Mindfulness with Clients: Sitting with Discomfort

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Learning Objectives

Understand
- The value in mindfulness for clients to be able to sit with uncomfortable feelings.

Learn
- How mindfulness can help clients to not soothe with drugs or alcohol.

Gain
- Knowledge of mindfulness techniques to use with clients.
Polling Question #1

Would you consider yourself someone who uses mindfulness in your personal or professional life – even somewhat? Yes or no

Why Mindfulness?

Many of our clients react to strong emotions by trying to get rid of them through the use of substances.

Mindfulness can help people to sit with uncomfortable feelings and be able to not react and act out.

Why Mindfulness?

Mindfulness techniques can be added to standard treatment protocols and programs for both clients and staff with little to no cost.

These skills will help the clients in multiple areas in life and can be utilized closely with other therapies, such as CBT.
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Jon Kabat-Zinn

- Jon Kabat-Zinn is the modern father of mindfulness in the West
- Studied under Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh
- Ph.D. in molecular biology in 1971 from MIT

In 1979 he founded the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, where he adapted the Buddhist teachings on mindfulness and created a structured eight-week course, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR).

By increasing their mindfulness, participants in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction aim to reduce their overall arousal and emotional reactivity and to gain a deeper sense of calm.

MBSR

- Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction is said to benefit individuals dealing with the following health conditions or problems:
  - ADHD
  - Anxiety
  - Depression
  - Chronic pain
  - Stress
  - Fatigue
  - Anger
  - Headaches
  - High blood pressure
  - Sleep problems

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Discomfort

*“As humans, we do everything we can do to reduce our suffering and to avoid pain — emotional or physical. So it is difficult to accept the pain (of our emotions) and not try to do anything to fight it”*

- Sheri Van Dijk, MSW

Discomfort

It is in our nature, and evolutionarily/biologically sound, to avoid pain and seek pleasure.

What do we do when someone is upset? Frequently we say, don’t cry. Cheer up. It will be ok. Especially with children.

We are not comfortable sitting with strong emotions and we are not taught to do it; it is not modelled.

Discomfort

Challenges of repeated relapse may stem from a limited ability to cope with uncomfortable sensations that are likely the result of an overly taxed nervous system.

The experience of addiction is not a logical process and treatment providers teach people about drugs/alcohol and the impact they have on their bodies, without teaching them how to be in their bodies.
To understand the relationship between feelings/sensations (i.e. anxiety, cravings) and action (behavior, drug use), the practice of mindfulness can help a person gain insight about their addiction through learning to witness their inner process.

Part of our discomfort is we don't want to feel vulnerable.

"Uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure" - Brené Brown

For many of our clients, it was not safe to be vulnerable - physically or emotionally in family of origin.
Polling Question #2

- Have you ever felt negative physical effects of stress because you numbed your feelings or didn’t allow them out in a conscious way? Yes or no

Avoiding, blocking, numbing

- Avoiding difficult feelings or numbing so we don’t feel are coping tools we use
- Another way is rationalizing the feeling away – I am not upset (truth: I shouldn’t be mad, it isn’t that big of a deal, brain over heart)

Binge-watching Netflix, eating, busy-ness, sex, drama, work, substances, shopping

These behaviors can be innocuous but when used as an escape from feeling our emotions, it is maladaptive
We can’t selectively numb emotion. Numb the dark and you numb the light.

Brené Brown

Effects of not feeling

Mind–body connection

If you don’t allow feelings to be felt, they come out in other ways

Psychological distress, depression, anxiety

Physical problems like heart disease, intestinal problems, headaches, insomnia, autoimmune disorders

Fight or flight – increased cortisol

Triggering the vagus nerve which is one of the main emotional centers in the body

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Biology and anatomy

- Biology and anatomy basics show that we cannot stop our emotions from being triggered, as they originate from the middle section of our brain that is not under conscious control.
- The part of the brain responsible for emotion is the limbic system, which is made up of several structures located in the cerebral cortex.
- Feelings need to come out somehow, so we can do so mindfully or in less healthy ways.

Helping clients feel

- Some people have not been permitted to feel in their lives; it hasn’t been taught, modeled, safe.
- Often substances are used to mask feelings or to cope.

Helping clients feel

- When abstaining from substances, other coping skills must be put in place.
- Feelings arise and without the right skills, clients often experience overwhelming emotions, fall into depression, or they process many emotions as anger.
Helping clients feel

- We have to make it safe to feel
  - They may have fight or flight arise for them
  - They may feel overwhelmed

But we also have to help clients to identify emotions in themselves

- What do they feel in their body?
- What triggers what emotions?
- Are they feeling contrary or mixed emotions?

We have to make it safe for them to feel whatever comes up, with us

What are the benefits of Mindfulness?
- Health
- Cognitive and Emotional Regulation
- Gratitude and Joy
What are the benefits of Mindfulness?

- Heart Health
  - Shown to reduce systolic and diastolic blood pressure/helped bring blood pressure down
  - Improved cardiovascular capacity and slower heart rates

- For children, this generally means, less worrying about the past or future and more focus on what is happening now

What are the benefits of Mindfulness?

- Decreasing cognitive decline from aging and Alzheimer’s
  - Compared to other alternative treatments such as relaxation training, those who practiced mindfulness showed greater improvements on cognitive scores than any other group
  - A systematic review of research to date suggests that mindfulness may mitigate cognitive decline, perhaps due to its effects on memory, attention, processing, and executive functioning

- For children, more focus

What are the benefits of Mindfulness?

- May improve our immune response
  - Multiple studies using mindfulness meditation or Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction found benefits to the immune system such as:
    - decreased inflammation
    - increased T-cells in patients with HIV or breast cancer
    - faster wound healing
Self-regulation

- Self-regulation involves controlling one’s behavior, emotions, and thoughts in the pursuit of long-term goals.
- Emotional self-regulation refers to the ability to manage disruptive emotions and impulses and to think before acting.
- It also reflects the ability to cheer yourself up after disappointments and to act in a way consistent with your deepest held values.

In essence, maturity reflects the ability to face emotional, social, and cognitive threats in the environment with patience and thoughtfulness.
- If this description reminds you of mindfulness, that’s no accident—mindfulness does indeed relate to the ability to self-regulate.
- Self-regulation involves taking a pause between a feeling and an action—taking the time to think things through, make a plan, wait patiently (by Arlin Cuncic).

Self-regulation is also important in that it allows you to act in accordance with your deeply held values or social conscience and to express yourself appropriately.

An adult with poor self-regulation skills may lack self-confidence and self-esteem and have trouble handling stress and frustration.
- This might be expressed in terms of anger or anxiety, and in more severe cases, may be diagnosed as a mental disorder.
- Self-regulation is also important in that it allows you to act in accordance with your deeply held values or social conscience and to express yourself appropriately.
Self-Regulation

- If you value academic achievement, it will allow you to study instead of slack off before a test.
- If you value helping others, it will allow you to help a coworker with a project, even if you are on a tight deadline yourself.
- In its most basic form, self-regulation allows us to bounce back from failure and stay calm under pressure. These two abilities will carry you through life, more than other skills (by Arlin Curcin).

Cognitive and Emotion Regulation

- Mindfulness has been shown to promote stronger focus, memory, and problem-solving functions that are impacted negatively by stressful and traumatic conditions.
- Regular mindfulness practice improves the brain’s capacity for decision making and emotional regulation.
- Self-regulation allows kids to manage their emotions, behavior, and body movement when faced with tough situations.

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Polling Question #3

- Do you have a fairly consistent gratitude practice personally or professionally? Yes or no.
Gratitude and Joy

"For it is not joy that makes us grateful; it is gratitude that makes us joyful."
- David Steindl-Rast, Gratefulness, 1984

Mindfulness cultivates agility and flexibility in attention, allowing us to more easily tune in to pleasant experiences that are always present even during a pandemic: spring blossoms, blue skies, laughter and love.

It's helpful to focus on where we want to go rather than ruminating on the potential dangers.

Gratitude is the most powerful correlate of happiness. When we're feeling grateful, our body calms, and we feel at peace in all realms of our lives.

It's impossible to feel grateful and stressed at the same time; this is a basic principle in psychology called "Reciprocal Inhibition": we can't feel two contradictory states at once.

The best part about gratitude is that it's easy to access in little time.
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**Mindfulness techniques**

- Meditation
  - Sit quietly and focus on your natural breathing or a word or “mantra” that you repeat silently. Allow thoughts to come and go without judgment and return to your focus on breath or mantra.

- Deep breathing
  - Notice subtle body sensations such as an itch or tingling without judgment and let them pass. Notice each part of your body in succession from head to toe.

- Noticing where the feelings are arising in the body
  - Sensory - Notice sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches. Name them “sight,” “sound,” “smell,” “taste,” or “touch” without judgment and let them go.

- Emotions
  - Allow emotions to be present without judgment. Practice a steady and relaxed naming of emotions: “Joy,” “grief,” or “fear” of the emotions without judgment and let them go.

- Urge surfing
  - Cope with cravings for addictive substances or behaviors and allow them to pass. Notice how your body feels as the craving enters. Replace the wish for the craving to go away with the certain knowledge that it will subside.

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Practice acceptance

Gently redirect. If your mind wanders into planning, daydreaming, or criticism, notice where it has gone and gently redirect it to sensations in the present.

Try and try again. If you miss your intended meditation session, simply start again.

By practicing accepting your experience during meditation, it becomes easier to accept whatever comes your way during the rest of your day.

How to incorporate

Deep breathing with clients in individual sessions
Deep breathing with clients in group
Guided meditation from local teachers, YouTube videos, apps, and scripts
Helping clients notice when feelings arise and how and where they experience them in the body.

Working with other therapies

- Mindfulness is a great collaborative tool with other techniques in your toolkit.
- For example, if you utilize Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, you are working to have them identify how they feel and they may have difficulty doing so or even identifying the thought.
Working with other therapies

- Motivational enhancement/motivational interviewing: Mindfulness goes hand-in-hand with expressing empathy, rolling with resistance.
- 12 steps utilize prayer and meditation and are probably most closely associated with mindful techniques already.

Free, completely portable

- We can take deep breaths anywhere, anytime, even knowing if.
- We can take mindless can be practiced at a workplace, during conflict, in jail or prison.

Questions?
Concerns?
Skeptics?
Thank you for your time and attention
May you be well

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THANK YOU!
Any questions?
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This series is designed to accompany the NAADAC/NCC AP Code of Ethics. The Ethics in Practice Specialty Online Training Series will provide a thorough dive into the NAADAC/NCC AP Code of Ethics, bringing to life how the code plays out in the work of addiction professionals and ways to handle and avoid ethical dilemmas.

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