

Mindfulness and Mental Health



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Mindfulness is a helpful tool for working with many different kinds of clients. Mindfulness is an integral element of many mental health treatments and can be used to target some of the specific needs of various mental health disorders. Many evidence-based psychotherapies use mindfulness as a key component of treatment (e.g., dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), compassion-focused therapy (CFT), mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR)). Further, 82% of therapists use mindfulness in addition to treatment as usual (Michalak, Steinhaus, & Heidenreich, 2018). Mindfulness is a powerful tool in the treatment of anxiety and depression (Russell & Siegmund, 2016; Shapiro & Carlson, 2009). Mindful attitudes can be developed in psychotherapy to work with cognitive distortions, understand emotions, set goals, and identify values.

In order to help your clients more fully understand mindfulness and develop their skills, we have included this chapter. Unlike the rest of the chapters in this book, the remainder of this chapter is written for your clients. So, feel free to photocopy or print it. Though it is not designed to be a treatment manual or protocol, it contains many useful skills. Our hope is that this chapter will be a useful resource for clients and clinicians alike. It may be helpful to assign parts of this chapter or the whole chapter as a homework assignment for your client or in a group therapy session. You may consider implementing many of the mindfulness activities listed below in group or individual therapy. This chapter contains many useful practice tips that are practical ways your clients can start implementing mindfulness today. Mindfulness is a journey not a destination, so be patient as you and your clients practice and apply these skills.

Imagine you are embarking on an hour drive to meet an old friend for lunch. As you turn onto the freeway, your mind drifts to thoughts about your friend, what you

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are going to eat for lunch, the fact that you are missing work, and how you really need to do laundry tonight. An hour later, you arrive at your destination and don't really remember driving there. This is an example of mindlessness. Now, imagine that you are driving down the freeway and you are thinking about what you are going to have for lunch and how nice it will be to see your friend. Then all of the sudden, a car cuts in front of you and you slam on your breaks. You notice that your heart is beating a little faster, and now, you are only focused on driving. The car cutting in front of you has forced you to be mindful and aware of the present moment. Most of us experience mindlessness on a day-to-day basis, and it is often external events (i.e., a car pulling in front of you, a teacher or boss telling you to pay attention, etc.) that pull us into the present and thrust us into mindfulness.

As human beings, we have thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations that are often background noise to what we do. We go through life on autopilot and don't give much credence to what is actually going on physiologically or psychologically. We have habit-driven patterns of thinking, feeling, and doing that can cause us to lose our sense of joy, peace, and purpose. Mindfulness is about slowing down and experiencing life. It is a way of gaining knowledge about yourself and the world around you. Mindfulness is a way of being and interacting with the world. It is something that you likely already do some of the time. Mindfulness when practiced more consistently will improve your mental and physical health. This chapter will give you skills and tools that, if practiced, will help to live a more mindful life. As you read this chapter, you will come to understand how mindfulness can be applied to improve common mental health issues including anxiety, depression, and other maladaptive emotions. The first half of the chapter will discuss what mindfulness is and how it can help improve your mental health. The second half of the chapter will focus on mindfulness skills and how you can integrate mindfulness into your life to improve your mental health. Although we will provide some specific exercises and ideas that one could implement, the chapter is not designed to be a treatment manual or protocol. Rather, we will broadly discuss how mindfulness can be utilized to improve overall mental and emotional health.

What Is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a 2600-year-old technique that involves rooting one's attention in the present moment. It was originally developed as a method to enhance self-knowledge and wisdom (Anālayo, 2018). Mindfulness is a conscious and active process of focusing our attention and mind in the present moment without judgment or attachment to the moment (Linehan, 2015, p. 151). Mindfulness has two main components: full awareness of the present moment and attentional control (Rathus, Miller, & Linehan, 2015, p. 97).

Awareness of the Present Moment

The key to mindfulness is being aware of the present moment. This may be awareness of physical sensations (i.e., aches, pains, urges to move, sweaty palms, etc.), emotions (anger, sadness, joy, love, etc.), or thoughts. An important part of being aware of the present moment is withholding from making judgments about the present and withholding from trying to change the present moment (Rathus et al., 2015, p. 99). When we are trying to be in the moment, it is very easy to get distracted by future anxieties or stress about the past. While it is helpful to plan for the future and learn from the past, the goal of mindfulness is to help increase the amount of time you spend in the present moment. This will help you enrich your experience in the present and lead you to make more informed and wise decisions in the future. When you practice mindfulness, your mind will often wander and shift. You may start to notice just how easy it is to be mindless. Mindfulness occurs in the moments that you notice these shifts in your attention. It is about being present in yourself, observing what your mind is doing, and learning to live with our eyes wide open.

Attentional Control

As you practice rooting your full awareness in the present moment, you will likely notice the other primary goal of mindfulness, learning to focus on one thing at a time. This is also called attentional control. There is a huge tendency among millennials to multitask, especially while using social media (Carrier, Cheever, Rosen, Benitez, & Chang, 2009). Many people perceive that multitasking is more effective and that they are being more productive. This is not the case. In fact, the relationship of multitasking and performance is an inverted U. Multitasking is helpful to a point, but then, it quickly becomes unhelpful and unproductive (Adler & Benbunan-Fich, 2012). Multitasking is associated with more errors, worse performance, and increased time to finish projects. In mindfulness, you will practice keeping your mind focused on one thing at a time. This will help you be more productive, get more out of the things you do, and have a richer experience doing the things you love most.

Practice Idea: Start Right Now You can start practicing this right now. As you read this chapter, put away your phone and focus just on reading this book. Stay in the present moment. When your mind wanders to the future or past, bring it back to the text on this page. Spend just 10 min reading this book without switching from thing to thing. After you are done, compare this experience to your typical experience of reading a book. Were you more or less productive? How did it feel? Peaceful? Stressful? Consider doing this with work and homework, while spending time with loved ones, and in any other situation that you hope to experience the fullness of the moment.

How Mindfulness Can Help Your Mental Health

As scientists and practitioners have further examined mindfulness, they have noted that it can enhance many aspects of mind, body, and spirit. It can lead to positive brain changes including increased learning and memory capacity (Hölzel et al., 2011) and increased control over our mind. Mindfulness can create positive autonomic nervous system changes through enhancing our body's natural relaxation response (Khazan, 2013). Researchers suggest that mindfulness can help change the relationship we have with our thoughts and feelings, clarify what we value, increase self-awareness, cope with addictions, increase cognitive flexibility, decrease emotional reactivity, increase our ability to focus, decrease psychological distress, and enhance our spirituality (Coffey & Hartman, 2008; Shonin & Gordon, 2016). The rest of this section will address distinct ways that mindfulness can improve your mental health.

Mindfulness, Impulsivity, and Decision-Making

When we are especially emotional, it can be easy to respond in impulsive ways, without thinking. By learning to live in the present moment, we practice noticing what is going on in our body and mind. This gives us time to think before we act and act instead of reacting (Rathus et al., 2015, p. 100). This helps us to act with intention and purpose. It can help us to make better and wiser decisions. When I was freshman in college, I was often anxious about what professors thought about me or if I said something wrong in class. I would often worry about the emails that I sent and whether I offended one of them. I had the urge to send follow-up emails, clarifying what I had said. There were times when I impulsively sent emails to professors well after midnight. They often contained grammatical errors or autocorrect issues. The impulsively sent follow-up email often resulted in worse consequences than the originally sent email. This is an example, where I was caught up in future anxieties and was not being very mindful. If I had been acting mindfully, I would have noticed what was going on in the present and what I was thinking and feeling. I may have paused and been able to more rationally evaluate the situation. When we are experiencing a negative emotion, it can be very hard to be mindful. The urge is to react to the situation first, so that our distress will decrease. As we learn to be more mindful, we are able to slow down and have more control over our actions leading us to make wiser decisions.

Mindfulness and Physical Symptoms

Many people enter therapy as a result of chronic illnesses and stress-related illnesses (Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2017). Additionally, many people express emotions through physical symptoms. For example, those who are chronically stressed have increased activation of the hippocampal-pituitary axis and increased cortisol levels. This has been associated with morphological differences in your prefrontal cortex, decreased functioning of your immune system, depression, cardiological problems, and shorter life span (Mariotti, 2015). There is an increasing body of literature that shows that mindfulness can improve many aspects of physical health resulting in reduced physical pain and decreased muscle tension (Wippert & Wiebking, 2018). Many physicians have been using mindfulness to supplement or replace treatments for numerous physical conditions and chronic pain (Burdick, 2013). In fact, there is a large body of literature on the mind-body connection. This means that your mind and body are related and can influence each other. Mindfulness is an important tool that helps us to use the mind-body connection to improve physical health.

Mindfulness Reduces Emotional Suffering

Negative emotions commonly arise from worries about the future or rumination about the past. As we learn to become more mindful and live in the moment, we are able to experience the present more fully and worry less about our future and past. When we learn to accept the moment as it is and participate fully in it, we are able to enjoy the small details of life. Mindfulness has been linked to reduced stress and anxiety (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Another reason negative emotion may arise is because of harsh criticisms or judgments we make about ourselves or others. When we learn to be mindful, we learn to observe the present moment and describe it in observable facts (Rathus et al., 2015, p. 101). This leads us to use language of self-acceptance instead of self-criticism. Rathus et al. (2015) give the example of instead of calling yourself a “stupid idiot” you could “stick to the facts” and say something more observable (p. 101). For example, instead of calling yourself a “stupid idiot,” you might say “when I was tired, I misread that email. This resulted in me showing up to the meeting 15 minutes late. I will try to be more careful about getting enough sleep and reading my emails more thoroughly in the future.” The feeling is really different between these two examples. In the first example, there is harsh criticism that is likely to make you feel downtrodden and depressed. It is unlikely to motivate you to do anything that is effective. The second example describes what really happened and gives you the opportunity to do something differently the next time. It helps you to think and problem solve. When we are mindful, we learn to slow down and observe what is really going on. We are invested in seeing the present as it is, through nonjudgmental eyes. This helps us to see ourselves and others through a

lens of love and not hate resulting in more balanced and effective responses and emotions. In the remainder of this chapter, we will discuss how you actually do mindfulness. We will then discuss how you can use mindfulness to target problematic thoughts, cope with difficult emotions, and improve our relationships.

Mindfulness 101: How to Do Mindfulness

In mindfulness, there are core skills and core beliefs. How you do mindfulness matters just as much as the specific mindfulness activity you are doing. In the next several sections, we will first learn core beliefs or attitudes that we can apply to any mindfulness activity. Following this, we will discuss three broad categories of mindfulness activities or skills.

Core Beliefs

Mindful attitudes can be used to enhance our understanding of our thoughts and feelings. Jon Kabat-Zinn (2017) describes several attitudes of mindfulness. These include nonjudging, patience, beginner's mind, trust, non-striving, acceptance, and letting go. Linehan (2015, pp. 154–155) summarizes these into a set of skills called “How Skills” or “How to do Mindfulness.” How Skills are composed of three skills, nonjudgmentalness, one-mindfulness, and effectiveness. We will discuss these three skills along with acceptance. As we practice mindful activities, we suggest attempting to adopt these attitudes of being nonjudgmental, one-mindful, effective, and accepting.

Nonjudgmentalness As human beings, we use judgmental language all the time. In mindfulness, we try to cultivate an attitude of being nonjudgmental. Though judgments are quick and important ways of conveying information, they are also not very specific. For example, a mom might tell her child “good girl!” after the child eats her broccoli. While “good girl!” is a positive judgment and efficiently communicates a positive assertion, it does not give the child feedback about what they did that was good. Additionally, it says that the child is good, not that the behavior is good. Positive and negative judgments dominate human communication. They can harm relationships and intensify emotions. The function of being consciously nonjudgmental is not to eliminate judgments, but to help us notice our judgments, be more descriptive, and determine what we are actually trying to communicate.

Linehan (2015, pp. 200–201) describes two categories of judgments, those that discriminate and those that evaluate. Discriminations are a necessary part of life that describe how things are similar or different, whether something fits certain criteria, and whether or not something makes sense in a certain context. In contrast, evaluative judgments evaluate the worth of something. Evaluative judgments add opinions

and personal beliefs that exceed the facts of the situation. Notably, evaluative judgments are not a factual part of reality. Evaluative judgments assess what good and bad are as defined by the observer not qualities of what is actually observed. An example of a discrimination is noticing that your friend, Phoebe, weighs more than your other friend, Sam. An evaluative judgment is evaluating that because Phoebe weighs more, she is gross, should lose weight, and is not as good as Sam. In mindfulness, we practice letting go of judgments that evaluate and retaining those that discriminate. This will improve our relationships and make our communication more specific.

Practice Tip: “Don’t Should on Yourself” “Should” statements are usually an indicator that a statement is evaluative and not discriminative. We like the phrase “don’t should on yourself,” because it reminds us to be more self-compassionate and less judgmental. It can be an eye-opening experience to count the number of “should statements” you make in a day or attempt to spend an entire day or couple of days without using the word “should.” Another way to practice this skill might be counting how many judgments we make per day. Often we use judgmental language about ourselves, others, and the world and never stop to realize we are using this kind of language. The point of this exercise is to help you to be mindful of the judgments you are making not to eliminate judgments. This can help you to decide whether or not your judgments are effective—whether or not they are helping you accomplish your goals and move toward what you value.

One-Mindfully Much of human life is spent accomplishing things and moving toward a purpose; we are a driven species. Much of our time is spent multitasking and completing checklists. This attribute is extremely important as it helps us achieve our goals and has led to tremendous scientific, literary, and mathematical accomplishments throughout human history. However, this drivenness can lead to burnout over time. Being on overdrive can cause us to lose track of what is going on in our bodies and minds. After a long time, we can become grossly ineffective in what we are trying to do. We become tired, sick, and unhappy. In mindfulness, we practice being “one-mindful.” This means that we focus only on the present moment, doing one thing at a time and remembering to take breaks. This helps us to be completely immersed in and enjoy the present moment. One-mindfulness allows us to create space for doing self-care activities, which can increase self-compassion and effectiveness in reaching our goals.

Effectively The effectively skill reminds us that we must pay attention and notice if we are moving closer to or away from our goals and values. We must do what actually works to achieve our goals instead of what is “right” or “wrong.” Effectively means changing the things we can and accepting the things we cannot. Life is filled with goals and things or people urging us to change. As important as change is, acceptance is equally important. Often the need for acceptance and change exists in the same moment. The ability to accept the current moment or situation in its fullness helps us notice what we really want to change. This is perhaps the most painful

moment. This is when we become fully aware of a problem and the reality of the moment. While painful, this moment of clarity can be a powerful tool to see what needs to be changed and how to change it. It is only after this moment of acceptance that lasting change can happen. Effectively allows us to understand the different qualities and value of both acceptance and change. This helps us to clarify our values and move toward the life we want to live.

Acceptance Acceptance often occurs when we realize that certain situations cannot be changed. During these times, the only option we have is to accept the situation and move forward. This type of acceptance is hard but necessary to move forward and into the present moment. Lack of willingness to accept the present moment can explain a significant amount of the variance in depressive symptoms (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2016). Acceptance helps us to learn to be psychologically flexible which has been linked to decreased stress and increased well-being (Wersebe, Lieb, Meyer, Hofer, & Gloster, 2018).

Acceptance and Dialectics A useful tool for working on acceptance is practicing dialectical thinking. A dialectic is the idea that two opposing things can be true simultaneously. An example of this is the death of a loved one. It is really sad and can be quite tragic. However, there is another side. The reason that the funeral is sad is because of our love for the person who died and the impact they had in our lives. In this way, funerals are dialectical and multifaceted. Another example is failing a driving test. Let's say that you went to the DMV to take a driving exam and renew your license and you failed because your eyesight was poor. Though this was probably frustrating, it probably also helped you realize that you needed to get your eyes checked. Dialectical thinking helps us to see the many dimensions of life, leading to increased acceptance of the present moment and increased happiness.

Practice Tip: Dialectics Thinking dialectically can be easily practiced by replacing "but" statements with "and" statements. For example, let's say a teacher tells you that "You are really great writer, but you forgot several commas." The "but" in this sentence places more emphasis on the latter half of the sentence than the first half the sentence. Using an "and" statement values each side of the statement as equally true, "you are a great writer and you forgot several commas." Though "but" statements are natural, "and" statements help us to not discount the positive or negative qualities of a situation. They help us to willingly and effectively acknowledge the fullness and complexity of a situation or person. Acceptance is a key part of the healing process; it is a willing acknowledgment of the present moment.

Core Skills

There is a myriad of mindfulness activities. Linehan (2015, p. 154–155) defines three broad categories of mindfulness activities, the “What Skills.” These skills include observing, describing, and participating. Observing is the ability to notice what is happening right now. Describing is adding words to your experience or describing what is going on. Participating is the practice of fully participating in the here and now. Most mindfulness activities require that we apply our mindful attitudes to some combination of observe, describe, and participate.

Observe Observing is about being able to take a step back from the situation and observe the present moment. This includes the environment around you, your body, and your mind. It is easy to let past experiences color or shape our present experience. While the past is an important tool to learn from, it can prevent us from seeing the present situation accurately. Often we are so accustomed to situations being a certain way that we miss the ways that the current moment is different. During observation, we practice using a beginner’s mind (Kabat-Zinn, 2017). This is the idea of experiencing a moment as if for the first time. This helps us to see the present moment as a new, unique learning opportunity.

As we begin to observe the present moment, it is a common experience to want to hold on tightly to the positive experiences and avoid what is unpleasant. Many people believe that negative experiences are bad and should be avoided. The attitude of letting go reminds us that positive and negative experiences come and go, thoughts come and go, and emotions come and go. In mindfulness, we practice letting go. This is the attitude of letting experiences with both positive and negative valences come and go. Linehan (2015) calls this Teflon or “non-stick” mind. Observing in this way allows our minds to be open to all experience and learn from all experience.

Practice Idea: Use Oranges One application of the observe skill is called mindful oranges. This can be done alone or with other people. In this activity, obtain a bowl of oranges. Choose one orange out of the bowl. Spend about a minute getting to know your orange. Observe the orange. You might consider asking yourself, how is this orange different than every other orange? After a minute, put the orange back in the bowl and mix it in with the other oranges. Try to find your orange. This activity can be used in cases of social anxiety. If you are anxious about interacting with people, you may try asking yourself, “How is this person different today than all other days?” Observing helps us to be impartial about the present moment and fully experience reality.

Practice Idea: Breathing A classic example of observing is a breathing exercise. During such an exercise, you might pay attention to your breathing and attempt to slow it down. You may choose to focus on lengthening your exhales. Many people find it helpful to do “clock breathing.” In this exercise, you use a clock and breathe in for 5 s and out for 5 s. The goal is to focus only on your breathing. Throughout

this exercise, as you observe your breath, your mind may wander. When you notice it wandering, bring your mind back to your breath. This process of refocusing your mind is mindfulness. Observing allows us to attend to the present moment with awareness and see things in new ways.

Describe Describing is about using words to label our observations about behavioral and environmental events without judging. This helps us to work with what is instead of what we think it is or what we think it should be. When we describe, we put into words a description of just what we observed, without interpretation. This is an opportunity to provide words for what is happening around us and give a name to the thoughts, feelings, and sensations we experience. This can help us learn to be nonjudgmental and see things clearly. Observing and describing can be especially helpful in new or difficult situations, because it gives you some space from participating to actively observe and understand what you are doing and how you are interacting with the new context.

Practice Idea: Mindfulness of an Emotion In this activity, the goal is to describe the physical sensations of the emotion and the thoughts you are having and eventually put a name to the emotion. An important part of describing is that if it cannot be described through your senses, it cannot be described (Linehan, 2015, p. 154). This activity will help us to understand our emotions better and communicate them more clearly to our loved ones.

Participate Participate is about being wholly in the moment you just observed and described. During participation, you are aware and immersed in the moment, but you are not analyzing the details of the situation. Participating is the process of being fully emerged in the moment. It is about allowing yourself to be a part of what is happening without obsessing over the details. It is about being a part of the changing nature of life. Participation will help you to get more enjoyment out of the present moment and be more efficient and effective in the moment.

Practice Idea: Games An easy way to participate is playing a sport or game. When playing a sport or game, it is hard to think of anything else. You must be alert and aware of the game around you so that you can respond quickly and smoothly. The next time you play a sport or game, notice how it feels to be fully present. Try to take this with you into other daily activities. Try to be fully in the moment, at home, school, and work. As you participate in the moment, those around you will notice and it will improve your relationships. Other ideas for practicing participate might be during various meditations and relaxation activities such as loving-kindness meditations or body scans.

Mindfulness 102: Using Mindfulness to Improve Your Mental Health

Using mindfulness, we can increase our awareness of our thoughts and feelings, thus improving our psychological and emotional functioning. As human beings, we have a tendency to avoid our thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations. This is called *experiential avoidance* (Hayes et al., 2016). High levels of experiential avoidance are a hallmark of generalized anxiety disorder (Mennin, Heimberg, Turk, & Fresco, 2002). Additionally, the severity of anxiety, depression, and worry symptoms is highly correlated with the amount of experiential avoidance (Hayes & Smith, 2005, p. 47; Roemer, Salters, Raffa, & Orsillo, 2005). This avoidance can be habitual and results in either muted emotional experience or more distressing emotions. Mindfulness helps us be open to and aware of our emotional, mental, and physical experiences. This signals to our body and mind that these thoughts and feelings are manageable. It also helps us to understand our thoughts and feelings. Mindfulness helps us to respond to thoughts and feelings effectively instead of reacting impulsively.

As you practice mindfulness and begin to notice your thoughts and emotions more and more, you may realize that emotions and thoughts come and go. They are like waves in the ocean. To really experience a feeling or thought is to know that they are transient. It can be common to try to attain only positive feelings or thoughts and hang on to them out of fear they won't come back. When we stop trying to attain them, we will notice that they come up all by themselves and learn to trust ourselves to generate positive emotions and thoughts. Similarly, it is common to avoid negative emotions and thoughts and try to prevent them from entering our consciousness out of fear that they will come to stay. If we stop viewing negative emotions and thoughts as the enemy and simply let them be there, we will notice that they too pass. In 1987, social psychologist Daniel Wegner did a famous experiment. He had two groups of participants. Each group was asked to verbalize their stream of consciousness for several minutes. One group was asked to try to not think about a white bear, and the other group was allowed to think about whatever they wanted. Then, he asked both groups of participants to do the same thing, but this time, they were told to think of only white bears. The group that originally was not allowed to think of white bears thought of white bears much more often. When we suppress our thoughts, they come up at a much higher intensity. This is true for emotions too. Allowing ourselves to feel emotions helps us to move through them. In this section, we will discuss how you can use mindfulness to notice your thoughts and emotions and allow them to come and go. This will help you to cope with distressing thoughts, regulate intense emotions, improve your relationships, and deepen your experience of everyday living.

Mindfulness of Thoughts

Being mindful of thoughts helps us understand negative and positive thought patterns and work with our thoughts instead of against them. As human beings, we have thousands of thoughts per day. We think constantly, but rarely do we consciously notice that we are thinking. In *The How of Happiness*, Lyubomirsky discusses the idea that 50% of happiness is determined by genes and is totally out of your control, 10% is determined by your environment, and the final 40% is determined by our thoughts, actions, and attitudes. Thoughts can be powerful tools or destructive roadblocks in our happiness. Mindfulness helps us to notice our thoughts as just thoughts. This mindful stance helps us to use our thoughts as tools in order to create a space between our thoughts and our reaction, combat cognitive distortions, and gain control over negative thoughts and beliefs.

Increasing Our Reaction Time Mindfulness helps us notice the gap between stimulus and response. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) uses the ABC model of emotion. In this model, there are three parts: A is the activating event, B is the belief about that event, and C is the consequence of the event. According to CBT assumptions, most of the emotional pain due to mental health disorders and resulting behavior come from faulty beliefs or cognitions (B) about ourselves, others, and the world. For example, imagine you just failed a test and your friend is bragging about how well they did on the test. This is the activating event, A. This causes you to feel jealous and yell at your friend. This is the consequence of the activating event, C. In between A and C, there is B, the belief. An example of a belief about this activating event is that you believe that because your friend did better than you, you must be very stupid. However, there are some problems with that belief. An example of one problem with that belief is that one test does not determine your intelligence. Most of us go through life on autopilot and go from stimulus (A) to response (C) with little thought or processing. The more we notice the gap between stimulus and response, the more freedom we have to choose how we respond to difficult stimuli. Mindful attitudes help us to slow down and notice the intervening beliefs, B. This can help us to get some separation from our thoughts.

Creating from Space Your “Sticky” Thoughts As human beings, we often hold irrational and unhelpful beliefs. These are often called cognitive distortions. These distortions are exaggerated, irrational, or unhelpful patterns of thought that are often related to mental health disorders (Burns, 2000). These distortions prevent us from seeing reality clearly. They often come from making assumptions about ourselves or others. Common cognitive distortions include black and white thinking, personalization, overgeneralization, should statements, magnification, minimification, mind reading, and fortune telling. Cognitive distortions cause us to magnify negative experiences; minimize achievements; blame ourselves; jump to conclusions about ourselves, others, and situations; and judge ourselves and others. Cognitive distortions do not lead to problem-solving or personal growth; rather, they prevent us from seeing reality clearly and provide roadblocks in moving toward our goals and

values. Cognitive distortions can cause our thoughts to seem unmanageable or fixed. Some refer to these as “sticky thoughts” or “fused.”

Stephen Hayes (2016) has described multiple ways to gain space from our thoughts; he calls it cognitive defusion. The simplest way to “defuse” from a thought is called thought watching. In this activity, start with being mindful of your breath. As thoughts come up, practice saying, “Oh, there’s a thought.” When another thought comes up, practice saying, “There’s a thought too.” Another activity is called leaves on a stream (Linehan, 2015). In this activity, we imagine a tree next to a stream. Begin by observing what is around you. As you make observations about either the imagined tree and stream or your own experience, label these as thoughts, feelings, urges, or sensations. Then, imagine your thoughts, feelings, urges, or sensations landing on a leaf and floating down the stream. The key to this activity is to let your leaf drift off and not float with it downstream. Another way to practice cognitive defusion is noticing when you are having an intrusive, obsessive, or distressing thought and saying it aloud or writing it down. Some people find it helpful to sing the thought aloud or say it in an accent. Others find it effective to use the phrase “I am having the thought that” and then state their thought. These activities help us to detach from these sticky thoughts. Remember that the benefits of mindfulness accrue over time and with practice; while many of these might help a little initially, the biggest benefits occur as you practice these skills over and over.

Gaining Control over Negative Thinking Many of our thoughts are unimportant, odd, or irrational. It can be easy to get stuck on any one of these thoughts. Some people have intrusive or obsessive thoughts. This happens when someone has an unpleasant thought and pays more attention than usual to these thoughts. This increases both the frequency and distress of the thoughts. Berry and Laskey (2012) demonstrated that individuals with and without obsessive compulsive disorder(OCD) have similar types of intrusive and unwanted thoughts. They show that the difference between people with and without OCD lies in how much the thoughts bother them not the content of the thoughts. When thoughts bother us a lot, we tend to pay a lot of attention to them. We might say things such as “what does this mean about me?” Additionally, thoughts that distress us are thoughts that we have that seem to go against what we value. Often this causes us to attempt to avoid the thoughts, which makes them more severe. Mindfulness asks us to use acceptance and non-judgmentalness to lean into our internal experience—to allow our thoughts to come and go like waves. This helps us to allow our thoughts to come and go and ultimately leads to less distress about our thoughts and an increased sense of control.

Mindfulness of Emotions

As human beings, we experience a plethora of emotions throughout the day. Emotions are powerful tools that communicate information to us. Each emotion serves a different function. Emotions are as painful as they are pleasant. Emotions

have action urges associated them. These action urges range from very effective to wildly ineffective. It is easy to act on an emotion without noticing or feeling it. When we take a moment to notice and feel the emotion, we can decide what function the emotion serves and whether it is effective to act on the emotion. Below we will discuss several ways we can use mindfulness to regulate our emotions.

Just Notice Mindfulness of emotions can be experienced through leaning into emotions and then moving through them. Noticing emotions is the first step to mindfulness of emotions. This involves slowing down and recognizing how we feel in our body and our mind. Each emotion feels different physiologically and psychologically. When we learn to notice the small changes in our mind and body, we have an opportunity to intervene. The lower the intensity of the emotion, the easier it is to intervene. Using mindfulness, we can notice the minute changes in our body.

Practice Idea: Get Out of Your Head You might spend some time noting the different ways emotions make you feel both in body and in mind. It may also be done through paying closer attention to the chain of events both internal and external that cause emotional experience. It can be helpful to examine the pleasant and unpleasant qualities of all experiences. Part of mindfulness is realizing that all experiences (e.g., emotions, bodily sensation, external cues) are multifaceted and they have positive and negative qualities. This will help you get out of your head and make your emotions more objective and manageable.

Practice Idea: Daily Check-Ins You may consider checking in with emotions, body, and mind throughout the day. A check-in might look like setting reminders in your phone several times a day. During the check-in, begin by taking a few slow breaths. Then, pause and notice how your body is feeling. What are these physiological cues telling you? These physiological cues can tell you a lot about the thoughts and feelings you experience. If you are uncomfortable or tense, take a minute to readjust. If you have closed posture (i.e., pursed lips, folded arms, raised shoulders, knitted eyebrows), consider moving to an open posture (i.e., relaxed face, open hands). Changing the way your body is in space can change the way you feel. If you experience muscle tension, these check-ins can be especially important to take a moment and help yourself to feel more comfortable. Finally, take another moment, and notice what is going on in your mind. What kind of thoughts are you having? How you are feeling emotionally? We have a tendency to never slow down and notice what is going on. When we become aware, we have an opportunity to adjust. We can evaluate what is going on in our mind, body, and spirit. This allows us to decide if there are changes we need to make and gives us the space to address our own needs. This activity will help you notice what is going on and give you a chance to regulate your emotions before they get too intense.

Challenging Emotions When emotions are intense, they are hard to cope with and move through. We can use mindfulness to refocus our attention onto something other than our emotion for a time so that when we return to the emotion, it may be

at a more manageable intensity. During this kind of mindfulness, it is particularly helpful to do something very active or something that requires a lot of focus. This could be anything from a sport to a challenging puzzle. The key to this mindfulness skill is to be completely in the moment focusing on something other than your emotion and then after a sufficient amount of time returning to the emotional experience. It is usually helpful to stay in the mindful activity until you feel as though your distress has decreased by 50%. When you finish the mindfulness activity and your distress has decreased, you may consider returning to the emotion-evoking situation. As you examine our emotional experience, you may notice that your emotions, though they feel as if they come out of nowhere, have a cause. This cause can be an external event (i.e., an interpersonal interaction) or an internal event (i.e., a thought). The cause is usually not the event itself, but our interpretation of the event. Noticing the cause of our emotion can be an indicator of what our emotion is trying to communicate. Identifying what your emotion is trying to communicate can be a helpful tool in problem-solving.

Practice Idea: Be a Detective Next time you have intense emotion, spend some time observing and describing the emotion. What were you thinking while you experienced the emotion? What was your posture like? What were your facial expression like? Why was this emotion important? What was it communicating to you? What was it communicating to others? What would you have liked it to communicate with others? Maybe your emotion is telling you that you are feeling a little worn out; could you find some time for a self-care activity? Do you have too much on your plate?

Urge Surfing Most emotions are accompanied with an action urge or a desire to take action. For example, sometimes, people experience the urge to hit someone when they are angry. These action urges can feel automatic. This is due to the activation of the sympathetic division of our autonomic nervous system. This invokes the fight-or-flight response which is an automatic response to fearful situations. This can be adaptive in that it can prepare us to act in a potentially dangerous situation. An example of this could be running away from a bear who is chasing you. Sometimes, however, the fight-or-flight system is activated unnecessarily and is maladaptive. Sometimes, our action urges can be very ineffective (i.e., hitting someone when you are mad). We may practice mindfulness through urge surfing (Linehan, 2015). Urge surfing is the process of experiencing the urge to do something and waiting for it to come and go. As the urge comes up, you might be mindful of all the physiological sensations that arise. Take some time to label or describe them. Urges typically peak in about 20 min (Linehan, 2015). These urges can be emotional urges or urges related to addiction. Mindfulness increases our ability to act deliberately. With mindfulness, we can decide whether or not to act on an action urge. We wait for the initial urge to subside and then decide on how to proceed. Taking time to notice what emotions we are experiencing and what they communicate to us can help us decide how to best communicate this to other people and the world. As we are mindful, we realize that our emotions are interconnected with us.

Mindfulness gives us space to organize what is important to us, convey it to other people, and cultivate a life rich with what is important to us.

Practice Idea: Don't Scratch the Itch Next time you have an itch, use it as an opportunity to be mindful. Instead of giving in to the urge to scratch the itch, just let it be. Allow the itch to be there. Observe the itch and describe its qualities; how does it feel? Watch the urge build and the dissipate. Consider writing down what you learned from this experience.

Mindfulness in Relationships.

Whether it is by our never-ending to-do list or our anxieties, it is easy to be distracted in relationships. Mindfulness can be used when talking to people to enhance relationships. It can also be used to increase thoughtfulness and preserve relationships by helping us to be less impulsive. Mindfulness is a power tool in dealing with complex relationships.

When we are not mindful, it is easy to say things without thinking. Sometimes, we are on autopilot and do not realize our own verbal tics. A common one is the use of the word “sorry.” Some people are chronic “sorry-ers.” They apologize for everything even when an apology is not warranted. Sometimes, this can be damaging to relationships. We can use mindfulness to understand the function of the “sorry.” For example, let’s say you are a chronic “sorry-er.” You just made a comment in a meeting and then apologize for talking too long. Perhaps, what you really intended to say was “thank you for listening” or “thank you for taking into account my comment.” A more mindful response may have been, “thank you.” You can use mindfulness to be more specific in what you say or to notice your verbal tics. Noticing your verbal tics gives you the opportunity to decide whether or not you would like to replace them with more specific communication. This can help enhance self-knowledge and strengthen relationships.

It is a common response to act impulsively when interacting with people we care about. For example, let’s say you get an email at work from your boss. He has given you some challenging feedback, and you are very upset. It can be easy to send an emotional email back immediately. However, we can use mindfulness to urge surf and ride the emotional wave. We can then send the email when we are in a more balanced frame of mind. Mindfulness can help us to become more informed about our own body and mind and therefore interact more positively in challenging interpersonal situations.

Mindfulness Activities to Enhance Daily Living Mindfulness skills can be used to broaden experience in everyday life. These may include using mindfulness while in nature or going for a walk, mindfulness while eating, mindfulness while driving, mindfulness of things you are grateful for, and using mindfulness in any everyday context. For example, imagine it is winter time and it is really cold outside. You have parked your car far away from the grocery store, because it was challenging to find

a parking spot. You can use mindfulness as you walk from your parked car to the grocery store. You might do this by noticing all the physical sensations of cold in your body or being mindful of your breath as you walk. In fact, being mindful while being out in the cold can help you to feel less cold and make your experience be more enjoyable.

Mindfulness can also be used to notice the things you are grateful for. Gratitude has been shown to improve physical and mental health including enhancing sleep, self-esteem, and resilience (Lavelock et al., 2016). Mindfulness can be used to practice gratitude through using the observe and describe skills. Examples of this would be gratitude journaling, spending time to notice and reflect on blessings, and gratitude-specific meditations.

Another common way mindfulness is used in everyday is called mindful eating. Most Americans do not really pay attention to what they are eating or when they are full. We are often distracted while eating. In mindful eating, we practice just eating without multitasking. It is the process of slowing down and using our five senses to observe the full experience of eating. This includes looking at your food, noticing its texture, experiencing the smell of your food, noticing how it feels in your mouth and in your stomach, and paying attention to your hunger and fullness cues. Mindfulness can be used in many different ways to brighten and broaden life experiences.

Final Thoughts

Mindfulness is a way of living life and seeing the world. It can help challenge negative beliefs and cope with difficult emotions. It can be practiced in structured or unstructured formats during psychotherapy and in everyday living. Mindfulness does not involve making huge changes in lifestyle, but rather, it allows us to see the world through more mindful lenses. Through our ability to notice details in ourselves, others, and the world, mindfulness helps us to create subtle and powerful changes that allow us to experience life in greater abundance.

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