques with/to your clients?**

A: Yes, I also host a twice monthly meditation group.

**You spoke about the individual knowing they have control. I work in a correctional environment. They really don't have control over their lives. They are told what they can do, when they can do it and sometimes how to do it. How would you work with a person in prison to understand they have control?**

A: When I refer to us as having control I am referring to the control we have over our thoughts and emotions. I spent 5 years working as an Assistant Warden/ Head of Security of a correctional facility in Baltimore City, so I can empathize with what you are saying. But, as chronicled by Viktor Frankl and others who support the existentialism of the 1950s, physical freedom is not the same as mental and emotional freedom. Each inmate has the ability to control their thoughts and their emotions. They have the ability, and freedom, to choose and control their behaviors. Regardless of the actions of other inmates toward another, that other inmate has the freedom to take part, walk away, or make it worse. All free choices based on the freedom of thought and emotion. Personally, I wish this concept (mindfulness coupled with the ABC's of CBT) were taught to inmates.

**Do you believe that neuroplasticity ends at a certain age? 40? 60? Can people change if their neuroplasticity is over?**

A: As I am not a neuroscientist I'm not able to speak about neuroplasticity, BUT, I will say that I have worked with many clients in their 50s and up who have made significant change in their thoughts and behaviors. So, whether or not neuroplasticity ends at a certain age, everyone, regardless of age, can be given hope that they can change their lives.

**Would you recommend Kabot-Zin's MBSR for relapse prevention?**

A: Yes, as but one tool in our tool box.

**What are your thoughts on Alan Marlett's MBRP (Mindfulness Based Relapse Prevention)? It is a fabulous training for /using mindfulness with substance abuse. Website: [mindfulrp.com](http://mindfulrp.com).**

A: I just reviewed the website you referenced and it looks fine to me. Keep in mind that this, like any other technique, is but one tool available to us.